

## SHRINKING TEXTS: THE DANGER OF HERMENEUTICS UNDER FREUDIAN AUSPICES

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"'Tis you that say it, not I."

John Milton (quoting Electra), *An Apology Against a Pamphlet*

"What could ever be written at all so carefully that it could never be twisted by an angry opponent into some sinister meaning?"

Erasmus (to Jacob Hoogstraten, the Inquisitor)

A good friend, a man who also mentored my dissertation on John Milton, once chided me for dismissing out of hand a book of Milton criticism written from a Freudian point of view. This book, as it happens, was written by the mentor of his own dissertation on Milton. "You must not," my friend said, "reject a book without even having read it."

That of course is perfectly reasonable advice. I accept it enthusiastically and with conviction—as a general principle. The rule, however, has exceptions. By their very nature, some books do not deserve this courtesy. Books that advocate a flat earth, for example, fall into such a category. So also do books of Freudian criticism. The burden of this essay is to explain why I believe as I do.

Simply put, I reject Freudian criticism because I reject the Freudian conjectures upon which it is based. These conjectures tell us, for example, that dreams "mean" and that they mean symbolically. Kings and queens, Freudians say, represent fathers and mothers. Journeys represent death. Small animals represent brothers and sisters. Landscapes, gardens, fruit and blossoms represent either the female body or select parts of it. Furthermore, when these images appear in art (verbal or representational) the same exegetical and iconological deductions can be made concerning them.

But every schoolboy knows how easy it is to foist sexual overtones onto almost every sentence one hears in normal conversation, innocent though these sentences may be. If we put our minds to it, we can translate countless words and notions into sexual innuendo. When a young wit exercises his ingenuity in this way and is brash enough (or disrespectful enough) to voice such banal indiscretions publicly, he usually succeeds only in embarrassing those around him and discrediting himself. We who hear him know that his perverse projections are merely that: projections. They have no real bearing on the initial speaker's sentence, character, or motivations. We hear such indiscreet interjections and dismiss them (if our standards of morality and of

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social decorum are not too severely offended) as the immaturity of youth. When he is older he will put away childish things.

In some portions of academia, however, such indiscreet interjections are called Freudian literary criticism and are thought to be scholarship. Freudian critics, like teenage boys, are experts at creating double entendre—with someone else's words. This, they tell us, is what the writer really meant, whether he knew it or not. When, for example, John Milton employs these latently sexual images, Freudian critics say, it is evidence of the poet's "predicate thinking," that distorted form of thinking that confuses two roughly similar objects or actions. Such thinking occurs when, for instance, "a tree and a male sex organ are equated in a person's mind because they both share the same physical characteristic of protruding."<sup>1</sup> Thus "as we read *Paradise Lost* we should remember the serpent as phallic symbol."<sup>2</sup> The fallacy here lies in attributing confusion (i.e. "predicate thinking") to someone else other than the critic. I reject any effort to employ adolescent sexual innuendo as a legitimate exegetical device. I do not classify either as literary scholarship or insight the assertion that because the narrator in *Paradise Lost* is sometimes portrayed in birdlike images we "should recall that in dream psychology a bird and flying have sensual significance" and that "flying dreams are erection dreams."<sup>3</sup> I stridently dissent when such critics tell us that "we cannot help being struck by the sexual overtones of the metaphor of inspiration"<sup>4</sup> employed in *Paradise Lost*. We can in fact avoid it, and most of us have done so. Sexual and/or pornographic intrusion is not a hermeneutical requirement.

What Freudian criticism misconstrues is not simply the nature of the literature under scrutiny but its own unsuitability as an exegetical tool. Freudian criticism is not legitimate exegesis and does not illumine the text at hand any more definitively than schoolboy jokes honestly reflect the character, intention, or meaning of their victims. In the hands of Freudian critics writers are victims too. That is because Freudian criticism is a mirror, not an eyeglass. It reveals the critic, not the text or the author under examination. Rather than explicating a text Freudian criticism merely interposes the perverse machinations of the critic between the reader and the text, and as a result genuine understanding is injured, not aided. I reject the idea that we understand Milton's theological epic poem better when we realize the sexual overtones and implications of Satan (the phallic symbol turned toad) whispering disturbing things into Eve's ear ("a symbol of the womb"<sup>5</sup>). To say that such "exegesis" is hopelessly over-subtle or that it is wildly speculative is

<sup>1</sup>C. S. Hall, *A Primer of Freudian Psychology* (New York: New American Library, 1979 [1954]) 40.

