

Polymetis Freud

Some Reflections on the Psychoanalytic Significance of Homer's *Odyssey*

Dany Nobus

Freud's "Good Books" and the Question of Homer

In 1907, the editorial board of *Neuen Blätter für Literatur und Kunst*, a Viennese journal for criticism in the arts and humanities, invited a number of renowned intellectuals, including Hermann Hesse, Arthur Schnitzler, Ernst Mach and Sigmund Freud, to compile a list of what they regarded as ten "good books". Freud's answer was most extraordinary, because all in all he mentioned more than twenty titles, whilst at the same time discarding half of these as irrelevant with regard to the question, since they concerned "most magnificent", "most significant" and "favourite" works, rather than merely "good books". Freud justified his response by pointing out that good books are "books to which one stands in rather the same relationship as to 'good' friends, to whom one owes a part of one's knowledge of life and view of the world—books which one has enjoyed oneself and gladly commends to others, but in connection with which the element of timid reverence, the feeling of

one's own smallness in the face of their greatness, is not particularly prominent" (Freud, *Contribution*, 245-246). I shall refrain from reproducing Freud's actual list of "ten good books", here, not because the "good books" lack importance—indeed, it is quite interesting to see who is featured amongst Freud's "literary friends", especially since the list is not in alphabetical order but (as we may assume) in descending order of influence—but because it is quite clear from Freud's comments that his true reverence lay elsewhere.¹ And in good psychoanalytic fashion, it is always better to focus on what appears in the margin of the message or, as Freud himself put it, "[to be accustomed] to paying attention to small signs" (Freud, *Contribution*, 245).

Instead of immediately listing his "ten good books", Freud preferred to contemplate first "the ten most magnificent works (of world literature)" (245), whereby he started with a single name rather than a specific book: Homer. Trivial as this metonymy may seem, the rhetorical figure definitely deserves some closer attention, here, partly because nowhere else in his enumeration of books did Freud identify a text as completely with its author, partly because Homer is no doubt the most elusive and paradoxical author in the entire history of Western literature. Not only his provenance remains couched in mystery, but the precise nature of his talent has puzzled and divided more researchers than anything else in the academic study of epic authorship, so much so that it has become quite common for Hellenic scholars, Classicists and Ancient historians to refer to "the Homeric question".² If there is one author in world literature whose books cannot be identified with his own act of writing, let alone displaced metonymically to a single authorial identity, it must be Homer. Whether Homer himself was able to write, and whether he himself

wrote *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, is not really the issue here. What matters is that both works derive their structure, composition and aesthetic qualities from oral epic performance. Even if Homer did write his books, he constantly drew on the musicality of the spoken word, and even if he did want his audience to read, he constantly forced his readership to listen. As Alexander Pope proclaimed in a famous phrase: “*Homer* makes us Hearers and *Virgil* leaves us Readers”.³ In mentioning Homer, rather than *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, Freud thus placed a question mark at the beginning of the most magnificent works of world literature.

If we take Freud’s list of “good books” and his aforementioned definition of “good” seriously, we can only arrive at the conclusion that “Homer” was not someone to whom the inventor of psychoanalysis owed part of his knowledge of life and view of the world. In what follows I shall argue that we must guard ourselves against interpreting this conclusion as indicative of Freud’s indifference towards the Homeric canon. If Freud could not have owed part of his knowledge of life and view of the world to Homer, at least when we take seriously his list of “good books”, then this does not by definition imply that he was in no way indebted to the poet. I shall endeavour to demonstrate that much like Sophocles’ tragedies (especially *Oedipus Rex*), Goethe’s *Faust* and Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Homer may have featured amongst the “most magnificent books” rather than the “good books”, precisely because Freud did not owe “part”, and thus “all” of his knowledge of life and view of the world to them.

