Psychology and Politics

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PART ONE

Cultural Representations of Psychoanalysis in Personal and Social History
On a table in the hall of the Freud Museum London stood a bell jar. It displayed, as I remember, some plants and twigs, the type of artificial habitat favored by Victorian taxidermists. But instead of the anticipated stuffed bird or animal, in the center on a bed of moss lay a small heap of excrement.

In 1988–89, Rachel Withers was artist-in-residence at the museum. Her assignment was to plan an exhibition based on Freud's life and work. In 1989 it was put on display, and it included that bell jar in the hall. Visitors invited to the exhibition were asked for their comments. Only one of them stuck in my memory and that was only because of the speaker's name—Dr. Couch. His comment was: “Miss Freud would not have allowed this in her house.”

Dr. Couch was a psychoanalyst who worked at the Anna Freud Centre, across the road from the Freud Museum; he had been analyzed by Anna Freud herself, and the shadow of transference falls across his words. As well as expressing his own disapproval of the exhibition, his comment conjures up the previous occupants of the house (Anna Freud and, by implication and association, her father) as the phantom arbiters of the museum.

In fact I never met Dr. Couch, nor heard his remark (it was reported to me), and so I cannot tell whether it was serious or jocular, or even whether he was speaking of the bell jar alone or the entire exhibition. That is unimportant here. His sentence resounds like an oracle, and its echoes reflect something of the situation of the museum (its psychopolitical situation) and of my own experience there as an employee during the early years of its existence.
People say funny things, and it is often hard to know why. Did Couch object on principle to allowing any artist into the museum to represent her view or version of psychoanalysis, or did he simply object to that one exhibit; that is, was it the excrement or art itself that he saw as scandalous? This specific uncertainty reflects our general uncertainty as employees of the museum responsible for representing Freud and his ideas to the public. We were still in the dark as to whether that responsibility could—or should—be delegated to artists.

While writing this chapter, I found myself questioning my own memory of Withers’s exhibition. It took place twenty-six years ago, and perhaps I had misremembered that particular exhibit? I contacted her and, to my relief, she confirmed that what I had written about the bell jar was more or less accurate. But she corrected one detail. I had recalled the centerpiece as a pile of excrement. It was indeed, she replied, albeit a counterfeit made of polyfilla. But what I had forgotten was that this artistic heap of excrement was prettily gilded with gold paint.

It seemed that my memory had done exactly what I suspected Dr. Couch might have done: mentally substituted the thing itself for its representation. We were both literalists of the image, we had both denied the cultural transformation. By gilding the excrement Rachel was not just illustrating the traditional gold/shit equivalence; she was also, in effect, imitating the alchemy of the dream work as Freud interprets it, transforming the affect inspired by some possibly revolting object into its opposite, thus turning disgust into delight.

Withers’ strategy—and the artist’s task—was neatly formulated by Baudelaire: “You gave me your filth and I turned it into gold.”

The museum that Couch visited that day was, evidently, no longer Miss Freud’s house. However, visitors and media often assumed that some shadowy Freudian establishment (appointed perhaps by the International Psychoanalytical Association?) must be in charge. Confusion was understandable: the management structure baffled insiders almost as much as outsiders. The Sigmund Freud Archives Inc. in New York, a group of American psychoanalysts who controlled the Freud archives in the Library of Congress, were the designated trustees of the museum. But they lacked any financial resources, which actually came from a U.S. charitable organization, the New-Land Foundation.

1 “Tu m’as donné ta boue et j’en ai fait de l’or” (Charles Baudelaire, from “Projet d’épilogue pour la seconde édition des Fleurs du Mal.”).
“A Museum of Human Excrement”

Meanwhile the property itself was held by an English charitable trust. New-Land and Archives together set up a joint committee that met in New York, which in turn designated an Advisory Committee that met in London, to supervise the new museum.

This clunky chain of command allowed Richard Wells, the director at the time of the exhibition, a certain freedom. What permissions he sought (if any) or which of the committees (if any) he consulted remains unclear; what is clear is that he was cautious, for Rachel’s exhibition was only opened to invited visitors on days when the museum was closed to the general public.

