

Freud and philosophy in Stanley Cavell

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Abstract: This article offers a philosophical and historical assessment of the reception of Sigmund Freud in the work of Stanley Cavell. In the first half, I argue that every major theme in Cavell's philosophy entails a dialogue, sometimes explicit and sometimes implicit, with the Freudian model. To this end, I analyse the psychoanalytical motives in Cavell's therapeutic and later perfectionist understanding of philosophy, reframing of the problem of scepticism, and literary and film criticism. The second half of the article is devoted to the sources and interlocutors in Cavell's engagement with psychoanalysis, the most important of which are shown to be non-analytic and even non-philosophical, and in particular literary. Cavell, as I recount, had become a committed reader of Freud in 1947, well before beginning his training in professional philosophy. I thus contend that, in spite of the indifference or even hostility towards Freud that Cavell found in the academic circles in which he was educated and then taught, his reflections on psychoanalysis received their nourishment, outside the philosophy departments of American universities, in figures such as the literary and cultural critic Lionel Trilling.

Keywords: Cavell, Freud, Wittgenstein, psychoanalysis, Lionel Trilling.

1. *Introduction*

That Sigmund Freud is a major presence in the philosophy of Stanley Cavell is widely acknowledged. Already in the late 1980s, during the first surge of responses to Cavell's work, Conant remarked that "Cavell's most pervasive and sustained intellectual debt" might be shown to be to Freud (Conant 1989: 22). Recently, Assif went as far as to situate Cavell's work in the context of a yet-to-be recognized "strain of Freudians" amongst whom she also includes psychoanalysts such as Jonathan Lear and Christopher Bollas (Assif 2020: 12). Numerous further references could also be made (see for example Mulhall 1994: 216-17; Gould 1998: 41; Eldridge 2011). Cavell himself stressed this influence on many occasions. "The figure of Freud", he wrote for instance, "shadowed my work in philosophy from the time I first published an essay about

Wittgenstein” (Cavell 2005: 213), which means from his 1962 seminal article on the *Philosophical Investigations* (Cavell 2002: 41-67). Surprisingly, however, an overall philosophical and historical assessment of Cavell’s reception of Freud and psychoanalysis is still lacking.

In roughly the first half of my article, which will privilege thematic over chronological organization, my main purpose will be to show that there is virtually no significant aspect of Cavell’s philosophy which remains untouched by explicit or implicit connections with psychoanalysis. I will look for such connections first in the ‘therapeutic’ conception of philosophy that Cavell builds mainly through a parallel between Freud’s method and the method of ordinary language philosophy, in particular that of Wittgenstein. I will then explore similar connections in Cavell’s notion of Emersonian perfectionism. Subsequently, I will highlight the Freudian undertones of Cavell’s reframing of the problem of scepticism. Finally, I will sketch the complex role of psychoanalysis in Cavell’s critical writings: this time Freud, more than the inventor of a method, would play the role of institutor of “an unsurpassed horizon of knowledge about the human mind” (Cavell 2004: 286).

In the second half of my article, which will follow an inverse chronological order, I will survey and assess both the philosophical and non-philosophical sources and interlocutors in Cavell’s reception of psychoanalysis. I will begin with Cavell’s texts of the 1980s and 90s, whose main sources prove to be feminist literary and film critics, and thinkers coming from the ‘continental’ tradition, especially French post-structuralism. Then I will move to considerations on the first two decades of Cavell’s production and also sketch out the academic environment in which he received his education. The scarcity of philosophical interlocutors on Freud at UCLA, Berkeley and Harvard, where Cavell came of age between the late 1940s and early 60s, suggests that at that time his interest in psychoanalysis was mainly being pursued through non-academic channels. Finally, an account of the circumstances of Cavell’s first encounter with Freud’s work in 1947, as well as other information scattered through Cavell’s interviews and autobiographical writings, suggests the hypothesis that Cavell was influenced by the writings on Sigmund Freud of literary and cultural critic Lionel Trilling. I will pursue this hypothesis through a brief overview of the similarities between Trilling’s treatment of Freud in the 1940s and 50s and that of Cavell in later decades. Overall, the second half of my article will contend that the most sensible way to account for the seeming contradiction between the limited standing of psychoanalysis in the philosophical debate in which Cavell was raised and the momentous role it would come to play in his own mature work is to focus on non-analytic and even non-philosophical sources, especially literary ones. As I hope will become apparent, Cavell’s philosophical allegiance

to Freud is an important aspect of what he called his “lifelong quarrel with the profession of philosophy” as it stood in the English-speaking half of the philosophical world (Cavell 1984: 31).

2. *Philosophy as therapy and self-knowledge*

The most natural place to start my overview is with Cavell’s interpretation of Wittgenstein, his main philosophical point of reference since his doctoral dissertation. In “The Availability of Wittgenstein’s Later Philosophy” (1962), Cavell argues that two crucial aspects of the *Philosophical Investigations* are habitually overlooked: their purpose of fostering self-knowledge and literary style. For Cavell, the aim of a method consisting of reminding ourselves of the statements we ordinarily make about things (see Wittgenstein 1997: I § 90) is to ask the person they are directed to “to say something about himself”, and thereby to produce self-knowledge (Cavell 2002: 61). Here the parallel with Freud is broached for the first time:

So the different methods are methods for acquiring self-knowledge; as – for different (but related) purposes and in response to different (but related) problems – are the methods of ‘free’ association, dream analysis, investigation of verbal and behavioral slips, noting and analyzing ‘transferred’ feeling, and so forth. Perhaps more shocking, and certainly more important, than any of Freud’s or Wittgenstein’s particular conclusions is their discovery that knowing oneself is something for which there are methods – something, therefore, that can be taught (thought not in obvious ways) and practiced (61).