<sup>2</sup>J. T. Shawcross, *With Mortal Voice: The Creation of "Paradise Lost"* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1982) 178 n. 3.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 18.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 179 n. 9.

not enough. It is schoolboy perversity, unworthy of serious scholarly consideration.

In other words, I do not believe that dreams mean, that they mean symbolically, that their unconscious iconography is either universal or interpretable, that their interpreted meaning ought to be understood as extensively sexual, or that their sexuality is of the sort described by Freud. Nor do I believe that these same symbols, and the iconic significance with which Freudians invest them, are appropriate ways of interpreting art, whether textual or visual. We have only the unconvincing assertions of Freudians that they are. What these critics fail to understand is that their theories reflect far more on them than on the text or author under consideration at the moment. Perversity, like beauty, is often in the eye of the beholder.

I reject as the worst sort of critical fiction any interpretation of Milton's "Lycidas" (a pastoral elegy dealing with, among other things, the problems of fame, a corrupt clergy and death) that, despite Milton's conscious aims, identifies the rose (line 45), the hyacinth (line 106) or the violet (line 145) as parts of the female anatomy. Nor should anything sexual be made of the fact that water is a dominant and recurring theme in the poem. One could hardly expect something very different from a poem occasioned by a college friend's death at sea by drowning. Any physical element in which Edward King's death had occurred would likely find prominent and repeated expression throughout Milton's monody. If King had died in fire, that element would likely have been employed by Milton in various symbolic and/or ironic ways, none of which necessarily would be indicative of the sexuality of his infancy. Freudian critics, nevertheless, in a plethora of articles and monographs would have told us what the fire images unconsciously signify about Milton and his fear of castration.

What Freudian criticism fails to appreciate sufficiently is that things like flowers and water are common images in pastoral poetry. As elements of pastoral convention, the nature and use of such things was determined long before Milton ever appropriated them. As a result, insofar as Milton is a conventional pastoral poet (or, in the case of *Paradise Lost*, a conventional theological epic poet) his poetic/Biblical images come to him largely as given elements. And he passes them on frequently in the same way he received them. As such, these images are less and less indicative of his own psychological history or makeup. They have little if anything at all to do with his sexual desires, conscious or otherwise.

Despite its tendency to universalize the iconic significance of images in dreams and in literary texts, Freudian criticism fails to realize the culturally relative nature of its iconology. That kings and queens represent one's parents is a hypothesis likely to arise only in times and places near to kings and queens. It may even be true that royalty dreams themselves will arise only in such conditions. If my memory serves (and Freudians, who know my mind better than I do, say it does not), I have never dreamed of or written about kings and queens, or even about the president and his wife, for that matter. Their presence and/or absence in my dreams and poetry is of no psychological or sexual significance whatever and has no bearing at all upon my relationship to my mother or father. The only small animal I remember dreaming

about at the moment is my dog Zeke. His appearance in my dreams “means” nothing beyond himself. Zeke is Zeke, not my brother Chris. In the only poem I ever wrote about Zeke he is himself, nothing more. I reject as the most blatant form of eisegesis any attempt to construe him otherwise. Apart from Freudianism’s bold assertions, where is the proof that kings and queens, roses and violets, or dogs and cats “mean” anything at all, in dreams or in art? Exegesis built upon the hypothesis of unconscious metaphor does not deserve to be called literary criticism. Books that unabashedly advocate it do not deserve to be read.