Freud and the Homeric Atmosphere

Designating Homer as one of Freud's great mentors will no doubt appear to many a Freud-scholar as a hugely overstated claim. For if Sophocles, Goethe and Shakespeare are amongst the most widely quoted literati in Freud's writings, Homer seems to play less than a secondary part within his pantheon of seminal literary figures. Nowhere in his published works does Freud explicitly refer to *The Iliad*. None of his major epistolary exchanges with friends and colleagues that have hitherto been published contains a single reference to Homer's most important work. As far as *The Odyssey* is concerned, Freud's published works and letters contain no more than a few scattered comments on brief episodes in Odysseus' trajectory. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* and *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud took his lead from *Der grüne Heinrich* by the Swiss author Gottfried Keller, whose *Die Leute von Seldwyla* he considered to be a "good book" (Freud, *Contribution*, 246), to read the Nausicäa episode in Book 6 of *The Odyssey* as an accurate representation of the dream of the unhappy wanderer (Freud, *Interpretation*, 247; *Psychopathology*, 106-108). In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud also drew an analogy between the "undead", indestructible character of the unconscious dream-wishes and the ghosts in the Kingdom of the Dead (Book 11 of *The Odyssey*), which spring to life as soon as they taste the blood of Odysseus' animal sacrifice (Freud, *Interpretation*, 249, 553n.1). Reflecting on the religious and mythological status of life after death in his 1915 essay "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death", he quoted Achilles'

lament to Odysseus, also in Book 11, in order to show how the afterlife had not always been regarded as a precious, joyous experience (Freud, *Thoughts*, 294). And finally, in his paper on “The Uncanny”, he pointed out that “Homer’s ghosts” do not induce an uncanny affect in the reader, owing to the way in which the Homeric universe is laid out (Freud, *Uncanny*, 250).

Alongside Freud’s total lack of engagement with *The Iliad*, the paucity of his references to *The Odyssey*—although it really concerns only three fragments from two books—could easily be used to substantiate the claim that Homer is by no means in the same Freudian league as Sophocles, Goethe, Shakespeare and (we may add) Dostoevsky. Freud modelled the crucial psychoanalytic concept of the Oedipus complex on a hero of Sophoclean tragedy and his literary heirs in *Hamlet* and *The Brothers Karamazov* (Masson, *Complete Letters*, 272; Freud, *Interpretation*, 261-266; *Dostoevsky*, 188). Yet for all I know, the Homeric question never inspired Freud to consider the possibility of an Achilles-, Agamemnon-, Telemachus-, or Odysseus-complex. If anyone was inspired at all to extract another complex from Homer’s legacy, it was Freud’s greatest intellectual rival Carl Gustav Jung, who in 1913 introduced the “female” version of the Oedipus-complex under the name of the Electra-complex (Jung, *Theory*, 154).⁴ In keeping with the “wandering” nature of his own mind, Jung seemed to have been much more enchanted by Homer than Freud. Drawing on passages from Jung’s autobiography, Henri F. Ellenberger has reported that some time during the early 1910s, i.e. around the time of his break with Freud, Jung embarked on a four-day cruise on Lake Zurich, during which he asked his lifelong friend Albert Oeri to recite Book 11 of *The Odyssey* (“The Kingdom of the Dead”), as

the backdrop for his own journey into the unconscious (Ellenberger, *Discovery*, 670). It is Jung rather than Freud who, presumably by virtue of his familiarity with Homer's world, agreed to write a preface to a new German edition of Joyce's *Ulysses*, although the text in question was never used as such on account of Jung's profound dislike for the book, which he described as a "transcendental tape worm" (Jung, *Ulysses*, 112).

Although Freud did not write any book or paper that deals specifically with the Oedipus complex, Sophocles' tragic hero is indissolubly linked to the Freudian edifice, much like Hamlet, Faust and Dmitri Karamazov, whose creators have the added privilege of detailed psychoanalytic scrutiny in exclusive essays (Freud, *Theme; Dostoevsky*). In sharp contrast, Freud interprets neither Homer nor his works, even less (in psycho-biographical fashion) a combination of both. With the exception of the brief fragments mentioned above, Homer completely escapes Freud's psychoanalytic knife. Yet contrary to what common sense would dictate, I wish to advance the hypothesis that the absence of the Homeric question in Freud's oeuvre, or rather the fact that Freud—unlike Rank and others—managed to resist the temptation to formulate a psychoanalytic answer to it, makes Homer into an even more fundamental reference for Freudian psychoanalysis than any of the other "giants" of world literature.⁵ Had Freud ever been quizzed about his apparent failure to engage with Homer, I imagine his answer would have been very similar to that he gave, on two separate occasions, in response to questions about his ostensible omission of Spinoza. On 28 June 1931, Freud wrote to Lothar Bickel: "I confess without hesitation my dependence regarding the teachings of Spinoza. If I never cared to cite his name directly, it is