He had good reason for such caution. Nowadays museum artists-in-residence are common, but at the time this was a pioneering venture. Apart from that, the museum had been tainted with scandal from the outset, and it remained a potential target of media outrage. When it opened, the so-called “Freud Wars” were raging. These were polemics disputing the status of psychoanalysis, and the battleground was as much Freud’s character as his theories. The museum itself was implicated in these wars. The Projects Director for Archives Inc., Jeffrey Masson, who was originally supposed to take charge of the future museum, had written articles questioning Freud’s scientific and personal integrity. In 1984, he published a book entitled *The Assault on Truth: Freud’s Suppression of the Seduction Theory*. Archives Inc. duly dismissed him three years before the museum opened.

Masson was a trained psychoanalyst: he was replaced by a professional curator, David Newlands. The fact that neither Newlands nor his successor Richard Wells (nor, for that matter, any of their staff) were psychoanalysts was one of the criticisms commonly leveled against the museum. This implied that only trained psychoanalysts are competent (or entitled?) to represent Freudian theory. This insidious idea caused a great deal of anxiety in the museum. Before the opening, Newlands was careful to submit his staff’s exhibition drafts for vetting by a group of practicing analysts.

Was it a sort of corporate superego in the guise of the Freuds themselves that loomed over the directors and their staff? Couch’s remark indicates that, in his eyes, it ought to have been so. And as Anna Freud’s analysand, he might well have been confusing her person with the process of psychoanalytic training. If that were the case, the gist of his comment might be translated (and in this form be nearer the truth): it was not the phantasied Freuds but phantasms of the institutions of psychoanalysis that haunted the museum.

Whether actual members of the Institute of Psycho-Analysis perceived the museum as an infringement of a supposed monopoly on Freud is not the
question. It is the perception of events from inside the museum that concerns me here, and for us the nexus of controversy and antagonism seemed to be visual representations of psychoanalytical theory. Accordingly, Couch's comment could well be interpreted as a criticism of attempts to transform those ideas into the alien idiom of art.

This hypothesis might seem devious. Surely it makes sense to attribute his reaction to a simple reflex of disgust at the bell jar's contents? After all, off-duty or on, a psychoanalyst is subject to cultural norms just like anyone else. But, at the same time, I assume he would have been capable of contextualizing a reference to anality. Everything depends on how the object is framed. I am led to assume that his objection was to such a graphic transformation of theory.

During her residency Withers was encouraged to discuss her exhibition project with the staff, and at some point Ivan Ward, who was in charge of the Education Programme, had suggested she should not overlook Freud's concept of the role of anality in human development. The hallucinatory construct under the bell jar and under discussion here was her response to that challenge. It could have been viewed as a botanical joke, or an aesthetic game, or a conceptual clash of registers. But in the House of Freud, or in the mind of a psychoanalyst (or in our perception of the analyst's attitude), it was seen as out of place, an irruption, an act of polymorphous mockery.

Psychopolitics hinges on perceptions, and perceptions of perceptions. We confront our own projections or introjections. Those phantasms seem to be our sense of attitudes emanating from institutions. But, however phantasmic, they emerge from a power relationship that produced real consequences.

There were, as I said, never any guidelines concerning how the museum should represent Freud and his work. The trustees, who could hire and fire, did not dictate its activities. The unease we felt about exhibitions can be attributed, on one level, to the inherent difficulty of the project, and on another, to bad weather in the psychoanalytic culture of the time (the Freud Wars, a siege mentality among analysts, evidence that the profession was in decline, financial uncertainties, etc.). All of this played a part. Couch seems only to have been voicing his own disgust. But his words hinted at a transferential identification, and that was the product of his psychoanalytic training. Whatever malaise afflicted us and the museum, it was historical and had its roots in the very origins of institutional psychoanalysis.

The botanical bell jar referred to those historical roots: a dream Freud dreamt in the summer of 1898 is diffracted through its lens. Writing it up in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud prefaced his account with the words: "It
is a short dream, which will fill every reader with disgust.” The reason for that soon becomes evident—this is the “dream of the open-air closet.” The account of the dream is brief enough to quote in full:

A hill, on which there was something like an open-air closet: a very long seat with a large hole at the end of it. Its back edge was thickly covered with small heaps of faeces of all sizes and degrees of freshness. There were bushes behind the seat. I micturated on the seat; a long stream of urine washed everything clean; the lumps of faeces came away easily and fell into the opening. It was as though at the end there was still some left. (Freud [1898] 1953, 468–69)

But does it really fill every reader with disgust? In fact, the dream reader himself tells us he felt no disgust at all. On the contrary, the dream associations led him to delight, for the clotted closet turns out to be a replica of his couch and the gift of a grateful patient; hence a constant reminder for him of how much his patients honored him. He comments: “Indeed, even the museum of human excrement could be given an interpretation to rejoice my heart” (Freud [1898] 1953, 469).

