

THREE STUDIES IN CRITICISM ¹

I

PSYCHO-ANALYSIS AND LITERARY CRITICISM

I

PSYCHO-ANALYSIS is very much in the air at present. No scientific theme, for the last ten years, has more widely attracted the attention of the general public. The flood of explanation, discussion, and comment shows no decrease; and whilst the learned disagree as to the merits of the new method, the common man, and the man of letters, have eagerly seized upon its sensational or dramatic possibilities. Having spread rapidly over Europe, and from the Old World to the New, it has entered into the very consciousness of our time.

A working knowledge of it can thus be taken for granted. Still, it may not be entirely superfluous to repeat that psycho-analysis, with which the name of Freud, and perhaps that of Jung, are prominently associated, is before all an analysis of the "psyche", or of the whole soul, not excluding the subconscious self. This is normally hidden and repressed; it expresses itself through dreams, and is secretly at work in the higher activities of the mind. Unravelling the tangled threads of inner experience, the "complexes" or abnormalities of character, and the elusive logic of

¹ Three lectures, the first and third of which were delivered at the Rice Institute in the spring of 1924 by Louis Cazamian, Professor of English Literature at the University of Paris.

140 Three Studies in Criticism

dream states, the specialist can probe the mysteries of the subconscious. What he discovers is a sort of obscured and buried layer, the confused mass of pre-human or barbarous development; a pitiless, brutal or shameful domain, lying under the clear world of civilized, moralized being. In that region of our selves, instinct is a supreme law; and all instincts are more or less directly connected with the "libido" or desire of the sentient being for the satisfaction of its appetites. Among the various forms of the libido, the sexual are practically predominant. Following those clues through the puzzles of behavior and the riddles of artistic expression, turning to use the involuntary confessions to be found in the visions of the dreamer, the imaginings of the poet, and all the spontaneous initiatives of the soul, the mental doctor can effect cures; he throws a ray of light on the hidden cause; and by revealing to us our secret wishes, enables us to satisfy or to eradicate them.

It can be seen from this extremely brief account that psycho-analysis has no less to do with the problem of art than with that of morality. The object of the following short study is not to pass judgment once more on the merit of the doctrine: that should be left to the competent persons; nor even to examine its relation to creative literature, a field in which it has been, for better for worse, a strongly stimulating influence. The "new psychology", as it is loosely called, to-day plays the part of that latest addition to the body of accessible scientific theories, which is in the modern world, to the imaginations of writers, what the leading religious or social belief was to those of previous centuries. If, as was expected by the philosophers, general ideas have succeeded dogma in the intellectual direction of mankind, the ideas that really assume power are not those of the metaphysician, for very obvious reasons. Even the physics

Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism 141

of Einstein finds few imaginative renderings, for reasons no less obvious. But the teaching of Freud has awakened an immediate and a universal echo. Perhaps the reasons, here again, are not far to seek. Leaving out the abundant literature which—be it novels, or poetry, or drama—is instinct with psycho-analytical curiosities or enthusiasm, my purpose is only to try and seek what auxiliary help the new lore has brought or can bring to literary criticism.

The relation between these two terms is natural, and has been promptly emphasized. The critic is an analyst in his way; a book is originally, and remains before all, an organization of psychological elements. There is a very apparent analogy between imaginative productions and dreams; an analogy which esthetics have long felt. The latest development of modern criticism, its return to an impressionistic ideal, which it attempts to deepen through a stimulation of artistic consciousness, and on the other hand the whole course of recent psychology towards a fuller realization of the spontaneous and subconscious activities, are movements on converging lines.

If we survey the applications thus far made of psycho-analysis to the criticism of literature, we find that they can be divided into two groups of unequal size, according as their object is general or particular. In the former and smaller group may be mentioned Professor Prescott's *The Poetic Mind*, and the first part of Mr. Mordell's *The Erotic Motive in Literature*. As examples of the latter we might quote the various literary cases examined in Freud's own works; Mr. Ernest Jones's famous interpretation of *Hamlet*; the second part of Mr. Mordell's study, previously cited; and Mr. Collins's *The Doctor Looks at Literature*.¹

¹ F. C. Prescott, *The Poetic Mind*, 1922; A. Mordell, *The Erotic Motive in Literature*, 1919; Ernest Jones, *Essays in Applied Psycho-Analysis*, 1923; J. Collins, *The Doctor Looks at Literature*, 1923.

