

## UNCONSCIOUS

Although the notion of the unconscious is generally associated with Sigmund Freud and the discipline of psychoanalysis, it was already widely employed by philosophers and creative writers during the 18<sup>th</sup> century, as was demonstrated for example by Lancelot Law Whyte. However, when Freud singled out the unconscious as one of the cornerstones of his psychoanalytic edifice, he provided it with a new meaning, and it is this particular conceptualisation that has left a lasting imprint on literary and cultural studies. In sum, for Freud the unconscious is a repository of repressed representations, an active dynamic force that does not stop imposing itself upon and thereby disrupting the human conscious experience, and a scene of unknown knowledge that can nonetheless be accessed and rendered intelligible through specific techniques of interpretation. On many occasions, Freud himself argued how this unconscious not only conditions a broad array of clinical symptoms, but is equally at work in socio-cultural phenomena and in products of the human creative imagination. Likewise, he showed how psychoanalytic techniques of interpretation can be employed beneficially to reveal the latent knowledge and hidden thought-processes permeating works of art as well as common social constructions such as group-formation, religious belief systems and political ideologies.

In the wake of Freud's groundbreaking contributions, psychoanalysts, literary and cultural theorists developed a new paradigm of interpretation which came to be known as 'psychoanalytic criticism', although the protocol and its object were not always as uniform as the term may suggest. Whereas some authors, such as Marie Bonaparte, heavily relied on a psycho-biographical method (explaining the contents of literary works with reference to unresolved infantile conflicts in the life-history of the author), others favoured a strictly

thematic approach, looking for the unconscious by identifying recurrent implicit themes in an author's oeuvre, or in semantically similar cultural manifestations. The latter approach became exceptionally popular during the 1950s by virtue of Claude Lévi-Strauss' structuralist anthropology, in which human beings, their social settings and their cultural productions are being depicted as animated by deep linguistic structures of which they themselves are profoundly unaware, and even more so on account of Jacques Lacan's thesis that 'the unconscious is structured like a language'. During the 1960s, this type of structuralist psychoanalytic criticism influenced a great many forms of social critique, including the Marxist political analyses of Louis Althusser and Étienne Balibar, who were primarily geared towards unravelling the unconscious historical forces behind ideological texts and configurations.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, psychoanalytic criticism in literary and cultural studies persists in all its forms, yet it is by no means as popular and widespread as it once was. This is partly the result of the emergence of alternative interpretive frameworks in literary theory—such as semiotics, reception theory and phenomenological criticism—which leave little room for the unconscious in the text, partly owing to the gradual decline of literary theory itself, yet perhaps most of all due to the massive influence of Jacques Derrida's deconstructionist method which, although it constantly engages with psychoanalysis, tends to expose psychoanalytic criticism as a self-serving method of interpretation. Whenever psychoanalysis claims to find something meaningful, Derrida suggested in the opening lines of his trenchant critique of Lacan's reading of Edgar Allan Poe's 'The Purloined Letter', it only ever finds itself, thus confirming its own meaningfulness rather than validating some meaningful aspect of the text.