The purpose of self-knowledge explains why Wittgenstein’s writing, both in its style and in the literary genres it combines and reworks, is so peculiar. Rather than philosophical arguments and demonstrations, we find a pastiche of literary devices (confession, dialogue, rhetorical questions, jokes, parables, etc.) whose aim, rather than to build theories and systems, is to change the reader. At this point, Cavell puts forth a second parallel with Freud:

his writing is deeply practical and negative, the way Freud’s is. And like Freud’s therapy, it wishes to prevent understanding which is unaccompanied by inner change. Both of them are intent upon unmasking the defeat of our real need in the face of self-impositions which we have not assessed (§ 108), or fantasies (‘pictures’) which we cannot escape (§ 115). In both, such misfortune is betrayed in the incongruence between what is said and what is meant or expressed [...]. Both thought of their negative soundings as revolutionary extensions of our knowledge, and both were obsessed by the idea, or fact, that they would be misunderstood – partly, doubtless, because they

knew the taste of self-knowledge, that it is bitter [...] the ignorance of oneself is a refusal to know (67).

The ‘psychoanalytical’ idea of philosophy sketched in the two passages above, the second especially, would be further articulated by Cavell, but never rejected. Take, for instance, the idea that inner change is what is produced by both psychoanalysis and Wittgenstein’s method. If we keep in mind Cavell’s grammatical piece of wisdom (in the Wittgensteinian sense), according to which ‘inner’ does not only mean ‘hidden’, as in the sceptic’s closet of consciousness, but also “*pervasive*, like atmosphere” (Cavell 1979: 99), which I take to mean all-embracing and characterizing the overall fabric of an individual, then we can see the idea coming back on many occasions. In “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy” (1965), such inner change is described in terms of a “revolution”, a simultaneous reconception of the subject and its world (Cavell 2002: 79-80). In *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell describes the transformation he has in mind with the concept of “rebirth” (Cavell 1979: 125); in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* and other texts of the same period, he stresses notions such as “transfiguration and conversion” (Cavell 1990: 36). Their conscious political, spiritual and religious overtones notwithstanding, these terms are appropriately read through the above-mentioned psychoanalytical lenses.

Further instances of continuity can be recalled. The conception of ordinary language philosophy as aiming at self-knowledge is at the core of the crucial section of *The Claim of Reason* devoted to “projective imagination” (Cavell 1979: 145-54). Moreover, on several other occasions, in the same book, Cavell renews the attempt, made in the previous quote when referring to “self-impositions” and the “refusal to know” as the enemies of self-knowledge, to translate into philosophical terms the Freudian notions of resistance, repression and defence mechanism: Freud and Wittgenstein are mentioned as examples of “serious criticism” of human conduct, aware of how “tenacious” a point of view (a Wittgensteinian “picture”) can be and how much more than logical coherence can be at stake in it (166). Later in the book, some version of the psychoanalytical concept of rationalization seems to be at play when Cavell argues that Wittgenstein’s method is able to problematize “the justifications and explanations” we give ourselves, our ways of “trying to intellectualize our life” and our “critical super-egos” (175).

In the two texts by Cavell directly devoted to Freud, this stance on philosophy and psychoanalysis is reprised with some significant additions. Both in his “Psychoanalysis and Cinema”, delivered in 1985 and republished in 1996 in *Contesting Tears*, and in a lecture on Freud delivered throughout the 1990s and published in his *Cities of Words* (2004), Cavell asserts that psychoanalysis should be understood as Freud’s “fulfilment” of and “inheritance” from phi-

losophy. Now the scope of the parallel goes well beyond Wittgenstein. “Psychoanalysis and Cinema” sees Freud as working within and making “concrete” the German-speaking line of philosophy initiated by Kant and running through figures like Fichte, Schelling, Hegel, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Cavell goes as far as to say that Freud should be considered a third way, alternative to those of Heidegger and Wittgenstein, of inheriting classical German philosophy and its focus, starting with Kant, on the conditions of possibility of human experience (Cavell 1996: 95-7). In *Cities of Words*, given the perfectionist framework to which I will soon return, the parallel extends even further, as Freudian analysis is linked to Socratic maieutic practice, Plato’s allegory of the cave and the Emersonian notion of self-reliance.

In both texts, Cavell addresses the reasons adduced by Freud for his distrust towards philosophy. It is as if, having ignored or dodged the reservations on psychoanalysis expressed by Wittgenstein in his *Lectures and Conversations* (to which I will briefly return later), he were now in the business of smoothing Freud’s own symmetrical doubts. Cavell suggests that Freud’s repeated gesture of distinguishing himself from philosophy and the frequent accusations levelled at philosophers of unabashedly ignoring the unconscious are not only inconclusive (did Nietzsche, for example, really ignore the unconscious?), but suspicious. By ironically using Freud’s own argumentation against himself (“If he had to deny it [a closeness of psychoanalysis to philosophy] so firmly, there must be strong reason to affirm it”; Cavell 2004: 282), Cavell argues that his “competition” with philosophy is indeed ambiguous: rather than simply a wish to “replace” or do away with philosophy, it could be interpreted as the not-so-veiled proposal to translate philosophy into psychoanalysis. Conversely, this would seem to entail the intention of “conceiving psychoanalysis as philosophy” (Cavell 1996: 92; 2004: 290).

3. *Psychoanalysis, perfectionism and education*

If we shift our attention from the methodological and meta-philosophical dimension recalled so far to Cavell’s moral reflections, we find a further articulation of this psychoanalytically inclined insistence on inner change and self-knowledge.