because I never drew the tenets of my thinking from the study of that author but rather from the atmosphere he created” (Freud, “Brief an Bickel”, 2). When the Spinoza-scholar Siegfried Hessing in turn questioned Freud about his indebtedness to the philosopher a year later, he conceded: “I have had, for my entire life, an extraordinary esteem for the person and for the thinking of that great philosopher. But I do not believe that attitude gives me the right to say anything publically about him, for the good reason that I would have nothing to say that has not been said by others” (Freud, “Brief an Hessing”, 670).

What could it possibly mean, then, for Freud not to draw the tenets of his thinking from the study of Homer, “but rather from the atmosphere he created”? From a letter Freud wrote to his friend Eduard Silberstein on 10 July 1873, when he was only seventeen years old, it can be inferred that he had already read *The Odyssey* or, at least, that he was familiar with the epithets Homer applies to Odysseus: using the original Greek, Freud described his chum Silberstein as “polymechanos” (of many resources) (Boehlich, *Letters*, 20). In light of the fact that Freud subsequently said to Silberstein “I would not advise you to read Homer” (23), we can also assume that *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* were not required reading for the Greek classes in the “Leopoldstädter Real- und Obergymnasium (Sperl Gymnasium)”, which both Freud and Silberstein attended, but that Freud read Homer in his spare time, either for leisurely purposes or to supplement his classroom knowledge of the Ancient world. The atmosphere Homer created appears to have enveloped Freud from an early age on, and he subsequently prided himself on his ability to remember entire passages from the poet’s work (E. Freud, *Letters*, 71).

Homer's atmosphere acquired real significance for Freud during the last decade of the nineteenth century, when he compared his own clinical "discoveries" to the sensational archaeological excavations of Heinrich Schliemann. On 28 May 1899, Freud wrote to Wilhelm Fließ: "I gave myself a present, Schliemann's *Ilios*, and greatly enjoyed the account of his childhood. The man was happy when he found Priam's treasure, because happiness comes only with the fulfilment of a childhood wish" (Masson, *Complete Letters*, 353).⁶ If Freud's choice of present may still seem rather trivial, here, it rapidly proved extraordinarily fortuitous. Writing to Fließ on 21 December 1899 about his clinical accomplishments with Mr E—his favourite patient at the time—and barely concealing his own childlike happiness, Freud revealed: "It is as if Schliemann had once more excavated Troy, which had hitherto been deemed a fable" (Masson, *Complete Letters*, 391-392).

Freud-scholars agree that Schliemann's work gave the impetus to the famous "archaeological metaphor" with which Freud intermittently explained the nature of his clinical practice, from the earliest days of psychoanalytic investigation to the very end of his intellectual itinerary.⁷ Yet if Schliemann was indeed "the man in whose life history Freud took the greatest pleasure, and whom he probably envied more than any other", as Peter Gay has claimed (Gay, *Freud*, 172), it is worth recalling some remarkable aspects of Schliemann's life and career. Although he is currently remembered as one of the greatest archaeologists of all time, Schliemann was a complete amateur whose lack of theoretical education in Ancient History and sketchy technical knowledge regarding excavation caused much controversy amongst his contemporaries, and regularly brought him into conflict with the Greek and

Turkish officials. In addition, Schliemann did not hesitate to use deception and treachery in order to get what he wanted, whether it concerned obtaining American citizenship, access to particular sites, or a decent share of the discovered treasures. Most noticeable, however, is the fact that Schliemann did not rely on any previous archaeological accounts in order to identify the most interesting places for excavation. Instead, he unearthed the remains of Troy ("Priam's Treasure", as he called it) by merely relying on a close reading of *The Iliad*, which he regarded as an accurate description of real places.⁸