142 Three Studies in Criticism

It seems to me that criticism can derive substantial benefit from the general methods of psycho-analysis, and that the problems of interpretation cannot ignore that new way of approach. I believe, on the other hand, that most of the attempts made, on dogmatic psycho-analytical lines, to solve the individual riddles of literature, and deal with artistic personalities, leave us in the mood of dissatisfaction and revolt. Such are the conclusions which it will be the modest endeavor of a layman to establish.

They imply some sort of a reaction to the claims of psycho-analysis itself; and though the proper valuation of those claims belongs only to the professional philosopher, it would be futile to pretend that I am not here trespassing upon his domain. So I had better give myself away at once.

In the light of simple common-sense, psycho-analysis cannot be dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders, or a flat refusal to take it seriously. However glaring its exaggerations and faults, it has come to stay. The modern mind has grown aware of an "other side" to our inner life; in some form, the subconscious will play its part in the knowledge and the ethics of man. One glance over the trend of thought since the Renaissance will show us that new and still newer layers of our deeper beings have been gradually laid bare. Romanticism was the outstanding event in that process of self-realization; but that irresistible surge of the long repressed emotions has not been the only means of their late recognition by an over-intellectualized world; even among the intellectualists, and through the rational centuries, men of stronger insight had been at work, deciphering the hidden play of instincts. In England only, the first Samuel Butler, whom the second was to echo so strangely, then Swift and Mandeville, had dug up unexpected ore from their cynical burrowings; Hazlitt, and the

Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism 143

Thackeray of *Vanity Fair*, followed after them. The exploration of the human mind, during the last fifty years, has chiefly busied itself with the origins and roots of things. The novel had taken that turn, before Freud came and recommended it to the novelists. The "new psychology" is a complement and consecration which the trained searchers have added to the intuitions and discoveries of the men of letters.

In so far as it is a necessary product of our time, and brings to a head latent elements or prevailing tendencies, psycho-analysis will probably stand its ground. But we cannot feel the same confidence as to any of its original theories and pet formulæ. The vigorous, dogmatic twist it tries to give to our notion of the subconscious life, meets not only with the opposition of many specialists, but with a resistance no less stubborn in most men's intuitive sense of reality. Even such of us as allow their fancy to play with the universal, all-embracing empire of the "libido" know that, to all practical purposes, there is no such thing. The dissections of infantile love, and the awful "Œdipus complex", leave us utterly unconvinced. Freud's interpretations of dreams are no less unreal than they are clever. We feel all along that such constructions can be put, after the event, upon almost everything. Indeed, psycho-analysis may be a magic key to open the secret chambers of the heart; but the only genuine discoveries it has so far made are not properly its own; and as we shall see, the key possesses no sure, unfailling virtue in itself; it is to be carefully adapted to each lock. In that adaptation—in the attentive study of all the special elements of each case—the value of the process lies. Now that is exactly what we might expect from the old biographical method of

144 Three Studies in Criticism

approach, completed and enlarged by a sane assimilation of the most solid results of common present-day psychology.

II

PROFESSOR PRESCOTT'S study of the *poetic mind* is a very interesting attempt to turn upon his subject the general light derived from the broadest notions and central endeavor of psycho-analysis. A theory of poetry bold and original, though encouraged and guided by many previous attempts, is thus connected, at a vital point, with the most acceptable elements in the doctrine of Freud.

There is much in common between that still mysterious activity, the invention of poets, and the spontaneous exercise of the imagination, either in day-dreaming, or in the dreams of night. Our mind is then liberated from the yoke of its normally practical and purposive thought; free play is granted to the mutual affinities of images; they associate of themselves, in groups whose peculiar logic or rather habits (contiguity, resemblance, etc.) have been summarily traced. There is a resilience, an energy, in that power of relatively unlimited development; it is the psychological reality of "inspirations". An indefinite possibility of forming new associations: such is the expansive force which is at the root of the "poetic" feeling.

