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Sigmund Freud's Experience with the Classics

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ABSTRACT. Classical culture played an important role in the work of Sigmund Freud and influenced the formation of psychoanalysis. This influence concerned several aspects of Freud's experience: the personal one, from his adolescent identification with ancient heroes to his emotional bond with Rome and Athens; the intellectual, including his use of authors such as Aristotle and Artemidorus the elaboration of psychoanalytical theory; rhetorical and expositive in his use of classical authors such as Sophocles and Vergil, and in his strategy of identifying thinkers such as Plato and Empedocles as forerunners of his theories. The present article reconstructs the evolution of this strategy, which began in 1900, in conjunction with the definition of the basic concepts of psychoanalysis. Some specific episodes of Freud's approach to the classics are also examined: his reception of Aristotle's concept of catharsis, and of the interpretation of this concept given by Bernays; Freud's interest in Vergil, highlighted by his use of verses from the Aeneid in his works; his conflictual relationship with Rome; the use of Empedocles as a predecessor of the changes that Freud made, in his last years, to the theory of pulsions.

KEYWORDS. Freud; catharsis; Aristotle; Vergil; Rome.

1. Anthony Grafton wrote, a few years ago, that «no modern scientist has shown more devotion to ancient texts and systematic reading than Sigmund Freud».¹ The term 'devotion' suggests a long-lasting feeling, something to which a man remains faithful over the years. Grafton underlines (rightly) Freud's singularity, but the picture he presents is not incongruent with the biographies of many scientists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who attended schools where Latin and Greek were seriously studied and classical texts were read.

This education was common, in Europe, until a few decades ago (now things have changed), and it was at that time difficult to find a physician or a scientist who was not able to quote a phrase more or less correctly

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¹ A. GRAFTON, *Commerce with Classics. Ancient Books and Renaissance Readers*, Ann Arbor 1997, p. 226.

in Latin. But in his profession he was oriented by completely different parameters, those of positive and experimental science. A condition resulting from the split between science and humanistic culture treated by Charles P. Snow in a famous book published in 1959, *The Two Cultures*.

Freud, up to a certain point in his life, remained faithful to this model of culture. He had had an excellent classical education in the Sperygymnasium of Vienna; at the school-leaving examination, in the summer of 1873, he had to translate, from Latin, about fifty lines of Virgil's *Aeneid*, and from Greek a passage of Sophocles' tragedy *Oedipus the King*.² A surprising coincidence, if we consider that 27 years later Freud used the name of Oedipus, in his *Traumdeutung* ("The Interpretation of Dreams"), to name the child's psychological experience of loving his mother and being jealous of his father.

But in 1873 Freud did not know of these future developments, and had before him a career as a physician, in which his classical interests were to be sacrificed to clinical practice and laboratory research. This is what he did in the following years, working in the Laboratory of Physiology directed by Ernst Brücke, the Psychiatric Clinic of Theodor Meynert, the Institute of Comparative Anatomy of Carl Claus. The latter awarded him a scholarship at the marine biology laboratory in Trieste (at the time it was an Austrian city). Within a few months Freud had dissected hundreds of eels, examining their testicles under a microscope.

His interest in the humanities remained confined to his free time (to the time of the *otium* to use the Latin expression): apart from studying medicine, Freud also attended in 1874-1875 some courses of the philosopher Franz Brentano; he translated, from English, some works by Stuart Mill,³ commissioned by the Hellenist Theodor Gomperz,⁴ with whom he remained in subsequent years on terms of friendship⁵ (his wife, Elise Gomperz, was also a patient and supporter of Freud).⁶ These activities

² See SIGMUND FREUD, *Sein Leben in Bildern und Texten*, hrsg. von E. Freud – L. Freud – L. Grubich-Simitis, Frankfurt a.M. 1976, pp. 74-76.

³ See M. MOLNAR, "John Stuart Mill translated by Sigmund Freud", *Psychoanalysis and History* 1 (1999), pp. 195-205.

⁴ Theodor Gomperz (1832-1912) was Professor of Classical Philology at the University of Vienna from 1873.

⁵ Gomperz's Greek Thinkers (1893-1902) was included by Freud in 1907 among the 10 books he recommended reading: see *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. by J. Strachey, 24 vols., London 1953-1974, vol. IX p. 245 (hereafter *SE* with number of volume and page).