If Freud envied Schliemann, to the point of identifying with him when having discovered "a scene from his [Mr E's] primal period" (Masson, *Complete Letters*, 391), he may thus have been enthralled not only by the archaeologist's successes, and the happiness they had yielded, but also by his amateurish modus operandi, his zealous pursuit of a juvenile dream and his scrupulousness in the realisation of his aims. After all, Freud was but an amateur-psychoanalyst too, whose determination to succeed no doubt also prompted him from time to time to have recourse to rather unconventional "field work" and dubious practices. Yet, above all, Freud would have been impressed by Schliemann's decision to discard all available scholarly knowledge of Hellenic society and take his bearings from a source as allegedly unreliable as Homer's poetry. Unlike most of his contemporaries in the field of archaeology, Schliemann was a reader and interpreter of Homeric verse, not with the aim of generating an interpretation of the text, but with a view to identifying and acknowledging the epic as an already existing, descriptive interpretation of real historical circumstances. Schliemann read Homer as a specific reading in its own right, which is why he could use it as a

valuable archaeological guide and why he did not engage in any lengthy exploration or interpretation of the Homeric text as such.

Although I tend to agree with Peter Gay's claim that Freud "saw himself for his part as the Schliemann of the mind" (Gay, *Freud*, 326), it is important to tease out the implications of this statement for Freud's own relationship with Homer. If Freud, much like Schliemann, did not interpret Homer, that is to say if he did not use his works as an object suitable for, or requiring any type of interpretation other than that which interprets it as an interpretation in its own right (which would indeed explain the scarcity of explicit references to Homer in Freud's oeuvre), then the crucial question emerges as to why and how Freud could have drawn on Homer as an expert guide for his own psychoanalytic "excavations" of the mind. If it may still seem too imaginative for many people to believe that *The Iliad* contains detailed and accurate representations of a historically existing society, then it would probably seem delusional to anyone that Homer's poetry could include detailed and accurate representations of the darkest recesses of the human mind. This is nonetheless what I venture to propose, and what I wish to argue with regard to Freud's position vis-à-vis Homer. Freud did not interpret Homer, because Homer was not Freud's object of study, but rather his most important guide. Freud did not tell his readers what Homer is about, because Homer told him, Freud, what he was about, concerning his position as a psychoanalyst and the direction of the psychoanalytic treatment. Freud did not interpret Homer because Homer was already an interpretation, and as an interpretation Homer guided Freud in the implementation of his amateurish psychoanalytic practice,

and the discovery and interpretation of the objects it was capable of generating.

However, I also believe that the “Schliemann of the mind” did not use the same guide, or the same part of the guide that his role-model had employed. Whereas *The Iliad* had proven its worth as a travel companion for the archaeological excavation of a buried society, Freud is more likely to have focused on *The Odyssey* as the guidebook of choice for conducting his psychoanalytic practice, and discovering the structural configurations of the unconscious psyche. In other words, if Schliemann had regarded *The Iliad* as a poetic text replete with clues concerning the location and social organisation of a forgotten world, Freud would have been more enthralled by *The Odyssey* as verses of wisdom pertaining to the nature and psychic constellation of a forgotten section of subjective experience. In this way, Freud was perhaps less the “Schliemann of the mind” than the “Finley of the mind”, insofar as it was Moses Finley who, in his hugely influential book *The World of Odysseus*, argued for the first time, yet fifteen years after Freud’s death, that *The Odyssey* depicted a real world, pervaded by the same psycho-social structures of kinship, labour and morality as other “primitive” societies.

The Odyssey as a Psychoanalytic Guide

How could *The Odyssey* serve the purpose of a general guidebook for psychoanalytic exploration? In what way could Freud have benefited from an

epic account of the vicissitudes of a homebound Achaean hero for setting up his psychoanalytic practice? Why would Odysseus, the wayward King of Ithaca, who “is somewhat of a liability as a guide” for his companions, as Lacan put it (Lacan, *Seminar I*, 240), be a better guide for Freud? The trivial answer, which Jung also seems to have intimated when he decided to undertake his four-day trip on Lake Zurich, is that a psychoanalytic process, when conducted well, invites analysands to embark on their own personal odyssey—a long circuitous itinerary, which the English dictionaries describe as an “adventurous journey” involving many “changes of fortune” and lots of “unexpected detours”. Much like Odysseus, the analysand can be regarded as someone who is constantly driven “off course”, or halted in his journey home, as a result of peculiar decisions that were somehow made on his behalf by agencies beyond his control and for reasons he can only surmise. Much like Odysseus, the analysand may sometimes feel victorious and enthusiastic about the prospect of regaining the comfort of her familiar surroundings, and be halted in the realisation of her aims by the totally unexpected intervention of “fate”. Much like Odysseus, the analysand can escape captivity, brave the elements and find his way home, merely to discover that home is no longer what it used to be: a safe haven transformed into a pernicious sojourn, where he can only arrive and survive with a disguised identity.