Modern Freudians are not the first of Milton’s readers to invent sexual overtones for Milton’s words or to imagine perverse sexuality behind them. The anonymous author of *A Modest Confutation* (1642) thought he detected such things in Milton’s *Animadversions*, where he found mention of “old clokes, fals beards, night-walkers, and salt lotion.”<sup>6</sup> From these the author concluded that Milton “haunts Playhouses and Bordelloes; for if he did not, how could he speak of such gear?”<sup>7</sup> Milton met such scurrilous libels with denial, indignation and refutation. He also brought “his inmost thoughts to the front” so that, if his “name and outward demeanor” were not sufficient to defend him in the eyes of the reader, then perhaps “the discovery of [his] inmost thoughts” would be.<sup>8</sup> When Milton himself examined his “inmost thoughts” he found very different things there than do the Freudians. Nourished as he was on Dante’s praise of Beatrice, on Petrarch’s praise of Laura, on Spenser’s allegory on “Chastitie,” and on the Bible’s warnings against licentious thoughts and actions,<sup>9</sup> Milton said that he learned “the love and stedfast observation of that vertue which abhorres the society of Bordello’s.”<sup>10</sup> More significantly for our point, Milton also said that from such books he learned the practice of “sublime and pure thoughts, without transgression,” mental sublimities that kept him above “low descents of mind.”<sup>11</sup> Yet even after he had carefully laid out his “inmost thoughts” to the reader, and even after he had set forth the details of the growth of his mind for all to see, Milton knew that some people would persist in their perverse and unjustified interpretation of his life and words—people who, like Freudian critics, were “good at dismembring and slitting sentences.”<sup>12</sup> He also knew that the scope of invention for anyone who read his works in that fashion was

<sup>6</sup>J. Milton, *The Complete Prose Works of John Milton* (ed. D. M. Wolfe; New Haven: Yale, 1953–82), 1. 886. The words to which Milton refers come from the preface of *A Modest Confutation*.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 886.

<sup>8</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 888–889.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 890–892.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 891.

<sup>11</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 890.

<sup>12</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 894.

nearly unlimited. "By such handy craft as this," Milton asked, "what might he not traduce?"<sup>13</sup>

Freudianism is a mirage in the sphere of literary criticism because it is a mirage in the sphere of human existence and knowledge. It is like that inspiring but illusory optical phenomenon of the desert. It has its own peculiar fascination and allure, but it is devoid of almost all objective reference. Freudianism is a deflection of the light of truth, a deflection that gives rise to images of things that do not exist. Its findings, if such they can be called, are merely chimerical. They have no objective or verifiable basis in reality. They are scientifically suspect. I agree with those who say that when Freud's theories are subjected to the close scrutiny of empirical testing, they fail miserably.<sup>14</sup>

Freudianism is but one more modern and perverse academic mysticism. It is one more intellectual deviation by which substantial and objective scholarship is woefully bedeviled. It may be that Freudians see what I cannot. It also may be that they see what is not there. That is because psychoanalysis pretends to psychic awareness. It confidently claims to be able to organize and to interpret the mysterious and the irretrievable.

But I am unconvinced. I deny that ids, egos and superegos exist, either as discreet entities in themselves or as mechanisms or processes in the mind. Ids, egos and superegos have no independent existence in the subject under analysis. These "things" are merely a part of the interpretive grid of the Freudian critic, not a part of the author that critic imagines he understands through his text. Nor do these "things" relate to one another in the way Freudians hypothesize. The existence of and interaction between ids, egos and superegos are a psychologist's fiction. It is much the same as the old faculty psychology of the middle ages, which posited emotions, intellect and will as separate faculties within us. The faculty psychologists had fallen afoul of the functional fallacy. They reasoned that because I emote, think, and desire and do, therefore I have an emotion, an intellect, and a will. But I do not possess, as separate entities within me, these three faculties. Nor do they relate to one another in the ways imagined by Thomas Aquinas, John Duns Scotus, or William of Occam. We know better, now that Locke has undeceived us. But having escaped that misconception we have fallen into another. Freud's fabrications concerning our inner composition and function have led us back into the middle ages. Sadly, some modern scholars do not know enough to perceive the gaffe. They welcome it.

Some Freudians try to explain the admittedly elusive character of these inner phantoms by telling us that "the names, id, ego and superego, actually signify nothing in themselves. They are merely a shorthand way of designating different processes, functions, mechanisms, and dynamisms within the

<sup>13</sup>Ibid.