⁶ See R. N. MITCHELL-BOVASK, «Freud's Reading of Classical Literature and Classical Philology», in S. L. Gilman et al. (eds.), *Reading Freud's Readings*, New York 1994, pp. 27-28.

were, in some way, linked with classical interests: Brentano gave lessons on Aristotle; one of Stuart Mill's essays, translated by Freud, dealt with the philosophy of Plato. Another friend of Freud was the archaeologist Emanuel Löwy,⁷ who became Freud's mentor and advisor regarding his collection of antiquities (admired by patients and visitors in his Study, in Vienna and then in London).⁸ The letters to Fliess show that Freud, in the 1880s and 1890s, was an avid reader of essays about Ancient Greece, the Mycenaean civilization and Schliemann's excavations of Troy (with particular interest in the idea of Greece developed in the 1870s by Burckhardt in Basel).⁹ Destiny forged a further striking link between the young physician and classical studies: his fiancée Martha Bernays, whom Freud married in 1882, was the niece of the eminent classical philologist Jakob Bernays, professor at Bonn University and author of important studies about Heraclitus, Aristotle, and Lucian.¹⁰ These connections fed what Armstrong calls Freud's compulsion, a desire «to return to the study of antiquity that transcends the mere repetition of a 'schoolboy psychology'».¹¹

But in public life, for a long time, Freud followed the behaviour expected of a man of science in accordance with the conventions of his time. The studies published in the 1880s-1890s reveal no traces of his humanistic interests, certainly also because of their subject matter: research on brain anatomy, the effects of cocaine, hypnotherapy, aphasia, also the *Studies on hysteria*, published with Breuer in 1892-1895, to which we will shortly return.

2. Freud's stay in Paris, in 1885-1886, to attend the Neurological Department directed by Jean-Martin Charcot in the Salpêtrière Hospital, has rightly been considered a milestone in the evolution of his thought. Charcot's use of hypnosis to study hysteria shifted Freud's interest toward psychology. This new perspective allowed him to overcome the disappointment at the failure of his recent attempt to establish himself

⁷ E. Löwy (1858-1937) was Professor of Archaeology at the University of Rome. See *Emanuel Löwy: ein vergessener Pionier*, hrsg. von F. Breined, Wien 1998.

⁸ The collection is described by L. GAMWELL and R. WELLS (eds.), *Sigmund Freud and Art: His Personal Collection of Antiquities*, London-New York 1989.

⁹ See the letter dated January 30, 1899: «I am reading Burckhardt's History of Greek Civilization, which is providing me with unexpected parallels» (The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, ed. by J. M. Masson, Cambridge, Mass. 1985, p. 342).

¹⁰ Jakob Bernays (1824-1881), professor of Classical Philology in Bonn from 1866, was one of the most influential philologists of the XIX century.

¹¹ R. H. ARMSTRONG, *A Compulsion for Antiquity. Freud and the Ancient World*, Ithaca and London 2005, p. 18.

in the circle of Viennese medicine, through his therapeutic experiments with cocaine (a failure which also had personal implications).¹² The new interests also caused a rift with the medical and psychiatric environment, which looked on Freud's enthusiasm for hypnosis, as a cure for hysteria, with suspicion and mistrust.

Despite this evolution the classical world continued to remain, for a few more years, confined to Freud's non professional interests, or at least those not visible in his scientific production. But there was an exception, a text published in 1890 which had a singular fortune, or rather misfortune. It is a short paper written for a popular medical work entitled *Die Gesundheit* ("Health"). It was omitted in the first collection of Freud's works, the *Gesammelte Schriften* published in 1924-1934; it was included in the second collection the *Gesammelte Werke*, appearing in volume V, published in 1942, with the erroneous dating of 1905 (instead of 1890). Apart from these circumstances, the paper must have proved to be embarrassing not only in the medical circles in Vienna frequented at that time by Freud, but also, many years later, in the psychoanalytical establishment, because of the presence in the title, *Psychische Behandlung* (*Seelenbehandlung*), of the word *Seele* ('anima'), which evokes the philosophical tradition from which psychological science had, much earlier, detached itself. It is significant that in the *Standard Edition* published by Strachey¹³ (1953-1974) the title is translated in English as "Psychical (or Mental) Treatment", avoiding the English word corresponding to the German 'Seele', that is 'soul'.¹⁴ In the paper, the reference to the soul is justified by the context: Freud refers to the ancient "medicine of the soul". The paper begins with the notation «Psyche is a Greek word which may be translated 'soul'. Thus 'psychical treatment' means 'treatment of the soul'» (*SE* 7.283). The ancient medicine of the soul is used by Freud to confirm the idea that «words are the essential tool of psychic treatment»; an idea borne out by his experience in the preceding years and probably reinforced after Freud's voyage to Nancy in the summer of 1899, where he visited the Clinic directed by Hippolyte Berheim, who was developing Charcot's experiments with hypnosis.

It is obviously not pure chance that the only paper of the 1890s in which Freud refers to ancient theories was published in a popular book. It

¹² See P. GAY, *Freud: a Life for our Times*, London – New York 1988, p. 45.

¹³ See n. 5.

¹⁴ See B. BETTELHEIN, *Freud and Man's Soul*, New York 1983 (Strachey's translation is justified by D. Gray Ornston in *Translating Freud*, ed. by D. Gary Ornston, New Haven, Conn. 1992, pp. 63-74).

was probably for this reason that he ventured to publish it. In the paper, he writes that «it is only comparatively recently that physicians with a scientific training have learnt to appreciate the value of mental treatment» (*SE* 7.284), but this statement is imbued with tragic irony, if we consider that it was in fact his psychological approach which had caused his isolation by the influential Viennese physicians.