Now, it is a well-known fact that in all such frames of mind, when the will and the intellect have abdicated, the emotions step into their places, and carry on. Whether we are awake or sleep, they play a predominant part in guiding the free associations of images. Here it is, then, that psycho-analysis comes in. The subconscious, most often, the repressed, desires of the self, are thus brought into

Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism 145

direct contact with poetic invention. They are normally the fountain-head of its capricious course.

Professor Prescott's thesis should not be judged apart from the many illustrations and confirmations which he is able to bring forth. For our present purpose, it will be sufficient to sum up one main objection, and the answer. Exception may be taken to such a view of poetry, which seems to do away altogether with the intellectual element of inspiration. A long poem has to be planned out. Measure and proportion are to be established between the various themes. Some sort of logical sequence must be followed out. Ideas, not rarely to a high degree abstract and subtle, must be expressed. There is a philosophy at the back of all poetry; and even where it is not materially apparent, its presence and magnetism are felt. All that is true; but construction, thinking, and the labor of careful expression, belong to the artistic, not to the properly poetical part of the esthetic task. The poets who have deliberately thought out all their effects, and assigned each its relative value, may be very distinguished writers of verse; they miss the something which is the supreme grace, and indeed the essence of poetry.

Other chapters of literary criticism can be illuminated in the same way, by side-lights from some of the main doctrines of psycho-analysis. However sceptical Freud's studies of particular dreams may leave us, he has done useful work in finding names for the tricks which the subconscious genius of dreams spontaneously develops, under the stress of repression and the "censorship". Professor Prescott turns "condensation" to clever use as a fit formula for one of the principal methods in the creation of fictitious characters; "displacement" as a general mode, under which all the manners of indirect presentment or suggestion are

146 Three Studies in Criticism

implicated. Symbolic expression is thus brought into touch with the natural working of the free imagination; and the inherent symbolism of all poetry duly emphasized.

The least felicitous part of this brilliant study is probably that in which the author tries to go beyond the stage of general psychological derivation; where he gives diagrams of the subconscious activities of the poetic mind, and attempts to reduce it to a somewhat mechanical precision. The working of substitution can hardly be represented with mathematical symbols, and assume the figure of an equation.¹ Some little gain in definiteness is thus purchased at too dear a price, and a dangerously false impression may be created in the reader. No two cases are alike in the history of the mind; no two associations identical. The relation of "a" to "a" is here an abstraction. The pursuit of a binding and ever-present connection between terms through such a process is vain. The psychological cause is related to the effect in such an elastic and peculiar manner that from a given effect, a given cause cannot be traced back with certainty.

III

THAT artificial hardening and stiffening of the elements of the mind is probably responsible for the repeated failures of the psycho-analysts, when they come to deal with individual problems, and insist on interpreting particular texts. Here they adopt the dogmatic and deductive method. Each special case is subordinated to ready-made outlines, and the rulings of Freud are given as final, with the absolute trust of disciples in a prophet.

Mr. Mordell's book, *The Erotic Motive in Literature*,

¹ *The Poetic Mind*, pp. 249-250.

Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism 147

deals first with generalities, and its conclusions are so far acceptable enough; but they do not add perceptibly to our knowledge. The practical points which psycho-analysis makes most triumphantly are those which had often been made before. To demonstrate at some length that the writer, not least when he prides himself on his objectivity, is always present in his work, does not take us beyond the familiar landmarks of ordinary criticism. We need hardly be reminded that love, in literature as in life, is very generally present and active. We knew that the self-expressions of writers abounded in "consolatory mechanisms"; had not Gœthe, for instance, found out a century and a half ago that the outpouring of fictitious emotions into *Werther* was the best way to allay in his own soul the fever of real passion? How the characters of villains and traitors are created from the gentle personalities of playwrights and novelists, and how a spiritual bond of filiation can unite a Shakespeare to the most various specimens of human nature, was no longer a mystery before Mr. Mordell wrote. To trace the almost universal diffusion of morbidity in modern literature to the repression of amatory instincts in children, is at best only a half truth, and of that the romanticists had made us fully aware.