<sup>14</sup>H. Eysenck and G. Wilson, *The Experimental Studies of Freudian Theories* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1974); T. Szasz, *The Myth of Psychotherapy* (New York: Doubleday, 1978); D. E. Stannard, *Shrinking History: On Freud and the Failure of Psychohistory* (New York: Oxford University, 1980).

total personality.”<sup>15</sup> In addition to sounding like an expedient adopted at the last moment to protect a cherished but endangered theory, this explanation is manifestly absurd. It speaks as if “processes, functions, mechanisms, and dynamisms” were “nothing in themselves.” This is mere verbal sleight of hand. Despite this Freudian’s convoluted language, a process is a thing. To process is an action. An action is a thing. But, we are told, “processes, functions, mechanisms, and dynamisms,” when referred to by the words “id,” “ego” and “superego,” are “nothing in themselves.” If the Freudians had said simply that ids, egos and superegos are nothing, we all could have agreed. But they did not. Freudian criticism is not known for stating the obvious and then stopping.

Put another way, I deny that Freudian criticism is methodologically sound. After all, it is not real authors we are psychoanalyzing but, rather, ancient bits of yellowing paper, or else modern editions of them. When a psychoanalytic critic poses questions to a text, it is not the author who responds. “Comus,” for example, is not written in answer to questions posed to Milton about the Oedipal pressures churning within him. If such questions were posed to Milton, and if he desired to answer them at all, we have no reason to think that he would point to “Comus” in response. In the end it is the Freudian critic himself, not the author, who both poses the question and answers it. And when he answers it he does so in the way a schoolboy invents an off-color joke: by foisting unintentional sexual overtones upon someone else’s words. Furthermore, because these sexual overtones cannot be ascribed to the author’s conscious intention itself they are relegated to his unconscious mind, as if such things actually existed and were accessible to us through texts and as if the concept of an unconscious mind was not in some sense a contradiction in terms.

I am not saying that a text cannot answer questions toward which it was not specifically addressed. Such “answers,” when they are to be found, are to be identified or extracted with the greatest possible care, always bearing in mind that, though we might wish it otherwise, some things from the past are not easily retrievable through literature if at all. In a theological poem like *Paradise Lost*, a poem that is intended to “justify the ways of God to man” (I, 26), the poet’s theology is both present and largely accessible. His unconscious psychological motivations and his psychic history (especially as interpreted by Freudian critics) are neither. *Paradise Lost*, after all, is not about Milton. Neither does it concern his alleged constituent psychological “functions”—id, ego and superego. I begin to think that those who find such things in theological poetry have become so skilled at reading between and behind the lines of a text that they have lost the ability to read the lines themselves.

Because of its method I deny that Freudian criticism is actually criticism. If criticism is, as my dictionary says, “the art of judging or evaluating with knowledge and propriety the beauties and faults of a work of art or literature,” then Freudianism is not criticism. Studies that abuse literary texts by making them a means to the solution of other, nonliterary, problems are not genuine

<sup>15</sup>Hall, *Primer* 34–35.

literary criticism. Their pursuit may indeed proceed via literature, but it is not legitimately a literary pursuit. True literary criticism must make literature its focus, not merely the vehicle of the critic's own private agenda or interests.

Some Freudian critics try to maintain their claim to legitimacy by insisting that their "discoveries" bear upon our understanding of the text because they bear upon our understanding of the author. They proceed, they say, from text to author to text. And so they do. But I deny that what they find at either end of their return trip is truth. Forays into extra-literary areas do not always lead us back into the perimeter. In fact they often end in foreign ports. Freudian criticism, despite the claims of some of its practitioners, is just such a foray. While a critic needs (and should welcome) all the help he/she can get from other disciplines, the critic must be sure that what is received actually constitutes hermeneutical assistance and not hindrance. Not every hand is a helping hand.

Perhaps Freudian critics do not take sufficient account of the fact that every intellectual discipline is fraught with ambiguity. As a result of this ambiguity every discipline entails a number of schools of thought, and each of those schools of thought in turn is colored by various shades of disagreement concerning interpretation and/or implementation. As an interdisciplinary study, Freudian criticism is doubly tenuous. On the one hand, it is racked by tensions and conflicts in psychology in general and in Freudianism in particular.<sup>16</sup> On the other hand, it also is buffeted by the warfare within literary criticism. I for one believe that Freudian criticism fails on both sides of its double life. It is bad science and it is bad criticism—bad science because of its natural inability to subject its conclusions to scientific verification (it is, we are told, a "postdictive science," not a "predictive" one<sup>17</sup>), and bad criticism because it mistakenly thinks that not only is a writer accessible to us in his text but so also is his subconscious.