In Freud's scientific production of the 1890s we don't find other references to the "medicine of the soul", and it is no coincidence that the essay of 1890 was postdated, as we have seen. But in the *Studies on Hysteria*, published in 1893-1895, we find a term that brings us to the ancient world, that of "catharsis". The *Studies* were written jointly by Freud and by Joseph Breuer (1842-1925), a Viennese physician who for several years had been treating a woman, presented in the *Studies* as Anna O. It is considered the first famous clinical case of psychoanalysis; the pseudonym concealed the identity of Bertha Pappenheim, who later became a writer and journalist. As early as 1888, in the entry *Hysteria* for the medical dictionary edited by Villaret, Freud referred to «a method first practiced by Joseph Breuer in Vienna», a method which led the hysterical patient, under hypnosis, «to the psychical prehistory on which the disorder in question originated» (*SE* 1.56). The term "cathartic" appears for the first time in the *Preliminary communication* written by Breuer and Freud in 1892 and included three years later in the *Studies on Hysteria*: «the injured person's reaction to the trauma only exercises a completely cathartic effect, if it is an adequate reaction» (*SE* 2.8).

A cultured reader will have no difficulty in recognizing the source of the expression "cathartic effect" used by Freud and Breuer: it is the famous passage in *Poetics* where Aristotle speaks of the effect of tragedy on the soul of the spectator, «through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation (*katharsis*) of these emotions» (1449b, trans. by S. H. Butcher). A specialist in studies on Aristotle can also correlate the Freud-Breuer use of the term with the debate that had taken place some years before on the original meaning of the Greek term "katharsis": the traditional moralizing interpretation, for example by Lessing, had been challenged by a medical interpretation of the term, according to which it would mean the "purging of the passions". This medical interpretation had been proposed by Bernays, who expounded his theory in some papers published in the 1860s and then in a volume published some years later¹⁵. Bernays's inter-

¹⁵ J. Bernays, *Zwei Abhandlungen über die aristotelischen Theorie des Drama*, Berlin 1880.

pretation was accepted by Gomperz, who in 1897 published an edition of the *Poetics*; it included an essay of the playwright Alfred von Berger, who linked the cathartic method of Breuer and Freud to Aristotle.¹⁶

The idea of the cathartic method is generally attributed to Breuer.¹⁷ This is certainly true for the method, which Freud on several occasions attributes to his colleague. The method was developed by Breuer - Freud states in an entry published in 1923 – as early as the beginning of the 1880s, while treating Anna O.; then he abandoned it, without publishing «anything about the case until some ten years later». He resumed his method at Freud's suggestion, after the latter's return from Paris. The method was called “cathartic” - adds Freud - at the time of the *Preliminary communication*, that is in late 1892 (SE 18.235). Freud's reconstruction is confirmed by the first clinical report of the case of Anna O., written by Breuer in 1882 and published in 1978:¹⁸ in it we don't find references to “catharsis”.

The denomination “cathartic” is attributed by Freud to Breuer only on one occasion, in the *Autobiography* (1924), where he says that «Breuer spoke of our method as *cathartic*» (SE 20.22). But surely, as we have seen, the denomination was adopted in the stage when the collaboration between them was closer, and in the *Studies* it is Freud who seems interested in it, more than Breuer: the term is used, as well as in the *Preliminary communication* (signed by both), repeatedly in the parts written by Freud, as “cathartic method” (SE 2.148) and “cathartic psychotherapy” (SE 2.304) (the term “catharsis” only later, in the *Autobiography*, cf. SE 20.22). The denomination is instead never used in the parts written by Breuer.

Also in the following years it was Freud who repeatedly spoke of the “cathartic” method as the first stage in the formation of psychoanalysis (e.g. in the preface to the second edition of the *Studies*, published in 1908, SE 2.XXXI). As regards Breuer, he was no longer interested in his method after the break with Freud. From a letter written to him by Gomperz in late 1896 we learn that he was very skeptical about the therapeutic role of the theatre¹⁹, probably referring to the above-mentioned essay by von Berger and to the Viennese debate on catharsis. This disinterest was probably also a consequence of the break with Freud, who abandoned hypnosis and discovered the sexual origins of hysteria.

¹⁶ Aristoteles, *Poetik*, hrsg. von Th. Gomperz, mit einer Abhandlung *Wahrheit und Irrtum in der Katharsistheorie des Aristoteles* von A. von Berger, Leipzig 1897.

¹⁷ See e.g. GAY, *Freud*, p. 68.

¹⁸ See A. HIRSCHMÜLLER, *Physiologie und Psychoanalyse in Leben und Werk Joseph Breuers*, Bern 1978, pp. 348-64.

¹⁹ See Hirschmüller, *Physiologie*, pp. 210-11.