In “Part Three” of *The Claim of Reason*, Cavell had already argued that, “because the self is not obvious to the self”, the rationality of morality should be seen as lying “in following the methods which lead [...] to a knowledge and definition of ourselves” (Cavell 1979: 312). The nexus between morality and self-knowledge is further articulated in Cavell’s later books on Emersonian perfectionism, where Freud once more plays a prominent role. Not only does the father of psychoanalysis figure in the little ‘canon’ of perfectionist works

and authors sketched early on in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* (Cavell 1990: 5) and reprised with some changes in the structure of *Cities of Words*, more importantly, the relationship between psychoanalyst and patient is taken both as isomorphic to (in *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome*) and a paradigmatic example of (in *Cities of Words*) a perfectionist moral intercourse.

Cavell describes perfectionism as the “dimension or tradition of moral life” in which the focus is on “some idea of being true to oneself”, “becoming intelligible to oneself” and gradually dissipating a “sense of obscurity” (Cavell 1990: 1-2, xxxi). Within this outline of perfectionism, Cavell stresses that a significant other, mostly likened to the Aristotelian friend, has the pedagogic role of catalysing perfectionist moral change, spurring and guiding it. Unsurprisingly, the psychoanalyst is among the figures used to characterize such an educational friendship. In the context of a discussion of Emerson’s notion of genius in “Self-Reliance”, Cavell suggests that our relationship with a perfectionist ‘friend’ – in the specific case, a book able to interpret us, to philosophically call us into question – can be seen as taking the form of what Freud calls “transference” (57). *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome* only makes this connection in passing, almost metaphorically. The Freudian notion of transference, however, had been already referred to by Cavell a few years earlier, in the context of an attempt to justify his idea that reading certain texts can have a therapeutic effect on the reader (Cavell 1984: 52). Furthermore, the parallel is repeated in *Contesting Tears* (Cavell 1996: 113) and systematically articulated in the chapter on Freud in *Cities of Words* (Cavell 2004: 295). A further, related interaction between perfectionism and psychoanalysis identified in *Cities of Words* concerns the concept of education. Given the inherently pedagogical dimension of perfectionism, Cavell finds it interesting that Freud repeatedly described psychoanalysis as “re-education” (290), “a second education [*Nach-erziehung*] of the adult, as a corrective to his education as a child” (Freud 1926).

Additional parallels between perfectionism and psychoanalysis can be identified if we do not limit ourselves to what Cavell states explicitly. Take for instance Cavell’s insistence that perfectionism is characterized by “a double picture, or picture of doubleness” of the self (Cavell 1990: xxi-xxiii). Here Cavell is offering a characterization of the Emersonian and Nietzschean idea of the self as always becoming, as split between what it is (the “attained”) and what it could become (the “next”). However, from a different but related perspective, Freud’s self is also becoming and split, it is equally “double”, or even threefold or more. Consider, also, Cavell’s idea that the distinctively Emersonian, namely democratic, trait of his perfectionism lies in its envisioning no final state of virtue that is identical and normative for everybody, or path “plottable from outside the journey” (xxxiv). Compare this to when Freud, commenting on the

power given to analysts by the transference mechanism, warns them against the temptation to try and mould patients according to their own ideal. This, Freud adds in quite an ‘Emersonian’ remark, would be to repeat the errors of parents who “crushed their child’s independence”; on the contrary, for “all his attempts at improving and educating the patient the analyst must respect his individuality” (Freud 1940: 52).

All this said, it is also hard not to sense a psychoanalytical undertone, or at least an implicit connection with psychoanalysis, in the scenes of “instruction” and the attention to childhood at the centre of the chapter on Wittgenstein in *Conditions Handome and Unhandsome* (Cavell 1990: 64-100); or in Cavell’s idea, put forth as early as *The Claim of Reason*, that philosophy can be conceived of as the “education of grownups” (Cavell 1979: 125). Indeed, this Cavellian expression could be a further and more appropriate English translation of Freud’s notion of *Nach-erziehung*.

4. *A psychoanalytical reframing of scepticism*

A further presence of a form of psychoanalytical thinking, this time mostly implicit, can be identified if we take a chronological step backwards and reflect on the reframing of the problem of scepticism in philosophy launched by Cavell in the two closing essays of *Must We Mean* and in *The Claim of Reason*. I will try to make the psychoanalytical undertones of Cavell’s treatment of scepticism apparent through a brief contrast with that of his favourite ordinary language philosophers, Austin and Wittgenstein.

For the Austin of “Other Minds”, philosophers asking questions like “how do I know that someone has feelings at all?” are being intellectually wilful (Austin mentions “the wile of the metaphysician”) or hazy (they are “barking [their] way up the wrong tree”; Austin 1961: 55, 84). What we need to do in response is to spell out for them the everyday, specific circumstances in which it makes sense to raise doubts about such matters and show how they differ from the circumstances in which their sceptical question was asked (see also Cavell 1979: 49-64). Wittgenstein’s stance is perhaps more nuanced, or more avowedly so. Besides passages which support an understanding of the battle against scepticism as “a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language” (Wittgenstein 1997: I. § 109), thus as a mainly intellectual matter, others focus on attitudes and resistances (“What has to be overcome is not difficulty of the intellect but of the will”; Wittgenstein 2005: 300e). However, what Wittgenstein’s critical method ultimately does is point out the “images”, “analogies” and “misunderstandings concerning the use of words” (Wittgenstein 1997: I. § 90) that lead us astray. Even if we accept the therapeutic inflection of readings

of the *Investigations* such as Cavell's (and others': see Baker 2004), it remains true that, once these images, analogies and misunderstandings are identified, the research seems to have reached its goal: Wittgenstein embarks on no further inquiries into the supposed psychological or existential causes behind their formation. This last level of investigation, on the contrary, is exactly what Cavell can be said to be attempting.