My belief that Freudian criticism is an interdisciplinary failure should not be taken to mean that I oppose interdisciplinary research in general or "extrinsic" criticism in particular. In fact I am very much in favor of them. I do not oppose Freudian criticism because it takes things into account other than the text. Rather, I oppose Freudian criticism because what it takes into account is Freudianism. External frames of reference are not necessarily faulty; Freudian ones are. Freudian criticism respects no boundaries. It exhibits no caution. It posits forces, factors and functions in things that may not even be things. As usually practiced, Freudian criticism has usurped the

<sup>16</sup>Oddly, some Freudian critics will use the variegated nature of current Freudian studies as a defense against my strictures. In conversations with me they say that my negative judgments do not take into account the fact that Freudianism is a spectrum, not a monolithic entity. But that defense will not do. It serves only to underscore my contention that most Freudian conclusions are neither demonstrable nor convincing, even to other Freudians. The anarchy within Freudian studies has been recognized also by many scholars. For example J. Barzun, *Clio and the Doctors: Psycho-history, Quanto-history and History* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1974) 71, observes: "The theorists of psycho-history invoke Freud and speak of psychoanalysis or of dynamic psychiatry as if those names covered unified teachings. Yet a slight acquaintance with the literature is enough to show that radical conflicts exist."

<sup>17</sup>Hall, *Primer* 53.

subject matter. In becoming psychographers, Freudian critics have often become less than literary critics. Despite claims to the contrary, Freudian criticism's primary pursuit is not the explication of the text at hand. Its objective is almost always one well beyond the text, even well beyond the author's intention or even his consciousness. Those who write 300-page monographs on the "psychogenesis of *Paradise Lost*"<sup>18</sup> are doing a great deal that lies beyond the pale of literary criticism. Not surprisingly, then, Freudianism's grotesque fabrications do not enhance our understanding of our language's great theological works of verbal art. Freudianism has not succeeded in deepening our understanding and appreciation of *Paradise Lost*, for example, because Freudianism has shown itself incapable of detecting either beauty or sanctity. It detects only the earthquake of sexuality and its aftershocks. Sanctity, despite the title of one Miltonist's book, is not a complex.<sup>19</sup> Nor, despite the same book, are complexes sacred.

Put another way, Freudian criticism often misconstrues theological art because it misunderstands the origin or generation of art. Art, to Freudianism, is traced to fantasies: to wish fulfillment and daydreams.<sup>20</sup> Such a causal connection, however, is utterly insupportable and is the merest of conjectures. As George Watson has explained concerning Freudianism's wildly speculative theories of literary causation and generation, Freud

compares the human mind, where "it is the rule rather than the exception for the past to be preserved", to the city of Rome as it might appear if most of its ancient monuments had not vanished, with pagan temples standing among medieval and Renaissance buildings and modern thoroughfares. In history itself, the past may die and leave no trace. But in the individual mind, in the Freudian view, memories are stored and stand ready for use. Looked at from the angle of the literary historian, such a view seems like an ecstasy of Victorian historical enthusiasm. The most biographical critic before Freud—Sainte-Beuve, for instance—would not have ventured so far as to suppose that remote infantile experience, and even pre-natal experience, could be formative in what ultimately appears as a work of literature. He would have been content, more modestly, with the outward facts about the schooling, reading and acquaintanceship of the poet whose portrait he drew. The Freudian critic would intensify these biographical elements to the point of seeing the poem as minute evidence of the past of the poet; not of one past only, or the experience immediately preceding the act of creation, but of a whole succession of states of mind stretching back into childhood and causally interconnected.<sup>21</sup>

Obviously human beings are interested in and motivated by much more than sex. I would imagine (though who can say?) that a great deal of theological

<sup>18</sup>W. Kerrigan, *The Sacred Complex: On the Psychogenesis of "Paradise Lost"* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1983).

<sup>19</sup>Ibid.

<sup>20</sup>S. Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (London, Heron, n.d.) 306.