The role of Freud in the choice of the denomination “cathartic” was then perhaps more important than it is usually considered. It was probably influenced by Gomperz, who could have explained Bernays’s interpretation of Aristotle’s catharsis to Freud (but obviously also to Breuer, who was also his doctor). It was also affected by the debate opened in Vienna by that interpretation, the former particularly influencing its implications for the theatre.²⁰ Freud’s interest in this debate²¹ is documented by the short paper “Psychopathic Characters on the Stage”, written in 1905 or 1906 but published only in 1942: addressed to the musician Max Graf, it opens with the quotation of Aristotle’s passage (*SE* 7.305).

It now remains to explain the fact that Aristotle is never mentioned in the *Studies*: the authors leave it to the reader to recognize the source of the term ‘cathartic’. This reticence is due to the scientist’s habitus that Freud has not yet abandoned, according to which a scientific writer does not quote a pre-scientific author such as Aristotle. The list of publications presented by Freud to the University of Vienna at the beginning of 1897 (*SE* 3.227) is still that of a “respectable” scientist: the list doesn’t include the essay of 1890 on psychical treatment and one of the works on cocaine; the most recent work cited in the list is the chapter on infantile cerebral palsy published in a medical handbook.

Freud’s last attempt to remain part of mainstream science, before starting his psychoanalytical adventure, can be considered the *Entwurf* of 1895, the failed project to provide a «psychology for neurologists», as Freud himself defines it in his letter of April 27 to Fliess.²² The project will be sent to Fliess in autumn (and will only be published in 1950). But in Freud’s intense activity of these years, revealed by the correspondence with Fliess, there is a noteworthy statement which we read in the letter of 15 October 1895, where he announces triumphantly to his friend that he has resolved «the great clinical secret» of hysteria: it «is the consequence of a presexual sexual shock».²³

²⁰ See M. WORBS, “Katharsis in Wien um 1900”, in *Grenzen des Katharsis in den modernen Künsten. Transformationen des aristotelischen Modells seit Bernays, Nietzsche und Freud*, hrsg. von M. Vöhler u. D. Linck, Berlin-New York 2009, pp. 93-113.

²¹ See G. GÖDDE, “Therapeutik und Ästhetik – Verbindungen zwischen Breuers und Freuds kathartischer Therapie und der Katharsis-Konzeption von Jacob Bernays”, in *Grenzen des Katharsis*, p. 91.

²² MASSON, p. 127.

²³ MASSON, p. 144.

3. To find a change in Freud's "public" behaviour, that is in his scientific production, we have to wait for the new century and his psychoanalytical literature, in which his references to ancient texts and topics recur frequently, justifying that 'devotion' of which Grafton spoke. Caldwell found 750 references to classical topics in the whole of Freud's works;²⁴ Glei counted 378 ancient names and topics in the Index of the *Gesammelten Werken*²⁵.

The turning point can be established as being at the beginning of the new century, with the publication of *The Interpretation of Dreams*.²⁶ Already in the epigraph of the work we read a quotation of Virgil, *Aeneid* VII 312, *flectere si nequeo superos, Acheronta movebo* («if Heaven I cannot bend, then Hell I will arouse» [trans. by H. R. Fairclough]), where Juno is speaking, referring to her call to Allecto to promote the war between Latins and Trojans. The meaning of the quotation has been debated,²⁷ but it is certainly indicative of the communicative value that Freud assigned to the ancient authors. As early as the end of 1896 he wrote to Fliess saying that he intended using this Virgilian line as the epigraph for a planned work on hysteria.²⁸ Before the publication of the *Interpretation* he was uncertain, for the epigraph, whether to use a quotation from Virgil or one from Goethe, but in the end he chose Virgil, whose line, as he wrote to Fliess, implies an allusion to repression.²⁹ The line is quoted not only as the epigraph of the work, but also in the last chapter, where Freud suggests that the Virgilian underworld represents the night during which men dream. In the edition of 1909 Freud added, after the Virgilian quotation, that «the interpretation of dreams is the *via regia* ("royal road") to a knowledge of the unconscious activities of the mind» (*SE* 5.608), where *via regia* (in Latin) seems a phonetic pun on the name of Virgil (*Vergilius*)³⁰.

²⁴ R. S. CALDWELL, "Selected Bibliography on Psychoanalysis and Classical Studies", *Arethusa* 7 (1984), p. 118.

²⁵ R. F. GLEI, "Freud und die Antike – oder: Hätte Ödipus einen Ödipus-Komplex?", in *Genie und Wahnsinn. Konzepte psychischer 'Normalität' und 'Abnormalität' im Altertum*, hrsg. Von B. Effe und R. F. Glei, Trier 2000, p. 9.

²⁶ The date of publication is given on the title page as 1900, but the book left the printing works a few months earlier, in 1899.

²⁷ See P. Traverso, "*Psyche è una parola greca...*", Genova 2000 (German trans. Frankfurt a.M. 2003); Armstrong, *A Compulsion*, pp. 145-46.

