

The ancient unconscious: psychoanalysis and the ancient text

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Reports of the death of (especially Freudian) psychoanalysis are grossly exaggerated, and its function in the interpretation of Greek and Latin texts is often denied as irrelevant, methodologically unsound, or both: either the ancients did not have an unconscious, or we cannot retrieve it. In this hostile climate, Vered Lev Kenaan's intense and challenging monograph eschews apologetic defense for straightforward attack, not least by choosing such an uncompromising title. Psychoanalytic concepts, specifically the notion of the unconscious, are indispensable, she argues, for the proper construction and understanding of our relationship with antiquity, and for hermeneutics in general. The Freudian unconscious must be rearticulated 'as a dynamic principle of textual meaning', 'a paradigm of a text's essence as unfolding in time' (p. 5). Thus, rather than parsing ancient text in search of traces of the ancients' unconscious, this book

suggests that the unconscious operates as a form of ‘deferral of meaning that is manifest only retroactively’ (p. 6), and as such cannot be eluded in any act of interpretation. When Freud discerns in ancient myth elements forgotten by consciousness, he elaborates a ‘principle of exegesis’ (p. 23), conceptually separate from both therapeutic practice and historical reconstruction, that makes the mutual reflection between ancient and modern the source of a deeper understanding of the self as well as of modernity’s relationship with antiquity. Lev Kenaan asserts that this dynamic, interactive approach is the essence of psychoanalysis as it is of comparative literature, and indeed, one could argue, also of any form of literary and philological enquiry, philology’s rootedness in historically verifiable data notwithstanding.

Between the Introduction and an Epilogue, the book unfolds in six chapters, the first devoted to methodological foundations. The unconscious, as Freud shows, is predicated on the elision of temporal differences, and the constant fusion or intersection of different chronological planes. This keystone of psychoanalytic theory poses a radical challenge to historical and philological reconstruction, and represents a source of anxiety that Lev Kenaan reads as revelatory of the very dynamics of the unconscious that such anxiety endeavours to steer clear of.

Chapter 2 looks at this interaction between different temporal levels from a different viewpoint, comparing and contrasting the application of a ‘dialectic of archaeology’ (as defined by Paul Ricoeur) in Freud and Hegel. For Freud, the method of archaeological excavation provides an analogue of psychoanalysis’ quest for the unconscious, which can be

revealed only through deferred exposure to (contemporary) consciousness. A comparison with Hegel's conception of antiquity, and his notion that the structure of modern consciousness is best appraised via the interaction between ancient and modern, further allows Lev Kenaan to situate Freud's approach in a wider historical and conceptual framework. Hegel's antiquity is not static, it must be appropriated and transformed, its recollection being central to the construction of our self; like the giant Antaeus, we must keep our feet firmly on earth (Gaia, the archetypal chthonic mother) if we are to survive, we can progress only if we are able to 'regress' to groundedness in the past, to be able to rely on cultural continuity.

Antaeus' connection with the mother implies an Oedipical challenge to the father, and the Oedipal conflict, which runs as a theme throughout the monograph, takes centre stage in chapter 3. Here the starting move is Freud's 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis' (1936), whose complex chronological texture and unexpected dénouement, with the Acropolis stirring the memory of his dead father, Lev Kenaan deftly reads as metaphor of a broader tension between Freud and his own Jewish rather than 'Classical' roots, a tension which problematizes, for Freud, the very notion of cultural continuity. Hence Freud's recurrent desire not to be bound, Antaeus-like, to Vienna as the ground/mother, but rather to look back at Antiquity as a site for the dialectic exploration of his relationship with his own father, with memories and desires. The date of Freud's essay explains the (implicit) invasion of political concerns into his personal recollection, which the book, prompted by Freud's explicit echo of the Virgilian *parvis componere magnis* (*Eclogues* 1.23),^[1] invites us to read

in parallel with Virgil's first *Eclogue* and its tormented narrative of exile; and the *Aeneid*'s archetypical image of *pietas*, that of Aeneas carrying his father on his shoulders, turns here into a representation of the connection between ancient and modern, a connection which Freud problematizes as a form of tension between continuity and change, acceptance and rebellion.

In chapter 4, further exploration of how meaning is created through the interaction between present consciousness and past unconscious turns to Homeric digressions, chiefly Eurycleia's recognition of Odysseus' scar in the *Odyssey* (19.361-475), which is interrupted by the narrator's recollection of two defining moments in the hero's childhood and youth, his naming and the wild boar hunt, a masculine rite of passage which explains the presence of the scar. Unlike Auerbach, who denies that mention of these episodes at this particular point qualifies as a memory, and favours a view of digression, here and elsewhere, as a moment of temporal stand-still, Lev Kenaan convincingly stresses that this digression conveys a subjective, regressive movement towards past events, as it does in dreams.^[2] Odysseus' scar leads inevitably to Sophocles' *Oedipus*, a play whose most compelling scenes find here a sensitive and astute reader, uninterested in whether Oedipus suffered from an Oedipical complex, but convinced that the play represents the prime site for exploring the creation of meaning thanks to a backward and forward movement: since 'the discovery of the unconscious requires a moment of self-recognition that intrinsically belongs to the future' (p. 2), 'discovery' of Oedipus' complex is always structurally projected into the future. Lev Kenaan is right to stress the importance of Freud's statement that the structure of dreams (and neuroses) preserves 'mental antiquities', i.e. that it can be analyzed as