But even through those chapters we are startled by the unguarded confession of the most naïvely rigid determinism. Mr. Mordell finds it possible to affirm that the life of Dante being given, the *Divina Commedia*, with all the wealth of its unique characteristics, could be expected and was to follow as a necessary consequence. The psycho-analytic influence in a writer's self, when found—and such discoveries, from the nature of the case, are most often conjectural—is turned into an all-sufficient and all-explaining cause. The problem of W. Cowper's more than half

148 Three Studies in Criticism

diseased mind had received pretty satisfactory solutions from a knowledge of his constitution, his temper, and the upsetting circumstances of his early career; but with those explanations the psycho-analyst disdains to have anything to do; the Œdipus-complex is summoned, and at one stroke the entangled knot of character and nerves is cut: Cowper was passionately fond of his mother and the poem which he wrote "on receiving her portrait" is the key to his whole consciousness. A bolder leap into the unknown is that through which the critic takes us to the inmost core of Homer's hazy, unsubstantial personality. The dream of Achilles is the clearest self-revelation. The author of the *Iliad* here lets us into the secret of his own master-emotion, a wounded and passionate friendship. . . .

With its second part, the book more professedly tackles individual problems; and the conclusion is forced upon us, that whatever we can accept was known to us before; whilst whatever is really new we cannot accept. The romantic period, as was to be expected, furnishes practically all the illustrations: the age of the great moral revolt was that in which the deeper instincts rose to the higher regions of the soul, and the subconscious in man took the direction of many lives. We are quite willing to believe that Keats's love for Fanny Browne did lay one of the most morbid strains in the rich tissue of the *Odes*; but what profit is it to learn that the *Belle Dame sans Merci* is an "anxious dream", with all the orthodox Freudian marks of a disappointed and inverted "libido"? And how are we to take this most irritating pronouncement, that the poet's wish to fly away with his nightingale into the voluptuous annihilation of death, is nothing but the expression of an erotic desire? It is in vain that Mr. Mordell quotes chapter and verse from the prophet of psycho-analysis; it leaves us

Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism 149

unmoved to hear that according to Freud, all "flying dreams" have one and the same origin.

Worse, if possible, is to come. In the mood of Shelley's *Ode to the West Wind*, we are prepared to find the gathered and complex emotions of a poet's heart. It is a fact that Shelley, through the successive ardors of his most susceptible nature, was haunted, from the time of *Alastor*, by a bitter sense of the mutability of love.¹ But how could we bear with an attempt to show that the noble self-despair of the Ode—crossed, as it is, with the invincible surge of a final hope—is only the embittered and veiled utterance of a claim in favor of "polygamous instincts"? When he wishes to scatter, like dead leaves, "his thoughts among mankind", Shelley, we are told, is actuated by a repressed longing for the freedom of a wild, roaming love. . . . No wonder, next, that the lyric flight of the *Ode to a Skylark*, should be instinct, like Keats's *Nightingale*, with an "unconscious sexual symbolism".

Such astounding results should give us pause; and they may at least serve this end, to reveal in a condensed form the essential fallacy of psycho-analytical methods, when turned into an instrument for the dissection of personalities or texts. The error is one of exclusion and emphasis. That all the elements of consciousness are directly or indirectly interrelated, is a commonplace of psychology. All states of mind belong to an organic whole; and there is no part of that organism but enters into some sort of relation with all the others. Subtle links of resemblance, contiguity, or interpenetration can thus be found between thoughts, images, emotions, which actual experience has never brought together. Distant echoes of a psycho-physiological

¹I have tried to interpret *Alastor* from a psycho-analytical point of view, in a somewhat fuller treatment of the theme of this lecture, *Revue de Littérature Comparée*, Juillet-Septembre 1924, pp. 467-471.

150 Three Studies in Criticism

nature can be heard in the dim regions of the mind, uniting in an obscure harmony the muscular and emotional ecstasy of flying, imagined in the day-dreams of a poet, and his remembrances of the exaltation of love. There is nothing more in that organic connection than the fact of all-round interdependence, a fact which the universal reign of the so-called "sexual symbolism" well bears out. To magnify the relation into a significant and a causal one, to lend it a privileged value, and expect that it should make clearer the working of poetical genius, is confessing to a singular misconception of facts. Not only is the wealth of creative imagination and spiritual desire thus impoverished; but the esthetic appreciation of art is entirely warped. Every mistake made in the interests of science is no doubt justifiable; but the literary critic who repeatedly labors under such a delusion shows himself gratuitously a prey to an obsession usually bred by the atmosphere of mental hospitals.