²⁸ MASSON, *The Complete*, p. 204 (letter of December 4, 1896).

²⁹ MASSON, *The Complete*, p. 361 (letter of July 17, 1899).

³⁰ See E. OLLIENSIS, *Freud's Rome. Psychoanalysis and Latin Poetry*, Cambridge 2009, p.127n. Another famous line from the *Aeneid*, '*forsan et haec olim meminisse iuvabit*' (1.203: "perhaps even this distress it will some day be a joy to recall") is quoted by Freud

Despite the presence of Virgil at the beginning of the work, in the first edition of the *Interpretation* some references to antiquity are still cautious, so as not to offend contemporary 'scientific' sensibilities. In the introductory chapter we read that «among the peoples of classical antiquity, the evaluation of dreams is clearly reminiscent of how they were viewed in primitive times», particularly the idea that dreams are foreseeing the future: that of the ancients is consequently a «pre-scientific conception of the dream» (SE 4.2). In this context Freud particularly praises Aristotle's theory of dreams, in which, for the first time, the dream «becomes a subject for psychological study». Freud mentions Aristotle's treatises *De somniis* (On dreams) and *De divinatione per somnium* (On divination through dream), and highlights in particular the definition given by Aristotle, «the dream is a sort of presentation (*phántasma*) and, more particularly, one which occurs in sleep» (462a). The definition is paraphrased by Freud as «the mental activity of the sleeper in so far as he is asleep» (SE 4.2). In later years Freud will continue to appreciate this definition, e.g. in a note added in 1935 to the *Autobiography*, where he writes that Aristotle's old definition «still holds good» (SE 20.46n).

The emphasis given to Aristotle's rationalistic definition is moderated, in the first edition of the *Interpretation*, by a statement omitted in the subsequent editions: «My own insufficient knowledge and my lack of specialist assistance prevent my entering more deeply into Aristotle's treatise» (SE 4.2). This statement is hardly credible, considering Freud's relationship with Gomperz, and is clearly due to the concerns that he still had towards the readers of the book. The omission of the statement from the second edition reflects a new approach to the classical authors, whose use is no longer constrained by previous concerns. It is also revealed by the quotations of Aristotle and other authors added in the subsequent editions.

A similar attitude of caution is also adopted by Freud in the first edition with regard to Artemidorus of Daldi, who is mentioned incidentally as an example of the «pre-scientific conception of the dream» (SE 4.5). The same Artemidorus becomes, in the fourth edition (1914), the one who «has left us the most complete and painstaking study of dream interpretation as practised in the Graeco-Roman world» (SE 4.98). An interpretation, as Freud wrote in the same year in *The History of the Psychoanalytical Movement*, that has a «close connection» with «psychoanalytical dream-

in the essay on *Screen Memories* published in 1899 (SE 3.317). On Freud's interest in Virgil, see also J. GLENN, "Freud, Vergil, and Aeneas: An Unnoticed Classical Influence on Freud", *The American Journal of Psychoanalysis* 47 (1987), pp. 279-81.

interpretation» (*SE* 14.20). The change of judgment may reflect a recent study of Artemidorus by Freud, but it also reveals a freedom of judgment unknown in the previous years. This is highlighted by a note added in 1914, in which Freud enhances the interpretation of a dream of Alexander the Great, reported by Artemidorus at 4.14: besieging the city of Tyros, Alexander dreamed a satyr; the interpretation was that he would soon storm the city, because “sa Tyros” (Satyros) in Greek means “your Tyros”. Freud already knew this interpretation from Artemidorus at the time of the first edition, but referred to it only indirectly, without the emphasis we read in the note of 1914: «a dream may have impelled some chieftain to embark upon a upon a bold enterprise the success of which has changed history» (*SE* 5.614). Alexander’s dream is mentioned by Freud also in the *Introduction to Psychoanalysis* (1915-1917), where he quotes not only the version of Artemidorus (*SE* 18.85), but also that given by Plutarch in the *Life of Alexander* 24.8 (*SE* 18.234), which he had read in previous years.³¹

Another classical author mentioned in the *Interpretation* is Sophocles, whose *Oedipus the King* Freud used to name the well known complex. He knew the tragedy, as we have seen, from his school years, and both in Vienna and Paris he had seen performances of the tragedy. The discovery of his own «libido toward *matrem*» (he uses the Latin word), the crucial event of Freud’s autoanalysis, was recounted to Fliess on 3 October 1897;³² on 15 October Freud presented it as a universal experience, which explains the emotional effect caused on the spectators by Sophocles’ tragedy.³³ Six months later Freud wrote to Fliess that he was looking for studies on the legend of Oedipus,³⁴ but the exposition of the *Interpretation* is not very far from that of the first letter to Fliess. The importance of *Oedipus rex* for his theory is to be found once again in the effect the tragedy has on the theatre public: «If *Oedipus Rex* moves a modern audience no less than it did the contemporary Greek one, the explanation can only be that its effect does not lie in the contrast between destiny and human will, but is to be looked for in the particular nature of the material on which that contrast is exemplified» (*SE* 4.263). One can detect, in Freud’s notation on Sophocles’ audience, the interest aroused in the preceding years by Aristotle’s *catharsis* and the debate triggered by Bernays’s interpretation. Freud notes, in the *Interpretation*, that the effect on the audience provoked

³¹ See F. STOK, “Freud, la filologia classica e la psicoanalisi”, due to be published.