At that time, psychoanalysis was hardly more than a name and a claim: it was propagated almost exclusively through the university lectures that Freud, as Privat Dozent, was entitled to deliver. Through the day’s residues that its associations brought up, we find out that the dream deals with the aftermath of one of these university lectures.

The previous evening (in the lecture theater of Professor Krafft-Ebing, author of Psychopathia sexualis), Freud spoke about the connection between hysteria and perversions. This lecture, he states, “displeased him intensely.” Furthermore, it being summer, he wished he was in the country with his family at Aussee, and he wrote: “I longed to be away from all this grubbing about in human dirt.” Afterwards, a member of his audience told him that his theory of the neuroses had cleaned the Augean Stables of nineteenth-century psychology, and that he was, in effect, “a very great man.” This praise only inspired a feeling of disgust in Freud, and as soon as he could, he escaped, went home, leafed through a couple of books (Rabelais and C.F. Meyer) and went to sleep.

The dream emerges as an expression of self-contempt overcome by self-confidence. A gargantuan exuberance sweeps aside both distaste for patients and their pathology (“human dirt”) and shame at a pupil’s excessive praise.
The dream allows the dreamer to find secret gratification in that praise and antipathy towards the pathological object of his professional activities.

The relationship between the therapist and his patient and that of the master with his pupil are both fraught and sensitive. Later in life, Freud would look back with a sort of nostalgia at these last years of the nineteenth century as his period of “splendid isolation,” before the responsibilities of followers or the politics of organization took over. In fact, the student in the 1898 dream associations might stand in for his very first pupil, Felix Gattel (see Hermanns and Schröter 1990, 6). Gattel was a disappointment, and in late 1897, after only six months of Gattel’s tutelage and around eight months before this dream, Freud admitted, “I feel toward him as I would toward a wayward son. I wish him the best and must accept his disgrace as mine.”

In due course, the shared disgrace would become public. The following year, Gattel published “On the Sexual Origins of Neurasthenia and Anxiety Neurosis,” and around the time of the dream (June 1898), a certain P. Karplus, an assistant of Krafft-Ebing, published a review of it, which, in effect, lambasted Freud for his pupil’s faults. To have followers is to be doubly exposed and vulnerable.

In the early days of the museum’s tutelage, its relationship to organized psychoanalysis was ill defined. Though the common perception was that its exhibitions and public program were subject to the dictates of the Freudian analysts on the board, there were, in fact, few on the London committee, and the American joint committee was far away. Richard Wells felt himself under no obligation to confer with them more than was necessary. Standard business practice has it that the basic function of a board should be to either support or fire the CEO. In line with that last clause, and a year or so after Withers’s exhibition, Richard Wells was fired.

In the two-step that ideology dances with finance, which of them calls the tune? While Withers had been working on her exhibition, the museum was engaged in its most ambitious and costly project to date: an international conference entitled Speculations, which was held in late 1990. In its wake, the museum’s finances were found to be registering a massive six-figure deficit. After Wells’s consequent termination, the museum was put on a short leash; the New-Land Foundation now took over doling out its vital annual financial contribution in monthly installments.

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2 Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, October 31, 1897, in Masson 1985.
It most probably had nothing to do with Withers. Despite Dr. Couch’s misgivings, most reactions to her work had been positive, and from that time onwards, under the directorship of Wells’s successor Erica Davies, art exhibitions would become a regular feature of the museum’s program. Over the next decade Davies organized regular group and individual exhibitions. In 2002, conceptual artist Stuart Brisley installed an exhibition in the museum. It was called *The Collection of Ordure* and its concept was an inquiry into the logic of selection, collection, and display. It included an installation in Freud’s study featuring (besides glass cases full of unclassifiable detritus) chairs smeared and daubed with extremely verisimilar faeces. This time there was no gilding.