IV

THOSE vagaries, and similar ones—as, for instance, Mr. Ernest Jones's audacious interpretation of *Hamlet* in the light of the Œdipus-complex—can indeed be traced to an obsession; and this is in itself significant enough to justify a few remarks.

Doubtless sexuality is closely connected in the more primitive regions of our nature, with all the entangled tendencies of man. There is no doubt as well that the higher activities of the mind spring from that same soil; and that the roots of moral enthusiasm or poetic inspiration are entwined with those of human love. There is no limit, either, to the possible affinities of psychological states. Passion, a localized focus in itself, radiates through our whole inner life.

Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism 151

An inquiry upon our being which sets itself, as its special task, to follow up those more or less distant influences and relations, needs no excuse. Psycho-analysis was to have its chance; and it is natural that the critic should turn to it, for whatever help it can afford. That help has so far proved, in most concrete applications, rather disappointing, because the zeal of a necessitarian enthusiasm, and an over-simplified discipleship, are a dangerous mood in which to investigate the complex problems of the soul.

We can easily understand how the scientific devotion to truth should have assumed that half-fanatical garb. The whole nineteenth century gave itself doggedly to a pursuit of the primitive origins of things. Not only have the depths of the past been explored with a more keen and hopeful vigor; but in the present, the rich growths of civilization have been analyzed into the humbler elements which are still part and parcel of them. Democracy, the morals of utility, and the philosophy of evolution, are various aspects of that levelling process. Psycho-analysis is to the study of the normal mind what Darwinism is to biology.

Below the superior domain of full consciousness does stretch the accumulated deposit of the untold development of the race. It is natural that in the experiences thus registered, the instincts and appetites of animality should reign practically unchecked. In calling our attention to the buried but still living roots from which the flowers of civilization and the life of the spirit have sprung, Freud and his school have enlarged our knowledge of ourselves. They have given the critic of art and literature a fuller intelligence of certain emotional reactions, cast a light on the spontaneous play of poetic fancy, and added a sharper edge to our appreciation of some effects. But modern man is before all what he is, what he wants to be, and is conscious of

152 Three Studies in Criticism

being. We are unjust to the soul that is always creating and moulding itself, unless we reckon its aspirations among the most substantial realities. It is not enough, as the psycho-analysts do, to talk of "sublimation". The primitive instincts which they discover within the highest ardors of the soul are not there present in the body, but are like shrivelled bloodless ghosts; what is radiant with the fullness of life, what is essential, is the "sublimity" that the progress of the mind has evolved, and which constitutes a new order of being.

With this order of being esthetic criticism has to do. Eagerly seized upon by over-enthusiastic disciples, the formula and phrases of psycho-analysis are dangerous, and no less in the interpretation of letters than in that of life. Their fault is not that they introduce an awkward complexity into our notion of the mind; but rather that they narrow and simplify it overmuch. What is one element among many, most often of negligible value, hardly ever predominant, is thus magnified into the all in all of motive, theme, and expression.

Sexuality is an important aspect of the subconscious; and the subconscious has its share in all the conscious activities. Whatever in art belongs chiefly to inspiration and invention cannot be studied apart from the subconscious. The critics and historians of literature must be prepared to find and gauge the influence of sexuality among the deepest forces which direct the artist in the choice of his subjects and his expressions. But in order to value properly the part played by that influence, it is indispensable that the critic should preserve an open mind, a delicate tact of the imagination and the heart, and a sense of proportion. Every case must be judged for itself; the spells and rules of a dogmatic witchcraft must be left severely alone, or used with the

Psycho-Analysis and Literary Criticism 153

utmost caution. As a guiding light, the critic should keep before him the intuitive assurance of the freedom which, rising above the imperious instincts and suggestions of animality, endows the artist with a share of sovereign power, and makes his invention a queen in the sphere of images or words.