‘a picture of phylogenetic childhood’. Here and at other junctures, her argument would be enriched by engagement with Ignacio Matte Blanco’s ground-breaking *The Unconscious as Infinite Sets: An Essay in Bi-Logic* (London 1975), which in its attempt to redefine the Freudian unconscious as a form of alternative, symmetrical logic offers a systematic approach to these issues.[\[3\]](#)

The classicist’s resistance to reading Oedipus in the light of forms of understanding developed in connection with the modern subject is at the core of chapter 5, where the main argument of the book comes to fruition. Freud’s reading of the ancient Oedipus through the lens of modern consciousness collapses chronological distinctions in the same way dreams do: we cannot read Oedipus without modern conceptions of the (Freudian) self, nor can we elaborate those notions without the stimulus and the atemporal connection deriving from that ancient text. The unconscious, as a consequence, is neither to be located in the antiquity nor in the present: it is a third, intermediate space, created as we ‘unrave[1] the hidden links between past and future’ (p. 150) and establish a mutual dependency between them. This link enables the modern subject to realise the existence of what consciousness has forgotten, and, reciprocally, to endow the ancient subject with an unconscious which will be fully revealed only at a future time. Lev Kenaan compares this relationship to the mode of figural interpretation developed for the interpretation of the Bible, enshrined in Tertullian’s image of *figura futurorum* and, again, central to much of Auerbach’s work, whereby events of the Old Testament must be read at the same time as historical reality and a prefiguration — a ‘shadow’ — of a meaning that will become clear in the New Testament.

As neither text is complete in and of itself, but meaning emerges on a bi-directional temporal axis, so Oedipus may not (yet) be Oedipical, but Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* does provide Freud with a 'myth of origin' of psychoanalysis (p. 162).

The final chapter of the book is devoted to the presence of Oedipal dreams in ancient and modern literature, and to a sustained critique of recent attempts to posit an unsurmountable barrier between the ancient and modern experience of dreaming. Artemidorus of Daldis, who locates the importance of dreams in their ability to predict the future, not to reflect fears and desires, is often invoked as chief witness for the prosecution. But Lev Kenaan is right to point out that Artemidorus' exuberant attempt to erase sexual significance and latency from Oedipal dreams and seek refuge in symbolic interpretations (the mother as earth, or power, or money...) simply neglects the rampant erotic imagery of the dreams he discusses.[\[4\]](#)

This book marks an important step for the understanding of psychoanalysis' role in hermeneutics in general and in a critical approach to the Greco-Roman past in particular. It is to be praised not only for its capacious theoretical underpinnings — apart from Freud, who is extensively quoted and acutely analysed, Lev Kenaan engages with Hegel, Burchkardt, Gadamer, Abraham, Auerbach, Dodds, a fascinating personal pantheon — but also for the shrewd reading of some foundational sections of Homer and Virgil.[\[5\]](#) As with any book which tries to subvert received wisdom, it will hopefully spark lively discussion and even controversy, which should be taken as testimony to its incisiveness and originality.[\[6\]](#)

Notes

[1] *Eclogues* 1.4, however, does not mean ‘you, Tityrus, are relaxing in the shade’: *tu*, qualified by *lentus*, is the subject of *resonare doces* in the following line, which is not quoted (p. 83); similarly ‘Phocis is the name of *ge* [i.e. the land, the earth, mother-earth]’ (p. 171, brackets in the text) is an odd translation of Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex* 733 Φωκὶς μὲν ἡ γῆ κλήζεται, ‘the land is called Phocis’ (but cf. ‘Phocis is the name of the land’, correctly, on p. 168).

[2] Odysseus’ emotional involvement in the retrospective narrative about to begin is made explicit at line 390-1, where the text mentions his fear that the scar may reveal his identity: this emotion represents a suitable starting point for the beginning of a personal memory, even if it is not explicitly presented as such.

[3] See for instance Lev Kenaan’s observations on the self-contradicting nature of analogy, defined by the interplay of difference and similarity (pp. 133-5).

[4] Cf. now P. Thonemann’s stimulating monograph *An Ancient Dream Manual. Artemidorus’ The Interpretation of Dreams* (Oxford 2020), one of whose merits is to interpret Artemidorus on his own terms.

[5] The statement that ‘[t]urning back is a major gesture in ancient poetry, offering a cure for forgetfulness’ (p. 97) should be qualified by recollection of the destructive power of that same gesture, as in the story of Orpheus.

[6] A few inaccuracies: in *Lucr.* 2.123-4 (p. 81) the line ends after *res*, and for *notitiae* read *notitiae*; at *Aen.* 2.708 (p. 142), for *subito* read *subibo*;

at *Aen.* 1.409 for *versa* read *veras* (p. 196; ditto at p. 197 instead of *vera*). The main character of the *Aeneid* is not ‘nam[ed] Aeneas Pius’ (p. 89). Also, at p. 123 for ‘degressive’ read ‘regressive’; at p. 133, for *Gleishzeitigkeit*, *Gleichzeitigkeit*; not F. Stoc (pp. 11 and 212) but F. Stok. *Gleichnis* does not mean ‘linking’ (p. 154), although a ‘simile’ implies a form of linking. Faulty word-divisions on pp. 137, 183, 193.