However convincing the analysand may appear, here, as a latter-day Odysseus, this analogy between the contents of *The Odyssey* and the nature of the psychoanalytic process is trivial, mainly because it does not capture the specificity of psychoanalysis. Many forms of psychotherapy, including those

relying on the virtues of “spiritual self-discovery”, could no doubt be characterized as “adventurous journeys”, containing many “changes of fortune” and “unexpected detours”. The analogy is also trivial, because it does not as such explain the nature of what is taking place during the time of the journey. The problem is similar to that which is generated when Freud compares the twilight existence of the ghosts in Book 11 of *The Odyssey* to the inchoate state of unconscious wishes: if the analogy may help the reader in visualizing and concretizing an abstract theoretical principle, it does not contribute in any way to an explanation of the principle as such. It might be useful to create a simile between unconscious wishes in the mind and undead souls in the underworld for the purpose of clarification, but the rhetorical figure still does not explain why the unconscious wishes operate in this particular way.

My argument that *The Odyssey* was Freud’s principal guide for conducting his psychoanalytic practice will not rely on a simple comparison between the wandering course of Odysseus and the rambling excursions of the analysand, but on a consideration of the narrative structure and evocative scope of Homer’s epic, in light of the aims and objectives of Freudian psychoanalytic practice. Whereas the “trivial” answer to the question as to how *The Odyssey* may be important for psychoanalysis focuses on the travels and travails, the trials and tribulations of the analysand, my own (hopefully less trivial) answer will focus on the position of the analyst.

To the best of my knowledge, only one author has ever made this type of connection between *The Odyssey* and the purpose (the ethics) of Freudian psychoanalysis, as defined by the analyst’s position in the treatment. In 1932,

the famous German writer Arnold Zweig submitted a short text to the journal *Weltbühne* entitled “Odysseus Freud”. Although Zweig’s text did not contain any lengthy theoretical exposition of the title-theme, it portrayed Freud the analyst as a latter-day Odysseus, fighting against the odds, defying unexpected onslaughts and struggling with all kinds of obstacles, without ever losing confidence in his ability to bring his task to fruition. From 1927 until his death, Freud maintained a regular correspondence with Zweig, exchanging ideas on the art of writing, the practice of psychoanalysis and the escalating anti-Semitic sentiments in Austria and Germany, yet remarkably the published record of this exchange does not contain any mention of Zweig’s text.⁹ Given the fact that the paper was reprinted, shortly after its original publication, in *Psychoanalytische Bewegung* and *Almanach des Internationalen Psychoanalytischen Verlag*, two psychoanalytic periodicals published under Freud’s supervision, it is nonetheless hard to imagine that Zweig’s text escaped his attention.

Just as I would not want to designate the psychoanalytic process on the side of the analysand as an odyssey, I am quite reluctant to accept Zweig’s identification of Freud and Odysseus. Freud was not a king returning home from the battlefield and he was definitely a better guide for his companions than Odysseus ever was. If Zweig’s poetic depiction of Freud deserves to be taken seriously, it is because it conveys a mixture of (mis)fortune and determination, unpredictability and resilience, the whimsicality of fate and the resourcefulness of reason. Freud not only recognized these powers in his personal life, but he was also confronted with them in his clinical practice. Justifying his decision not to include any specific

guidelines for analytic intervention in what was supposed to be a technical, instructive paper for practising analysts, he wrote: “The extraordinary diversity of the psychical constellations concerned, the plasticity of all mental processes and the wealth of determining factors oppose any mechanization of the technique; and they bring it about that a course of action that is as a rule justified may at times prove ineffective, whilst one that is usually mistaken may once in a while lead to the desired end” (Freud, “Beginning”, 123). The significance of Zweig’s characterisation of Freud thus lies in its suggestion that *The Odyssey* and the practice of psychoanalysis, as directed by the analyst, are animated by the same forces. And this is what deserves further elaboration.