<sup>21</sup>G. Watson, *The Study of Literature* (London: Allen Lane, 1969) 157–158. Elsewhere (p. 18) in the same text Watson makes another pertinent observation concerning the modern criticism of *Paradise Lost*: "Milton, if he could know that interest in his epics is no longer primarily theological, would be contemptuous in the last degree."



poetry has a source other than infantile sexuality and its alleged repercussions. Only a schoolboy's fascination with things genital allows us to posit sexual causation for art in such a facile manner. I say along with C. S. Lewis that "poetry is not a substitute for sexual satisfaction, nor sexual satisfaction for poetry."<sup>22</sup> I reject as perverse supposition the assertion that the motive for poetic creation lies beneath the consciousness and is linked to internal sexual turmoil, especially for Milton, whose poetic craft is conscious, deliberate, meticulous, precise, decorous, purposeful and highly intellectual. The unarticulated methodological arrogance of such Freudian suppositions is staggering. Though Milton himself says that his poetry was motivated by a love for God, for country and for freedom, and that it was intended to promote all three, the Freudian critic, who must imagine himself clearly aware of the many complicated factors within Milton that escaped even Milton's own notice, can see not only what the poet repressed but also why he has done so and what exactly was its artistic and theological residue. The Freudian critic believes he can identify and explain, with precision and confidence, what prompted a certain blind Englishman to write a theological epic poem more than three hundred years ago. Milton's plain affirmations to the contrary notwithstanding, we are told "that the oedipus complex is the generative center of his character and his art."<sup>23</sup> And, as if that staggering insight were not enough, we are assured that "this could be predicated of *all* authors who are not psychotic."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps I am hopelessly skeptical, but I hesitate to say things about all writers of nearly any category, especially something that pertains to their character and their art.

But this is one of those places where Freudian criticism breaks down so noticeably. It allows the Freudian critic to assert what the author denies and to deny what the author affirms. It entitles the critic to operate as if he/she knows Milton's motives and character better than Milton did. It is arguable, of course, that such a critic does not know Milton at all. The poet himself might prove to be very different from all the Freudian (or non-Freudian) speculations about his long-dead psyche and its hidden "processes, functions, mechanisms, and dynamisms." Unlikely as it is that Milton will return to dispel such myths (or that many Freudian critics would recognize him if he did), the fearless psychoanalyzing of writers who have been in their graves for centuries will continue on unrestrained.

Perhaps it is its unrestrained nature that renders so much Freudian criticism fiction and not fact. In that system of literary analysis, the wall dividing those two realms is virtually nonexistent. Even if ids, egos and superegos existed, Lewis Carroll's Alice does not possess them. She does not even possess a she. She does not exist. That minor consideration, however, has not prevented critics from psychoanalyzing her, or Hamlet, or Captain Ahab. But though it is frequently attempted one cannot profitably psychoanalyze the nonexistent. That the Electra complex has no real connection to

<sup>22</sup>C. S. Lewis, *Selected Literary Essays* (ed. W. Hooper; Cambridge: Cambridge University, 1969) 295.

<sup>23</sup>Kerrigan, *Sacred* 6.

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.* (italics mine).

the psychic development of a fictional character like Alice, a character who has no psyche to develop, has not kept Freudian criticism out of Wonderland. Freudian criticism seems to specialize in fictional characters, characters like the Milton that it imagines stands behind his theological poems, spewing forth a stream of unconsciously sexual and/or pornographic metaphors. Perhaps one of the reasons Freudian criticism proceeds as confidently with fictional characters as it does with historical persons is because Freudian criticism is not rooted in verifiable reality. In its hands, historical persons are fictional. After all, we have only the psychoanalytic critic's (not unbiased) word that such a Milton ever existed. Or, to paraphrase I. A. Richards, despite what psychoanalytic critics might assert, the imagined mental processes of a writer are not a very profitable field for investigation because they are too happy a hunting ground for unbridled speculation.<sup>25</sup>