Cavell's strategy is a complex mix of Wittgensteinian exegesis, reflection on human finitude inspired by existentialism and the kind of psychoanalytical philosophizing I have characterized above. For him, rather than idly attempting to refute scepticism (Cavell 1979: 37-48), the critic should try to assimilate the seed of truth that it contains and identify the actual human experiences that scepticism is at the same time expressing and falsifying through their intellectualization. Indeed, we are not far from Freud's stance on dream-work, fantasies, slips and symptoms more generally, or from his notion of "working through" (*Durcharbeiten*), to which Norris has already directed his attention (Norris 2017: 68).

The seed of truth is that our relationship with the world and others, in Cavell's famous formulations, is not one of knowledge and certainty, but of "acceptance" and "acknowledgment" (Cavell 2002: 298; 1979, 45-7). For Cavell, this truth is contained in and expressed by sceptical thinking, albeit, one might say, unwillingly or unconsciously. In fact, scepticism's own self-representation falsifies this aspect of our existential condition (the reference to Heidegger's concept of '*existentiale*' is explicit: Cavell 2002: 243) and covers it with something else. Rather than deriving from our human finitude and separateness, scepticism interprets it in intellectual terms, as a failure of our knowledge. Cavell – in yet another move possibly inspired by Freud – understands this shift of attention on the sceptic's part as a rationalization of a wish for something else: for example, to escape the responsibility of maintaining the forms of life we share (Cavell 1979: 109); to avoid the burden of having to respond to the pain of others (342); to repress awareness of the contradictions of one's own position towards others' humanity (the slave-owner: 372-8); to find refuge in a fantasy of privacy that, by thwarting any possibility of others knowing us, falsely suggests that we cannot fail to know ourselves (109, 351); etc.

On Cavell's account, scepticism is – again, quite psychoanalytically – a denial, an avoidance of something which, in a sense, we still cannot fail to know: that we know each other well enough, that the real challenge is to acknowledge each other, to recognize ourselves and let ourselves be recognized (Cavell 2002: 252). Hence, rather than refutation, the therapy of scepticism entails the pointing out (on the part of the critic/therapist) and acknowledgement (on the part of the sceptic/patient) of what had hitherto been an object of avoidance (of Freudian 'repression').

5. *Freud in Cavell's critical writings*

Disowning Knowledge (1987) furthers the inquiry into the violence and blindness (towards oneself and others) that derives from attempts to escape the existential frailty of the human condition. That Cavell analysed this condition not only in Wittgensteinian and Heideggerian, but also in growingly explicit psychoanalytical terms, is made especially clear by the essay on *Hamlet*.

The necessity to accept human finitude is described in this chapter in terms of the concepts of 'individuation' and 'separation' that can be seen as reminiscent of Carl Gustav Jung and Melanie Klein (Cavell 2003: 188-9). It is also explicitly connected, through Laplanche and Pontalis' reinterpretation (1968), to Freud's concept of the primal scene as discussed in the famous case study of the Wolf Man. Hamlet is interpreted by Cavell as harbouring fantasies about the sexual relationship between his mother and father that are attempts to make sense, as any child grappling with the primal scene wants to do, of his own origin as a finite and separate being (Cavell 2003: 184-8; as shown by Alfano 2018, separation and dependency, with regard to the child's relationship with the mother in particular, are topics that Cavell probably derived specifically from Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott). The whole essay on *Hamlet* is indeed built in Freudian terms, with a brilliantly counterintuitive interpretation of Hamlet's play within a play based on the mechanisms of inversion, displacement and condensation that Freud found typical of dream-work. Furthermore, the essay gives a 'Freudian' name – "deferred representation", in mimicry of Freud's notion of "deferred action" – for the dramaturgical structure Cavell identified in *Othello* and finds again in *Hamlet* (Cavell 2003: 132-3, 189-91).

A look at the index of names in *Disowning Knowledge* reveals that Freud is the most referenced author, significantly more so than Wittgenstein even. The 23 occurrences – covering topics which range from the death drive to the Oedipus complex, from incest to hysteria and the relation between jokes and the unconscious – do not need to be recalled here. Other references to psychoanalysis are unaccredited, for instance, a possible implicit use of Jung's concept of shadow in the interpretation of a line uttered by the Fool in *King Lear* (283).

There is also another line of psychoanalytic thinking running through Cavell's book. It can be found in each of the essays therein, but with unrivalled clarity in the ones on *King Lear* and *Othello*. Cavell's psychological character analysis often entails an appeal to the reader to try to make sense of behaviour and evaluations on the part of Shakespeare's protagonists which seem utterly irrational and impossible to understand: how can Lear prefer Goneril and Regan's affected declarations of love over Cordelia's stern sincerity (57)? How can Othello put his trust in Iago, the epitome of dissimulation, rather than in the loving Desdemona (133)?

Cavell's answer – as Freudian as the question itself – is that the two characters unconsciously want to be deceived, because what the deceiver allows them to believe (in Othello's case, that Desdemona is unfaithful; in Lear's, that his favourite daughter does not love him) is – however terrible – still preferable to some scenario that they unconsciously fear even more (that Othello took away Desdemona's purity along with her virginity; that a crownless Lear has nothing which can ensure him or pay back Cordelia's love: 57-61, 133).

A brief quotation from Freud's above-mentioned case history of the Wolf Man will make the parallel clear. Explaining that his patient preferred to believe the horrid thought that his relief at his sister's death was due to economic reasons (he could inherit the entire family estate) rather than deeper feelings of competition for the love of their father, Freud remarks:

now I am the only child and my father must love me and me alone [...] while the thought in itself was entirely capable of becoming conscious, its homosexual background was so unbearable that it was easier to disguise it as filthy greed, for this no doubt came as a great relief (Freud 2002: 281).

Both Freud and Cavell explain a seemingly inexplicable preference for a doomed condition on the basis of an attempt to avoid something that the unconscious deems even more frightening.