The main force permeating Freud’s theory and practice is the force of the unconscious wish (*Wunsch*), a repressed desire which continues to strive towards satisfaction yet which can only accomplish its aim in roundabout ways, by circumnavigating the obstacles of censorship, deceiving the watchful eye of the Ego or advancing in cunning disguise. Theoretically, Freud argued that unconscious wishes manage to make themselves heard and felt in dreams, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, jokes and neurotic symptoms, although rarely if ever in an immediately recognisable, overt fashion. Only through the work of analysis did he consider it possible to dismantle these phenomena with a view to revealing the underlying unconscious desire. Yet, even then, he also believed that it was impossible for psychoanalysis to access, identify and capture the unconscious desire in its entirety. As he pointed out in a famous paragraph from *The Interpretation of Dreams*:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definitive endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where this meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium. (525)

This theoretical principle prompted Freud to adopt a professional stance which would give the patient the opportunity to approximate the unconscious wish or, at the very least, to allow desire to reveal itself in a less disguised form. In essence, this professional stance itself relied on a certain desire, which can be summarized in a very simple way as a desire for the patient to speak (Lacan, *Seminar XI*, 11), without any reservations, about whatever comes up in his mind, and regardless of chronology, coherence and general consistency. As Freud stated in "On Beginning the Treatment": "What the material is with which one starts the treatment is on the whole a matter of indifference—whether it is the patient's life-history or the history of his illness or his recollections of childhood. But in any case the patient must be left to do the talking and must be free to choose at what point he shall begin" (134).

Anyone familiar with the opening lines of *The Odyssey* will immediately be struck by the similarity of Freud's statement, here, and the poet's invocation of the Muse: "Sing to me of the man, Muse, the man of twists and turns driven time and again off course, once he had plundered the hallowed heights of Troy . . . Launch out on his story, Muse, daughter of Zeus, *start from where you will*—sing for our time too" (77, italics added).

Freud may not be Odysseus, then, but his "analytic opening" is virtually a blueprint of the poet's request to the Muse: launch out on your story, where to begin is a matter of indifference, start from where you will . . . Hellenic scholars are still puzzled by the opening verses of *The Odyssey*, if only because "Epic narrative characteristically announces the point in the story at which it begins and then proceeds in chronological order to its end" (Knox, "Introduction", 10). In allowing the Muse to start at any point, *The Odyssey* contravenes this principle and consequently opens, not with the vicissitudes of Odysseus, but with the story of his son Telemachus, who sets sail in search of news of his beloved father. Remarkably, Knox and others have interpreted the first four books of *The Odyssey* (the so-called *Telemacheia*) as a purposely chosen literary device, thus reducing the poet's proposed contingency to a narrative necessity: "The reason for this startling departure from tradition is not far to seek. If the poet had begun at the beginning and observed a strict chronology, he would have been forced to interrupt the flow of his narrative as soon as he got his hero back to Ithaca, in order to explain the extremely complicated situation he would have to deal with in his home" (10). Perhaps my lack of expertise in Hellenic studies and epic poetry prevents me from appreciating the strength of this argument, but I have to admit that I find it

everything but persuasive, partly because the poet's explanation of "the extremely complicated situation" at home only covers the first chapter of the *Telemacheia*, partly because the narrative flow of *The Odyssey* is fundamentally characterised by an endless series of interruptions anyway, much like Odysseus' journey itself. As an amateur-Hellenist, I am inclined to argue that in response to the poet's invitation to start at any given point, the Muse starts with a narrative of the current situation in Ithaca, because it just happens to be at the forefront of the Muse's mind. And only very gradually, after an extensive description of the voyages of Telemachus, does the Muse "launch out" on the story of the epic hero. If I were to attempt a more provocative reading, I would say that the Muse's "decision" to start with the story of Telemachus somehow demonstrates how she herself is driven off course. In being asked to sing about the "man of twists and turns" she herself "twists and turns", thus avoiding the question in the contents of her narrative, but at once responding to it in her seemingly "arbitrary" point of departure.