³² MASSON, *The Complete*, p. 268.

³³ MASSON, *The Complete*, p. 271.

³⁴ MASSON, *The Complete*, p. 304 (letter of March 15, 1898).

by Sophocles' tragedy does not occur for tragedies based, like those of Greece, on the contrast between destiny and human will, and gives the example of the tragedy *Die Ahnfrau* by Grillparzer (1817).

In a note added in 1914 Freud observes that «none of the findings of psycho-analytic research has provoked such embittered denials, such fierce opposition - or such amusing contortions - on the part of critics as this indication of the childhood impulses towards incest which persist in the unconscious» (*SE* 3.264n). There was in fact strong opposition, in subsequent years, not only to the Oedipus-complex,³⁵ but also to Freud's interpretation of Sophocles' tragedy. One of the best known attacks on Freud's interpretation is the essay published by Jean-Paul Vernant in 1967, whose significant title was "Oedipus without the Complex"³⁶.

4. The foundations of psychoanalysis are closely intertwined with Freud's personal experience of autoanalysis. The discovery of his own childhood Oedipal experience occurred shortly after the death of his father Jakob (October 23, 1896). Sigmund's father is present also in the references to a singular syndrome suffered by Freud in these years, the so-called "Roman phobia".³⁷ Freud describes it in the letter to Fliess of December 3, 1897: «my longing for Rome is deeply neurotic. It is connected with my schoolboy hero-worship of the Semitic Hannibal, and in fact also this year, as had happened to him, on approaching Rome, I was unable to go beyond Lake Trasimene».³⁸ In fact during his trip to Italy, in September 1897, Freud had arrived (it seems) at Orte, and then turned back, northwards. In the *Interpretation of dreams* Freud connects his adolescent identification with Hannibal, the enemy of Rome, remembering an incident of anti-Semitism of which Jakob had been a victim in the presence of his son: «I contrasted this situation with another which fitted my feelings better: the scene in which Hannibal's father, Hamilcar Barca, made his boy swear before the household altar to take vengeance on the Romans. Ever since that time Hannibal had had a place in my fantasies» (*SE* 4.194). Reacting to anti-Semitism Freud identified with the Semitic (Tyrian) Hannibal and sided against Rome, Hannibal's enemy, but also

³⁵ In the *Interpretation* Freud speaks of "Oedipus dream"; the definition "Oedipus complex" was introduced in 1910 (*SE* 11.171).

³⁶ See J. P. VERNANT & P. VIDAL-NAQUET, *Myth and Tragedy in Ancient Greece*, New York 1988, pp. 85-112.

³⁷ See S. TIMPANARO, "Freud's Roman Phobia", *New Left Review* 147 (September-October 1984), pp. 4-31.

³⁸ MASSON, *The Complete*, p. 285.

the city of the Catholic Church, as he states in the *Interpretation*: «to my youthful mind Hannibal and Rome symbolized the conflict between the tenacity of Jewry and the organization of the Catholic church» (SE 4.196).³⁹

The recovery from his Roman phobia coincides with the completion of the auto-analysis and also with the new open approach to the classics which began with the *Interpretation*: in September 1901 Freud managed to reach Rome. In the letter of September 19 to Fliess he writes: «it has been an overwhelming experience for me and, as you know, the fulfillment of a long-cherished wish». ⁴⁰ Freud identifies, in this letter, ‘three Romes’: the ancient, which he visits passionately, the Catholic, to which he seems now indifferent, and the modern, ‘Italian’, which seems to him «nice». ⁴¹

The Roman phobia, from which Freud had just recovered and that had prevented him from reaching Rome, concerned ancient Rome, which he now appreciates, or the Catholic Rome, which clashed with the Jewish identity of his father? Both answers have been given, and perhaps both are right to a certain extent. What it is interesting to note is that the identification with Hannibal also seems to have influenced Freud’s interest in Vergil: the quoted line used as the epigraph of the *Interpretation* is uttered, in the *Aeneid*, by Juno, the protector of Carthage and enemy of Aeneas. Another Virgilian line, IV 625 *exoriare, aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor* («Arise from my ashes, unknown avenger»), is at the centre of a lapsus discussed by Freud in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901). They are the words of Dido, who prophesies the Punic wars and the advent of Hannibal. «Once again – observes Ellen Olliensis – Dido and Hannibal appear to be bound up with Jewish anxiety in the face of Catholic persecution». ⁴²

5. In the following years, the ancient author most often mentioned by Freud is Plato. As early as 1914, in a note added to *Interpretation*, Freud praised Plato’s statement that «the best men are those who only *dream* what other men *do* in their waking life» (SE 4.67: it is a paraphrase of *Republic* IX 571c-d). In the following years Plato is quoted by Freud mostly for the theory of pulsions: for the first time in the preface to the fourth

³⁹ On Freud’s Hannibal see W. J. McGRATH, *Freud’s Discovery of Psychoanalysis*, Ithaca, NY 1986, pp. 62-66; Armstrong, pp. 222-24.