I will not dwell at length on *Pursuits of Happiness*, Cavell's book on what he calls the film comedy of remarriage. Suffice it to say that a sentence from Freud's *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* ("The finding of an object is in fact the refinding of it") is not only mentioned in the epigraph, but can be seen as expressing the core intuition behind the idea of remarriage, with its perfectionist insistence on the transformation of incestuous intimacy into socially sanctioned erotic union. Moreover, a few pages later, it is suggested that the comedies of remarriage are moved by a fundamental awareness of the conflict between "eros and civilization" (the implicit reference is to Marcuse's text of the same name and thus to Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents*; Cavell 1981: 43, 64-5; see also 89-90).

I shall rather focus on *Contesting Tears* (1996), which deals with psychoanalysis in an even more overt and extensive manner. In Cavell's essays on the cinematic melodrama of the unknown woman, with their interest, along with scepticism and perfectionism, in topics such as sex, love, gender, homosexuality and the subjugation of women, Freud is once again an overarching presence. Even more than in *Pursuits of Happiness* and *Disowning Knowledge*, certainly more than in *Must We Mean* and *The Claim of Reason*, here Cavell appears willing to engage with the 'technical' details of psychoanalytical theory, in a direct albeit not exclusive address to an audience of psychoanalysts and psychiatrists

– this was literally true of the spoken version of chapters 2 and 3 of the book, delivered in 1985 and 1984 respectively at the Washington School of Psychiatry and the Columbia Psychoanalytic Center in New York (Cavell 1996: xi).

The range of Cavell's use of psychoanalytical concepts is, again, broad: it spans from the 'local' Freudian interpretation of the hat symbolism in *Now, Voyager* in chapter 3 (119), to the more substantial hypothesis, sparked by a contrast in chapter 4 between Freud and Lacan's understandings of the dissolution of the Oedipus complex, that the threat of castration could offer a developmental explanation of a male wish to control "the woman's voice" (179-90), or to the equally substantial refutation of attempts, typical of some Lacanian school and feminist film theory, to use a Freudian and Marxian concept of fetishism to characterize the overall workings of cinema and thus demonstrate its inherent patriarchy (207-10, 219).

The broadest and most systematic treatment of psychoanalysis in the book, however, can be found in its second chapter, entitled "Psychoanalysis and Cinema". Some of its ground has already been covered during my preceding discussion of the relation between psychoanalysis and Cavell's therapeutic idea of philosophy. What I left out, however, was Cavell's articulation of the relationship between psychoanalysis and scepticism, here given its most explicit treatment of all Cavell's oeuvre.

Cavell's complex and certainly idiosyncratic take on the topic can be summarized as follows: if scepticism can be understood, as Cavell proposes, as the human subject's metaphysical repression of its own intimacy with itself and with the other, two crucial aspects of psychoanalysis make it uniquely fit to address scepticism and even offer a therapy for it. The first aspect is the Freudian understanding of the mind as sunk into the unconscious, or the unconscious as the starting point of any therapeutic enterprise. The second is Freud's systematic study, first sparked by the interest in hysteria, of the relation between somatic symptoms (the body) and their repressed or forgotten psychological causes (the soul), to put it differently, his understanding of the body as inherently "expressive of mind" (105). Freud, with his psychodynamic explanations of organic pathologies and notions such as that of 'somatic compliance', was all too aware of the truth expressed by Wittgenstein when he wrote that "The human body is the best picture of the human soul" (Wittgenstein 1997: II. § IV) – a sentence that for Cavell is both anti-behaviourist and deflationary of other-mind scepticism (Cavell 1996: 104).

A sentence from this chapter can be used here to sum up many of the ideas touched upon in the first half of this article: "The advent of psychoanalysis", writes Cavell, "is the place, perhaps the last, in which the human psyche as such, the idea that there is a life of the mind [...] receives its proof" (94).

6. *Some sources on psychoanalysis*

Cavell's work of the 1980s and 90s shows a substantial engagement with the debate inside and on psychoanalysis. References range from Jacques Lacan and the object relations theories of Melanie Klein and Donald Winnicott, to Jacques Derrida and film and literary critics influenced by psychoanalysis (often through post-structuralism) and engaged in feminism and queer and gender studies, such as Shoshana Felman, Linda Williams, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Janet Adelman. If we slide back to a previous phase of Cavell's writing, however, the situation changes significantly. Explicit references to psychoanalysis in Cavell's books and essays of the 1960s and 70s are restricted to the sole Freud, an indication that at that time, with French post-structuralism's penetration into the literature departments of North American universities still absent or moving its first steps, Cavell's interest in psychoanalysis was being pursued 'privately', with very few interlocutors in the academic world in which he was immersed.

Cavell would have agreed with psychoanalyst and philosopher Marcia Cavell, his wife until 1961, when she wrote in 2006 that "neither in Great Britain nor in the United States has philosophy been much affected by psychoanalysis" (M. Cavell 2006: 5). Obviously there are exceptions, for example, Richard Wollheim and Stuart Hampshire (see for instance Wollheim *et al.* 1982), or the Richard Rorty of *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (1989). But most of them, at least within the analytic style or tradition of philosophy, came quite late – again, in the 1980s and 90s, thus more than two decades after Cavell's first philosophical attempt to tackle Wittgenstein and Freud. Most importantly, they were mainly concerned, as argued by Levine, with whether psychoanalysis should be considered scientific, a topic that was indeed far from Cavell's interest (see for example Grünbaum 1993; Macmillan 1997; and the literature review in Levine 2000: 6-7). Cavell was quite explicit on his sense of lacking interlocutors: "Most philosophers in my tradition, I believe, relate to psychoanalysis, if at all, with suspicion, habitually asking whether psychoanalysis deserves the title of a science. I am not here interested in that question" (Cavell 2004: 286).