The Cunning Schemes of Desire

The opening of *The Odyssey* is tantamount to the opening of a Freudian psychoanalytic process, with Freud-the-analyst in the position of Homer-the-poet. This in itself might be a good enough reason for considering *The Odyssey* as a splendid guide for the direction of the psychoanalytic treatment. Yet I believe there is more psychoanalytic value to be found beyond the

opening lines of Homer's epic. As I pointed out above, the Muse's answer to the poet in the four books of the *Telemacheia* ignores and satisfies the poet's requirements at the same time. It ignores his invocation, because instead of launching into a song about Odysseus, the Muse sings about Telemachus. Yet it also satisfies his invocation because the Muse's song indeed appears as an arbitrary point of departure, and in being "off the mark" it represents an essential feature of the hero's story—a man of twists and turns who is constantly being driven off course.

The dialectical opposition, here, between the surface and content of the Muse's message, and the intention that is operative behind this message, may serve as a poetic paradigm for the multi-layered aspect of human speech and, par excellence, for the way in which the analyst should approach the analysand's speech in the context of the psychoanalytic treatment. If an analysand may seem to "resist" the analyst's invitation to talk about something (his life-history), starting wherever he wants, he can still be regarded as accepting the invitation, on condition that the analyst distinguishes between the content of the message and the place from where it is spoken or, as Lacan put it, between the subject of the statement and the enunciating subject (Lacan, "Subversion", 287). The subject of the statement is the subject who is being represented by language in the content of the message; the enunciating subject is the subject "insofar as he is currently speaking" (287). Put differently, the subject of the statement is the subject as it appears in what is being said, whereas the enunciating subject is the subject who is actually saying it. In the Muse's response to the poet, the subject (content) of the statement at first appears as deceitful because it launches into a song about

Telemachus (rather than Odysseus), yet the enunciating (speaking) subject is still responsive to the poet's invocation because it is "off course". In not talking about Odysseus, the Muse talks about him anyway, purely by virtue of the way in which she talks about him. In not talking about Odysseus, and drifting off into another story, she is still successful in talking about what it means to be driven "off course". As such, the narrative structure of Homer's epic duplicates the wandering nature of its central character.

The convergence of *The Odyssey's* enunciating subject (the Muse who is driven "off course") and the fundamental characteristic of its hero facilitates the addition of one more point to my designation of *The Odyssey* as Freud's analytic guidebook. Whereas the subject of the statement epitomizes a form of linguistic (grammatical) representation, the enunciating subject coincides with a wish, a point of desire. It is from a certain desire that the subject starts to speak, over and above the demand that may become audible at the level of the message. In articulating thoughts, beliefs and emotions, whether in waking life or during sleep (at the level of the dream), the subject acts upon a certain desire or, to put it less voluntaristically, a desire is seeking to express itself. As Freud conceded in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, retracing this desire is the main task on the psychoanalytic agenda, although pinpointing its source is very much an asymptotic process: "dream-thoughts . . . cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought" (525). Where exactly desire has taken shape must remain unknown and so the true nature of desire itself escapes our knowledge. Its emergence and wanderings

appear to us as unfathomable and unpredictable, following a course whose beginning and end can neither be recovered nor anticipated.

If we accept this quality of human desire, then it does not require great acumen to ascertain that Odysseus is not so much a man inhabited by desire, but the personification of desire as such. Odysseus does not have any desire, for the sole reason that he *is* desire. Both in the enunciating subject of *The Odyssey* and in its hero-protagonist, Homer gave flesh to the wandering, restless, unpredictable activity of a human mental function, illustrating its indestructible force, its ostensible irrationality, its cunning disguises and its quest for fulfilment.

It suffices to look at the epithets with which the poet embellished his hero in order to recognise these characteristics of desire. The most pervasive of these epithets is no doubt “polymetis”, which expands on Odysseus’ unique attribute of “metis”. The term “metis” has attracted an enormous amount of scholarly interest, including a book-length study by two pre-eminent French Hellenists (Detienne and Vernant, *Cunning Intelligence*). The term is traditionally translated as “scheme”, yet it includes connotations of cunning, metamorphosis, fluidity and shape-shifting. The addition of “poly” to “metis” in Odysseus’ most common epithet serves to reinforce this protean quality by emphasizing the multifarious sources from which the “metis” flows and the multitude of forms with which it presents itself. In a perceptive essay on the resonances of “metis”, Laura M Slatkin has referred to Odysseus as “the ultimate man of metis”: “Odysseus the dissembler, the man who assumes many identities, is called superior in *metis* to all mortals—and is the only mortal bearer of the epithet *polumetis* in the Homeric corpus . . .” (236).