Transmuting visceral disgust into intellectual delight (or, at least, appreciation) requires a greater degree of detachment, or a wider art-historical perspective, than most visitors could perhaps muster. It had been more than ten years since the financial crisis that caused Richard Wells’s dismissal. Since that time, the London Management Committee and the Joint Committee in New York had shown their support for the director primarily by insistently urging her to raise funds. But the deficit remained chronic, fund-raising appeals failed to realize the goal of financial independence, and in the summer of 2003, Davies too was fired.

Committees make such decisions in closed sessions, and their discussions are not generally recorded. The part that the art exhibitions played in that decision remains a matter of speculation. My impression was that there were purists on the committee who felt that art was not part of the museum’s mission, or that the exhibitions were too frequent, or that they were insufficiently integrated into a psychoanalytic context. Other committee members were, I guess, more pragmatic, and mainly concerned that these exhibitions were failing either to increase overall visitor numbers or to attract significant funding. My guess is that if finances had been in order or if any of the various fundraising drives had been more successful, or if, say, Brisley’s *Ordure* had, like Piero Manzoni’s *Merda d’artista*, sold well (and, of course, on the museum’s behalf) at Sotheby’s, then Davies might have been vindicated and kept her job.³

In any case, trustees might still have voiced ideological objections to art exhibitions in order to reinforce their financial case against the director. And

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³ In the 1960s, Manzoni produced a number of sealed tins entitled *Merda d’artista*. In the year 2000, one of these tins was sold at Sotheby’s for £22,350. By 2007, the price had risen to £81,000.
if they did, I would conjecture a range of arguments, from those of the hard-liners, who saw no place at all for art in the museum, to those of the moderates, who conceded that some artists could be trusted to respect psychoanalytic theory, while others could not.

Irresistibly the oneiric image of Freud urinating on the couch comes to mind. In the open-air closet dream, the solid, disgusting matter draws attention away from the action itself, which is urination. This is a lighter, more mercurial theme. In the 1914 and later editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, another significant urinary dream known as “The French nurse’s dream,” was added to the book. It gained prominence not only for being the only artwork in it, but also because it was not an actual dream but an artist’s invention. Eight comic strip illustrations show a sleeping nurse ignoring a child’s insistent cries, while a series of images attempts to persuade her that she is already attending to the child’s need to urinate. In the images, the child’s initial trickle swells into a canal, then into a river, then into an ocean, at which point the necessity of waking finally overcomes the nurse’s desire to continue sleeping (Freud [1914] 1953, 368).

The drawings came from the Hungarian comic paper *Fidibusz*. When Ferenczi sent them to Freud in 1911, Freud wrote back that the artist understood the theory of dreams better than Bleuler, Morton Prince, or Havelock Ellis.4 (This eminent trio resisted a wholehearted acceptance of psychoanalysis.) The comment and the inclusion of the images into the book register Freud’s endorsement of the artist’s role in representing psychoanalytic theory.

Those illustrations are clearly a long way from conceptual art or installations. Though the cartoons may demolish the hardliners’ case against artists, the moderates can obviously continue arguing on the grounds that there is art and “art,” the latter of which merits exclusion from the museum. This distinction begs the vexed question of how one defines art.

In late 1898, some months after his closet dream, and as if in compensation for Karplus’s attack, Freud received an essay by Havelock Ellis that was not only appreciative of his work, but even cited the work of his pupil Gattel (Ellis 1898, 260–99). As Ellis had been among the first foreigners to recognize his work, Freud was, for a long time, predisposed in his favor. Over the years, a certain irritation at Ellis’s misunderstanding or resistance to his theory would sour his goodwill, as indicated by the comment to Ferenczi in 1911.

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After World War I, Freud saw a paper Ellis had published: “Psychoanalysis in Relation to Sex” (Ellis 1917). Ellis asserted that Freud was an artist, not a scientist. Freud termed this, “the most interesting example of highly sublimated resistance.”

Though Freud considered it resistance to call psychoanalysis an art, not a science, this does not mean that his definition of science excludes artistry. He complained to Fliess that he failed to achieve the style he was striving for in The Interpretation of Dreams, and the technique of dream reading itself is termed an interpretative art: Deutungskunst. What underlies his objection to Ellis’s critique is not that Ellis sees art in his work, but that he sees Freud as an artist. The conflict is not between science and art as fields of activity, but between the character of the scientist and the character of the artist.