The only work dealing with Freud and coming from the analytic tradition that Cavell actually mentions is John Wisdom's *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis*, published in 1953 and collecting essays first published between 1933 and 1948. Wisdom highlights some similitudes between psychoanalysis and aspects of the idea of philosophy he was championing under the influence of Wittgenstein: both philosophy and psychoanalysis try to bring out models and fantasies that unconsciously dominate our thought, both use paradoxical sentences to make us see things that were already in plain sight in new ways, and both can free us from "mental cramps". Wisdom even draws a parallel between the neuroses and

psychoses dealt with by the psychoanalyst and the metaphysical fixations of the other-mind and external-world sceptic (Wisdom 1969: 169-81, 248-82). It is thus reasonable to think that Cavell drew some inspiration from Wisdom's ideas for his therapeutic interpretation of Wittgenstein. However, Wisdom's parallel seems of a more limited scope than Cavell's. Its stress falls more on the theoretical possibility of seeing things differently than on what most interests Cavell, namely self-knowledge and personal 'inner' change. This probably explains why Cavell's references to Wisdom are so cursory: the essays from *Philosophy and Psychoanalysis* are mentioned by Cavell but three times, always in footnotes, and only in his very early essays on Austin (1958) and Wittgenstein (1962); even more significantly, they are never referred to in the actual passages in which Cavell articulates his parallel between Wittgenstein's and Freud's methods (Cavell 2002: 18-19, 37, 54).

It is also significant that, despite all his insistence on Wittgenstein, Cavell never discusses, or even mentions, his remarks on Freud recorded in *Lectures and Conversations*, published in 1967. We can surmise that, even if he had read them, he would not exactly have known what to make of their ambivalent stance. That Wittgenstein famously defined himself to Rush Rees as a "Freudian" would confirm the parallel put forth by Cavell in 1962. However, when Wittgenstein accuses psychoanalysis of the same tendency towards unwarranted generalization that the *Investigations* describe as a philosophical malady, he can be seen as situating himself in the exact same strain of reflection on the epistemic status of psychoanalysis that, as I remarked, Cavell found alien to his interests.

This lack of interlocutors can also be partially explained by the success of behaviourism in American academia. As argued by Mahoney, the 1960s were "expansive and exciting" years for behaviourism, when "the ruling authority of psychoanalysis" was a primary polemical target (Mahoney 1984: 303-4). Harvard University, where Cavell was a PhD candidate between 1951 and 1961 and taught from 1963 onwards, was no different: B. F. Skinner, a pivotal figure of behaviourism, taught there, and there Cavell also came into personal contact with philosophers influenced by behaviourism such as W. V. O. Quine, who was a faculty member, and Gilbert Ryle, who visited from Oxford and whose *The Concept of the Mind* was a common topic of discussion (Cavell 2010: 247-8, 281, 290). Cavell also recounts that in 1948, as a student at UCLA, he had taken some psychology courses, to his dismay finding them to be dominated by experimentalists and entirely hostile to Freud (242).

In fact, in the account offered in his autobiography of his early years as a student and young teacher in UCLA, Berkeley and Harvard between the late 1940s and 60s, only two names of colleagues and friends interested in psychoanalysis stand out. The first is that of Kurt Rudolph Fischer, a Jewish-Austrian 'conti-

mental' philosopher who taught in Berkeley before 1967 and later published (mostly in German) on topics such as existentialism, Nietzsche and psychoanalysis (*Little Did I Know*, 343-52; also see *Contesting Tears*, 225). The second is Michael Fried, indeed not a philosopher but an art critic and historian: Cavell declares a debt both to his work on artistic modernism (Cavell 2010: 406-7) and his use of psychoanalysis in criticism (Cavell 1996: 223).

What is left is Cavell's engagement with psychoanalysis *outside* academia in the 1960s and 70s. He underwent analysis personally twice in his life: the first course started in Berkeley around 1960, the second in Boston in 1976 when he was grappling with the writing of *The Claim of Reason*, whose manuscript even became material for the sessions (Cavell 2010: 108-9). Somewhere towards the end of the 1970s Cavell also began training as a therapist at the Boston Psychoanalytic Institute. It is perhaps revealing of the distrust between philosophy and psychoanalysis at that time that restrictions imposed on him by senior members of the institute finally induced him to drop out of the programme. It is equally telling of Cavell's intellectual temperament that this institutional dead-end prompted him to pursue, as he writes, the "therapeutic registers in his writing" and the "therapeutic impulse" in himself with even more determination (Cavell 2010: 512-4).

7. *On the possible influence of Lionel Trilling*

One last step back will take us to the time of Cavell's first discovery of Freud. It was autumn 1947 and the 21-year-old Jew from Atlanta had barely enrolled on the graduate programme in music composition at the Julliard School of New York, when the deep vocational crisis began that would reroute him to philosophy. The few months spent in New York preparing the application for Julliard and then mostly avoiding its classes were in reality mainly dedicated, Cavell writes, to "reading whatever it was that people called philosophy", which he had heard "had something to do with examining one's life" (Cavell 2004: 282). But what 'philosophy' was Cavell actually reading at the time? It was first of all Freud, which Cavell dived into "ten to twelve hours a day", starting from the *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (Cavell 2010: 185). Besides Freud, his main reading material was *Partisan Review*, the major journal of the so-called Anti-Stalinist Left of New York (see the interview with Cavell in Borradori 1994: 118-36). This simultaneity offers us a trail, thus far overlooked by scholars, that I would like to follow in this closing section.