⁴⁰ MASSON, *The Complete*, p. 449.

⁴¹ In the subsequent years Freud frequently visited Rome (see R. BRUNNER, *Freud et Rome*, Paris 2011). In 1913 he studied the statue of Moses by Michelangelo Buonarroti in the church of San Pietro in Vincoli, on which he wrote a well known essay.

⁴² OLLIENSIS, *Freud’s Rome*, p. 129n.

edition (1920) of the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, where he invites the reader to consider «how closely the enlarged theory of psychoanalysis coincides with the Eros of the divine Plato» (SE 7.134). The assimilation libido / eros is then recurrent, from the *Group Psychology* (1921: SE 18.91) to *Why War?*, the letter addressed to Einstein in 1932 (SE 22.209).

In his *Autobiography* (1924) Freud explicitly presents Plato's *eros* as the historical antecedent of his own theory: in 1914, he writes, «I was aware that in deriving hysteria from sexuality I was going back to the very beginnings of medicine and following up a thought of Plato's. It was not until later that I learnt this from an essay by Havelock Ellis» (SE 20.24). This statement does not seem very true. The reference is to the essay "Hysteria in Relation with the Sexual Emotions" published in 1898 by the American journal *Alienist and Neurologist*, where Havelock Ellis discussed Freud's *Studies on Hysteria* and pointed out the analogy with Plato. But Freud had in fact read the essay very soon after its publication, and quotes it in the letter to Fliess of January 3, 1899. Many years later, in 1920, Freud decided to present Plato as the precursor of his own theory, as part of a strategy directed to define the scientific and cultural collocation of psychoanalysis.

Indicating in Plato a precursor of his concept of *libido* Freud was assigning to psychoanalysis a special status among the sciences of his times, evoking ancient philosophy and wisdom. Plato was also a way of defending psychoanalysis from its critics, who blamed Freud for the excessive importance given to sexuality. This role assigned to Plato is evident in *The Resistances to Psychoanalysis* (1924), where Freud notes that the Platonic *eros* is not coincident with sexuality: «what psychoanalysis called sexuality was by no means identical with the impulsion towards a union of the two sexes or towards producing a pleasurable sensation in the genitals; it had far more resemblance to the all-inclusive and all-preserving Eros of Plato's *Symposium*» (SE 19.218). The same objective is to be found in the previous *Group Psychology* (1921), where Freud mentions, besides Plato, *The Epistle to the Corinthians* of the apostle Paul, who praises «love above all else» (SE 18.91).

The Freudian *libido* obviously has little in common with the Platonic *eros*, as emerges from the comparative study by Santas,⁴³ but the Platonic genealogy of psychoanalysis was functional to the discursive approach adopted by Freud in the twenties. Other dimensions of the Freud / Plato

⁴³ G. SANTAS, *Plato and Freud: Two Theories of Love*, Oxford & New York 1988.

correlation have been studied e.g. by Simon,⁴⁴ but are not supported by direct references. Freud didn't even mention Plato when the presence of the Greek philosopher is quite evident, as in the in the *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (1932), where Freud compares the relation between Ego and Id to that of the rider with the horse: «the ego's relation to the id might be compared with that of a rider to his horse. The horse supplies the locomotive energy, while the rider has the privilege of deciding on the goal and of guiding the powerful animal's movement. But only too often there arises between the ego and the id the not precisely ideal situation of the rider being obliged to guide the horse along the path by which it itself wants to go» (SE 22.77). The simile echoes that proposed by Plato in *Phaedrus*, where the tripartite soul is represented by the chariot and the two horses. The chariot i.e. the rational soul has to govern the passions represented by the horses: «when the charioteer beholds the vision of love, and has his whole soul warmed through sense, and is full of the prickings and ticklings of desire, the obedient steed, then as always under the government of shame, refrains from leaping on the beloved; but the other, heedless of the pricks and of the blows of the whip, plunges and runs away, giving all manner of trouble to his companion and the charioteer, whom he forces to approach the beloved and to remember the joys of love» (253e-254a, trans. by B. Jovett). That Freud was inspired by Plato is evident, but he doesn't quote the name of Plato: because he took it for granted that the reader would recognize the quotation⁴⁵ or, more likely, because the quotation was not functional to his communicative strategy.⁴⁶

6. Plato as the ancient predecessor of psychoanalysis is replaced, in the last years, by Empedocles. From 1920 Freud had modified his theory of the instincts, putting the death instinct (*thanatos*) side by side with the sexual *libido*. In *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937) he says that he recently «came upon his theory in the writings of one of the great thinkers of ancient Greece», that is Empedocles (SE 23.244). The analogy noted by Freud was between his own theory and Empedocles' theory of the two natural energies, *philia* ("love") and *neîkos* ("discordance"). Freud had read the fragments of Empedocles in the collection of the *Vorsokra-*

⁴⁴ B. SIMON, "Plato and Freud: the Mind in Conflict and the Mind in Dialogue", *Psycho-analytical Quarterly* 42 (1973), pp. 91-122.