Perhaps Ellis’s remark rankled because it was already too familiar—maybe it even dimly recalled Krafft-Ebing’s comment that Freud’s aetiology of hysteria was “a scientific fairy tale.” Artists gild their dreams to make them socially acceptable, but the gilding is the give-away. Freud’s warning that his open-air closet dream “will fill every reader with disgust” carries the implicit message: “this is not art.”

Though psychologist and artist alike observe human behavior, their respective communities have different modes of demonstration and validation. While Brisley questioned classification systems and the construction of order through his “collection of ordure,” nothing was proved. But was Brisley so different from Ellis, with his respective collection of deviant data, classified without any evident overall system? In the 1930s, discussing the sexologist with the poet H. D., Freud would finally get to turn the tables on Ellis for that aspersion of being an artist: “He [Ellis] records so many funny things that people do but never seems to want to know why they do them” (H.D. 1985, 148).

Case histories may read like novellas and yet be scientific if their core and context are “why.” As for the funny things people did or said about art in the museum, it seems to me that many of them might be attributed to this (ultimately sterile) art/science debate. The corroboration offered here—decisions emerging from closeted discussions or a dubious comment—only becomes evidence if placed in the context of years of impressions and experi-

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ences building up to a climate of opinion, the bad weather prevailing around the museum at the time.

Attitudes have since changed. Control of the Museum has since passed from Archives Inc. and the Joint Committee to the London Committee alone, and the art exhibitions continue. The latest one includes the installation “Gavin Turk’s Desk,” cluttered with objects in imitation of Freud’s. Object 49 is a cracked tin can entitled “Ordure”: the artist’s label states that it is “a musing on Piero Manzoni’s Merda d’artist” and that it is “imagined that the artist’s shit had escaped.”

Dr. Couch, being dead, is not available for comment. As always in art history, scandals are assimilated into tradition and orthodoxy. Reality continues to evade capture.

In Freud’s open-air closet dream, the stream of urine supposedly “washed everything clean.” Yet the final sentence of the dream account adds: “It was as though at the end there was still some left.” This apparent afterthought is left uninterpreted. How could this residue be read?

I make no exclusive claims for the following conjectures.

The problem about case histories sounding like novellas is, as Freud stated, that they thereby “lack the serious stamp of science.” (This is the Standard Edition translation: the original word, Wissenschaftlichkeit, denotes scientificity or a scientific approach, rather than science in the abstract.) His indignation at the comments made by Krafft-Ebing or Havelock Ellis was aroused by their aspersions against a style or approach that does not accord with their notions of science. It is a sore point, because, unlike his friend Fliess, Freud did not have recourse to mathematics. His own innate sense of style was outraged by the devious phraseology and forced circumlocutions he found himself using. It is probable that something like this dissatisfaction, in this instance deriving from the lecture he has just given, infects the dream and its associations.

Alternatively (or additionally), the dissatisfaction expressed in the dream associations relates to the practice of therapy. In either instance, the residue remains as an enduring trace of the analyst’s own self-disgust. This is dirt that cannot be washed away. And perhaps it should not, because it represents the analyst’s self-critical faculty, so necessary for the successful practice of the profession and the antidote to the delusions of grandeur that pervade the dream. The delight was transitory: the residue of disgust remains as a link to reality. It is the sting in the tail, a reminder that, awake, the dreamer will no longer be a mythic giant.
Taking the interpretation one step further, it acquires a philosophical twist. Excrement is a problem for conceptual as well as physical hygiene. It is produced as a consequence of appetite and pleasure. It is inside us and then it is expelled; it involves attraction and repulsion, inside and outside worlds. In short, it confuses categories.

Ambivalence and ambiguity are discomforting. There is something like an atavistic proto-scientific longing for conceptual purity and well-defined ideas. In this realm of moral philosophy, Freud’s dream might be presented as a warning to himself against such temptations. The delight of having washed away the impurity of human dirt was premature. The scientist is human after all, still hopelessly involved in the stuff of observed reality. No need for further comment, the evidence is there in the punchline: “there was still some left.”

REFERENCES