A brief detour is needed here. By 'Anti-Stalinist Left', alternatively referred to as the 'New York Intellectuals', intellectual historians mean a group of scholars, critics and literary authors publishing, roughly between the late 1930s and

early 80s and reaching their apogee in the 1940s and 50s, in cultural journals such as *Partisan Review*, *Commentary* and *Dissent* (see Bloom 1986). Their ranks included the Columbia University professor and literary critic Lionel Trilling, philosophers such as the pragmatist Sidney Hook and the German-born Hannah Arendt, art critics such as Clement Greenberg and Meyer Schapiro, as well as novelists (for example Saul Bellow and Norman Mailer), film critics (Robert Warshow) and sociologists (Nathan Glazer). Mostly American Jews born, like Cavell, of Eastern European immigrants, they were characterized by an intellectual brand that can be synthesized here under three aspirations that find parallels in Cavell's mature work: 1) reconciling the acquisitions of modernism in the arts and literature with progressive politics; 2) assimilating European high culture into the American experience and its democracy, as well as finding and legitimizing its American equivalents; and 3) putting the critical intellect to work outside the disciplinary and institutional boundaries of academia, which for them meant writing not only as scholars but also as public intellectuals.

Cavell testifies to having discovered the New York Intellectuals in 1947 and having been a regular reader of their journals between 1948 and 1951, when he was a student at UCLA (see Cavell's afterword in Warshow 2001: 290). Many traces in his books and interviews, however, tell us that Cavell kept reading them for his entire intellectual life. Clement Greenberg's reflections on modernism in the visual arts, through the mediation of Michael Fried, had a strong influence on Cavell's writing on the same topic between 1965 and 1971 (see Cavell 2002: 68-90, 167-96, and especially 171, 201; 1979: 108-18, especially 113). Robert Warshow's critical essays on Hollywood films and American pop culture can be seen as an inspiration for much of what Cavell wrote in *The World Viewed* (1971). In addition, they were explicitly drawn upon in "Film and the University", the appendix to *Pursuits of Happiness* (1981), and celebrated in Cavell's afterword to the reissue of the collection of Warshow's essays *The Immediate Experience* (2001). Lionel Trilling's literary and cultural criticism too is praised persistently. In 1980, five years after Trilling's death, Cavell participated in the *Lionel Trilling seminars*, a permanent seminar at Columbia University, and described Trilling as someone "whose work has been so nourishing to me, from the time I began searching for my way into the world of mind" (Cavell 1984: 188). In 1981, one of the essays of *Pursuits of Happiness* made reference to "The Fate of Pleasure", one of Trilling's most important contributions on the subject of modern literature (Cavell 1981: 154). In his interview with Borradori in the early 1990s, Cavell described his reaction to Trilling (and Warshow) when he was a young man as an "ecstatic experience" (Borradori 1994: 122). Finally, Cavell's autobiography is replete with anecdotes and passages that confirm his prolonged appreciation of the Anti-Stalinist Left as a group (Cavell 2010: 11, 158, 185, 231, 242, 252, 299, 406-7).

Freud and psychoanalysis were a frequent subject for the New York Intellectuals. *Partisan Review* editor William Barret, for example, in the very year 1947 authored an imaginary dialogue between Freud and Heidegger on *angst* and authenticity (Barrett 1947). However, I would like to focus on the figure in the group most deeply and persistently engaged in psychoanalysis, namely Lionel Trilling, formulating the hypothesis that Cavell's youthful interest in Freud was sustained and prolonged by the steady flow of works that Trilling devoted to the psychoanalyst: for example, "Freud and Literature" (1940, revised version in September 1947), "Art and Neurosis" (1945), "Neurosis and the Health of the Artist" (December 1947), "Two Analyses of Sigmund Freud" (December 1947), "Freud's Last Book" (1949), *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* (1955) and "A Review of the Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung" (1974), as well as the numerous passages on Freud in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1972), the transcription of Trilling's Norton Lectures at Harvard in 1970.

Cavell never references these texts and, although he was teaching at Harvard at the time of Trilling's lectures, we have no way of judging whether he actually followed them. Therefore, besides my previous considerations on Cavell's appreciation of Trilling and the New York Intellectuals in general, my hypothesis will be based only on thematic correspondences between Cavell's treatment of Freud and that of Trilling, as well as the indirect but significant clue offered by the chronological correspondence of the issue or reissue, in autumn 1947, of three of Trilling's above-mentioned essays, with Cavell's own discovery of Freud in the same months. I will highlight some of such thematic correspondences, focusing especially on essays published by Trilling before 1962.

Trilling, who in 1955 was the first literary critic – indeed the first layman – ever asked to give the annual Freud Anniversary Lecture at the New York Psychoanalytic Society (the previous year had been the turn of Anna Freud), repeatedly insisted on the inherent similarities between psychoanalysis and literature. Despite appreciatively mentioning aspects of Ernest Jones' analysis of *Hamlet* and Freud's analysis of *King Lear*, Trilling finds himself dissatisfied, like Cavell some decades later, with the overt orthodoxy of psychoanalytical literary criticism (Trilling 2008: 39, 46-52; Cavell 1996: 91). Indeed, Trilling does not connect psychoanalysis to literary criticism, but to literature itself, the output of novelists, playwrights, and poets.

The introductory paragraph of "Freud and Literature" (1940/1947) opens with the words: "The Freudian psychology is the only systematic account of the human mind which [...] deserves to stand beside the chaotic mass of psychological insights which literature has accumulated through the centuries". The same paragraph closes with a reminder of Freud's statement that it was not he, but the poets who discovered the unconscious, while all he did was find "the

scientific method by which the unconscious can be studied” (Trilling 2008: 34). Some 60 years later, Cavell would insist on exactly the same idea: after characterizing Freud’s achievement as an “unsurpassed horizon of knowledge about the human mind”, Cavell recalls that Freud “likes to insist that his insights into the human mind have been anticipated by the creative writers of our civilization” and that he only “systematized the culture’s power of insight into a new science” (Cavell 2004: 286-7).