⁴⁵ So Y. OUDAI CELSO, *Freud e la filosofia antica*, Torino 2006, p. 142.

⁴⁶ On Freud's other quotations from Plato see F. STOK, "Psychology", in *A Companion to the Classical Tradition*, ed. By C. W. Kallendorf, Malden, MA 2007, pp. 366-67.

tiker published in 1935 by Wilhelm Capelle, and drew from this book the information he gives in his work.

The role played by Capelle seems similar to that assigned in 1924 to Havelock Ellis, whose lecture revealed to Freud the existence of an ancient predecessor of his sexual theory, that is Plato. This statement, as we have seen, is not credible, firstly because Freud had already read Havelock Ellis's essay in 1899; secondly because he very probably knew Plato's *Simposium* directly, before reading Havelock Ellis. In the case of Empedocles Freud chooses the inverse solution. He does not exclude the possibility of having been influenced, in working out his theory, by Empedocles himself, whose work could have been among the many he had read in his youth: «I am very ready to give up the prestige of originality for the sake of such a confirmation, especially as I can never be certain, in view of the wide extent of my reading in early years, whether what I took for a new creation might not be an effect of cryptomnesia» (*SE* 23.244).

Freud had already spoken of “cryptomnesia” some years before, for a book he had read at the age of fourteen, and which was subsequently forgotten (*SE* 18.264). In a more hypothetical way this possibility is proposed for Empedocles, considered as possible reading material of the young Freud. We can believe or not believe this story, and perhaps it is better not to believe it. It confirms however the continuity of the Freudian strategy of suggesting, to his public, an ancient genealogy for his psychoanalysis.

That in the last year Freud confirmed his attachment to the classics is testified by the biographical episode recounted by Freud in 1936, in the open letter to Romain Rolland. In 1904 Sigmund and his brother Alexander made a trip to Greece and visited Athens. After having climbed the Parthenon, Freud suffered a sudden state of disorientation: «we could not believe that we were to be given the joy of seeing Athens». Sigmund did not know, as he admits, what his brother's reaction was, but his name, Alexander (that of Alexander the Great!⁴⁷) was probably sufficient to permit him to use the plural, also in referring to his father, which gives a further psychological meaning to the episode: «our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant much to him» (*SE* 22.245).

The Athenian episode is a sort of pendant of the Roman phobia. Both testify to Freud's psychological bond with the two great centres of ancient

⁴⁷ At age 10 (1866) Sigmund obtained from his father that the new-born brother was called Alexander, and to convince him the boy listed all the victories of the Greek hero (see GAY, *Freud*, p. 8).

culture. The relation with the first, Rome, was disturbed by Freud's identification with Hannibal, but it was then resolved, as we have seen. The relation with Greece is well explained by Freud in a letter to Fliess, where he recounts a dream which concerned his daughter Mathilde, who could be called Hella, because «she is enthralled by the mythology of ancient Hella and naturally regards all Hellenes as heroes».⁴⁸

TÍTULO. *A experiência de Sigmund Freud com os clássicos*

RESUMO. Cultura clássica desempenhou um papel importante na obra de Sigmund Freud e influenciou a formação da psicanálise. Essa influência preocupou vários aspectos da experiência de Freud: a pessoal, a partir de sua identificação adolescente com antigos heróis à sua ligação emocional com Roma e Atenas, o intelectual, incluindo o uso de autores como Aristóteles e Artemidoro a elaboração da teoria psicanalítica; retórica e expositivo em seu uso de autores clássicos como Sófocles e Virgílio, e em sua estratégia de identificação de pensadores como Platão e Empédocles como precursores de suas teorias. O presente artigo reconstrói a evolução desta estratégia, que começou em 1900, em conjunto com a definição dos conceitos básicos da psicanálise. Alguns episódios específicos de abordagem de Freud para os clássicos também são examinados: sua recepção do conceito de Aristóteles de catarse, e da interpretação deste conceito dado por Bernays, o interesse de Freud em Vergil, com destaque para o uso de versos da Eneida em suas obras; sua relação conflituosa com a Roma, o uso de Empédocles como um predecessor das mudanças que Freud fez, em seus últimos anos, a teoria das pulsões.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE. Freud; catarse; Aristóteles; Virgílio; Roma.

⁴⁸ MASSON, *The Complete*, p. 249 (letter of May 31, 1897).