Its nonfactual nature accounts for some of Freudian criticism's apparent profundity, a "profundity" that arises from its ability to see what is not there. Readers of Freudian criticism, for example, sometimes come away from a Freudian work surprised at all they missed when they read the *Faerie Queene* or the *Pentateuch*, especially when compared to all the Freudian critic claims to see.<sup>26</sup> But seeing is the one thing Freudian criticism does not do—unless one classifies exegetical hallucination as vision. Though they tell us that the iconic significance of flowers and puppy dogs is unknown or unrecognized in the writer's own consciousness and that it lies buried deep within the recesses of his psyche, though they tell us the psyche operates by means of the mysterious transference of hidden "psychic energies" (whatever they are) between the inscrutable "processes, functions, mechanisms, and dynamisms" we label id, ego and superego, despite all this shadowy ambiguity—or perhaps because of it—Freudian literary analysis often fails to exercise anything remotely resembling skepticism or modesty concerning its hypotheses. (Evidence for this is the fact that Freudians usually label their ideas "conclusions," not "hypotheses.") It apparently matters little that the verification of Freudian theories concerning literary cause and effect, if it exists, lies well beyond (or below) what many cautious and reasonable scholars would allow as either relevant or analyzable data. In this light one may be permitted to speculate that the Freudian critic's own imagination (as it feeds upon a number of perverse schoolboy speculations concerning literary meaning and origin) has been doing duty in place of a close, responsible treatment of the text itself as understood against its historical and literary background.

Freudian criticism proceeds by hooking up a sexual and/or pornographic view of psychic reality to a religious text like *Paradise Lost*, a poem that draws upon the long-standing conventions of epic genre and upon the content of the Bible and its traditional interpretation. It then tries to interpret that poem in light of the view of psychic history it posits for the author, a history based both upon its hypothetical id, ego and superego paradigm and upon its

<sup>25</sup>I. A. Richards, *Principles of Literary Criticism* (San Diego: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1925) 29.

<sup>26</sup>For an example of a psychoanalytic interpretation of the *Pentateuch* see S. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism* (New York: Random House, 1939).

assumptions concerning the iconic significance of unconscious metaphor. This imagined psychic history, in turn, is brought back into play not only in conjunction with the poem's unconscious meaning but also as an explanation for the poem's very existence. In other words, the hypothetical psychic background that Freudians deduce from the text is used as a hermeneutical aid for the text from which it was derived. It proceeds by transforming its highly suspect hermeneutic for dreams into a hermeneutic for verbal art. This truncated and misshapen method brings us, exegetically, exactly nowhere. Understanding an epic poem from a Freudian slant is not to be identified with understanding an epic poem.

All this is not to say that suffering people have never been aided through psychoanalysis. They certainly have. But their improvement is not justification for Freudianism as an exegetical device. In fact their improvement is hardly justification for Freudianism as therapy. These instances of therapeutic success do not offset the instances (and they are legion) where not only no healing occurred but actual damage was inflicted. Some studies have shown that Freudian therapy's healing powers are hardly better than no therapy at all.<sup>27</sup> I would expect as much from any therapy not rooted in reality.

Finally, if I may be permitted to turn the tables for one paragraph and to psychoanalyze the psychoanalysts, I speculate that Freudian criticism is itself a wish fulfillment. Perhaps Freudian critics want to make this fallen world understandable when it often is not. Perhaps they want to make the world simpler by imposing upon it their own narrow system of causes and effects. But they cannot and they have not. And they do not know that they have failed.

That, at any rate, is why I no longer believe I ought to read every book about John Milton. Some simply do not repay the time and effort required to study them seriously. The time I waste on such books is time I could have invested studying genuinely useful books about Milton—books by Masson, Hanford, French, Kelley, Verity and Oras, to name but a few. In short, I have reconfirmed for myself what Milton had earlier discovered about useless books, that "if the compendious recitall of what [one man misthought] was so tedious and unprofitable, then surely to sit out the whole extent of their tattle in a dozen volumes, would be a losse of time irrecoverable."<sup>28</sup>

<sup>27</sup>Among the many scholars and studies that support this conclusion see for example T. Oden, "A Populist's View of Psychotherapeutic Deprofessionalization," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 14 (1974) 3-18; "Consumer Interests in Therapeutic Outcome Studies: A Reply to Herron," *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* 15 (1975) 74-84.

<sup>28</sup>Milton, *Prose Works*, 1. 944.