In “Freud and Literature”, Trilling states that the greatest merit of psychoanalysis lies in having made “poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind” and that “psychoanalysis is one of the culminations of the Romanticist literature of the nineteenth century” (Trilling 2008: 35, 52-3). Cavell, in a passage of *In Quest of the Ordinary*, would remark in passing that there is “a sense in which [psychoanalysis] was preceded by romanticism” (Cavell 1988: 48). Even on the subject of Freud’s positivism, Trilling and Cavell are close. Trilling insists on the ambivalence of its effects: “From his rationalistic positivism”, he writes, “comes much of Freud’s strength and what weaknesses he has”, the weakness lying mainly in Freud’s tendency to understand art only as a substitute gratification for repressed drives (Trilling 2008: 40-6). Cavell is less dismissive, but shares Trilling’s idea of a tension, within Freud’s work, between the scientific and the ‘literary’ mind. In the chapter on Freud in *Cities of Words* (2004), it is almost as if Cavell were trying to defend Freud from Trilling’s critique, while at the same time maintaining Trilling’s view on the limitations of a positivistic understanding of psychoanalysis: he states that the reason why his chapter focuses on Freud’s text about Jensen’s *Gradiiva* is that in it Freud most explicitly insists on his break from “advanced Western thought, as represented in philosophy and established in science”, and “his continuity with the high literary tradition of Western culture” (Cavell 2004: 283).

Also close to what Cavell would write decades later is the idea, put forth by Trilling in *Freud and the Crisis of Our Culture* (1955) and later expanded in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1970), that psychoanalysis and literature share an understanding of the self which is typically ‘modern’. For Trilling, Freudian psychoanalysis – especially *Civilization and its Discontents* – epitomizes an understanding of human subjectivity first born out of Shakespeare’s theatre and later developed by the novel: the modern self is understood as always in development, as always caught in a complex dialectic, an antagonism even, between the inner and the outer, individual and society, social masks and what lies behind them (Trilling 1955: 33-58). This same dialectic would be described by Cavell in terms of his modified notions of scepticism and perfectionism. The similarities are significant: not only would Cavell go along with the – certainly widespread – narrative that traces back the “modern self” to Shakespeare (Cavell 2003: 3), he

would also, as I recalled above, draw an idiosyncratic connection (but perhaps less so in light of its possible source in Trilling) between the history of modern scepticism and psychoanalysis (Cavell 1996: 104-5).

One further aspect of Trilling's assessment of the common genius of literature and psychoanalysis finds resonance in Cavell's work. For Trilling, literature and psychoanalysis are at one in that they share a moral and epistemic commitment to the other. They presuppose and at the same time instil a capacity to see the inner life of other human beings, to accept it and take it into account, recognizing its reality both in its separateness and its relation to us. In his 1955 lecture, Trilling describes the capacity of the literary author and the psychoanalyst to "imagine the selfhood of others", to come to the "realization of the selfhood of others in pain", to affect a "willing suspension of disbelief in the selfhood of someone else", and declares it "the essence of moral life" (Trilling 1955: 18-19). From the closing essays of *Must We Mean What We Say* onwards, Cavell would explore this same capacity, a cornerstone of our moral life for him too, in terms of his philosophy of acknowledgement. Among the cultural forces able to foster the human capacity to acknowledge the subjectivity of other human beings, Cavell would count not only psychoanalysis and literature, but also film and – most importantly – philosophy itself, at least in the therapeutic conception of it that he elaborates by joining together aspects of the work of Wittgenstein and Freud.

This quick comparison does not cover the whole range of either Trilling's or Cavell's ideas on Freud. Certainly, it is not able to demonstrate a direct influence, especially given the already mentioned absence of explicit references as well as the conspicuous time lag that occurred between the publication of Trilling's ideas on Freud and Cavell's alleged reworking of them.

Should the hypothesis of an influence be found worthy of consideration, the lack of references and belated reception can perhaps be interpreted in the following two non-mutually exclusive ways. Cavell explicitly stated that his "life-long quarrel with the profession of philosophy" as it stood in the American academia of the time certainly entailed a wish to open it to new possibilities (continental philosophy, psychoanalysis and literature), but never to simply do away with its epistemic and communicative paradigms, insofar as he recognized them to be a "genuine present of philosophy" (Cavell 1984: 31-2). Thus it can be surmised that the relaxed, non-academic cultural criticism of Trilling (and other New York Intellectuals) was too far removed from the philosophical academia of Cavell's time to be put to work in the writing through which Cavell was seeking to find a distinctly personal, but also legitimate and institutionally sanctioned place in the philosophical world. Cavell almost states something of the sort to explain why, despite the great influence the Anti-Stalinist left had exercised on him, at a certain point he had to leave it behind in favour of his

professional philosophical work (Borradori 1994: 122).

It is also possible that, having been interiorized by Cavell in his early years, Trilling's ideas on Freud worked as a silent co-incentive to reflect on psychoanalysis in a time when the only philosophical avenue at Cavell's disposal was the therapeutic inflection in the likes of Wisdom and Wittgenstein. Then, by the time of Cavell's more mature reflection, when his securer position in the philosophical world and the encounter with post-structuralism and the new currents of literary and film criticism had permitted wider philosophical engagement with psychoanalysis, Cavell worked some versions of Trilling's ideas into his writing while no longer fully aware of their exact provenance. Reception can work this way, especially in case of the cross-disciplinary dissemination of the work of culturally influential intellectual figures such as Freud, whose pervasive presence in American culture until the 1980s, outside academia at least, is unquestionable (Hale 1995), and Trilling, who, according to a survey circa 1970, ranked among the ten most influential intellectuals in the United States (Rodden 1999: xxxiv).

If, on the contrary, the evidence backing the hypothesis of Trilling's influence on Cavell is found to be thin, his treatment of Freud as sketched out above can at least be considered a representative example of the kind of work on psychoanalysis in American literary circles to which Cavell might have been exposed in the decades of his education and early philosophical production.

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