Paired with this other extraordinary attribute with which Odysseus is endowed, the infamous “*dolos*” (ruse, guile), “*metis*” allows the hero to escape the cave of Polyphemus, yet it also enables him to arrive at Ithaca in disguise, and thus to start weaving a cunning scheme in order to defeat the suitors and regain Penelope’s love and trust.

Drawing on Detienne and Vernant, Slatkin has reminded us that in natural history “*metis* is the property of such creatures as the octopus, with its polymorphy and its capacity for disguise through camouflage” (236). Drawing on Freud, I myself feel inclined to argue that in subjective history, *metis* is the property of desire, with its perennially shifting, proteiform manifestations and its inexhaustible capacity for disguise through masquerade. *The Odyssey* stages the human life of desire and the desire of human life, and this is why Odysseus can only sing his “*kleos*” (glory, fame) by virtue of “*dolos*” and “*metis*”. In order to conjure up desire, the poet (much like the analyst) must allow the Muse to start wherever she wants, for only without a rigorous prefabricated narrative, that is to say only through another cunning scheme is it be possible to elicit and follow the cunning schemes of desire. In Detienne and Vernant’s words: “The only way to get the better of a *polumetis* one is to exhibit even more *metis*” (30). This is the lesson of *The Odyssey*, and this is what makes it into the best guidebook that Freud could have wished for when designing a framework for eliciting, retracing and following the analysand’s desire. Gay’s “Schliemann of the mind” and Zweig’s “Odysseus Freud” do not do justice to the cunning schemes that the founder of psychoanalysis himself had to weave, not in order to sing his own “*kleos*”, but in order to allow the “*dolos*” and “*metis*” of the analysand to manifest themselves in the wandering

schemes of desire. If Freud was the “Schliemann of the mind”, he used the protean narrative of *The Odyssey*, as Albert Lord has called it, not in order to become “Odysseus Freud” but in order to become “polymetis Freud”, a cunning scheme of desire, woven for the cunning desires of his analysands.

Brunel University

Works Cited

Allen, Susan Heuck. *Finding the Walls of Troy: Frank Calvert and Heinrich Schliemann at Hisarlik*. Berkeley CA-London, The University of California Press, 1999.

Boehlich, Walter (ed.). *The Letters of Sigmund Freud to Eduard Silberstein 1871-1881*. Trans. Arnold J. Pomerans. Cambridge MA-London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990.

Braymer, Marjorie. *The Walls of Windy Troy: A Biography of Heinrich Schliemann*. London: Gollancz, 1972.

Detienne, Marcel and Jean-Pierre Vernant. *Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society*. Trans. Janet Lloyd. Atlantic Highlands NJ: Humanities Press, 1978.

Duchène, Hervé. *The Golden Treasures of Troy: The Dream of Heinrich Schliemann*. Trans. Jeremy Leggatt. London: Thames and Hudson, 1996.

Ellenberger, Henri F. *The Discovery of the Unconscious: The History and Evolution of Dynamic Psychiatry*. New York NY: Basic Books, 1970.

Finley, Moses I. *The World of Odysseus*. London: Pelican Books, 1977.

Freud, Ernst L. (ed.). *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*. New York NY: Harcourt, Brace & World, Inc, 1970.

Freud, Sigmund. "The Aetiology of Hysteria (1896c)." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. James Strachey. Vol. 3, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1962. 187-221.

---. "The Interpretation of Dreams (1900a)." *Standard Edition*, Vols 4/5, 1953.

---. "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1901b)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 6, 1960.

---. "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria (1905e[1901])." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 7, 1953. 1-122.

---. "Contribution to a Questionnaire on Reading (1907d)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 9, 1959. 245-47.

---. "On Beginning the Treatment (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis I) (1913c)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 12, 1958. 121-44.

---. "The Theme of the Three Caskets (1913f)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 12, 1958. 289-301.

---. "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death (1915b)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 14, 1957. 273-300.

---. "The 'Uncanny' (1919h)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 17, 1955. 217-52.

---. "The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman (1920a)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 18, 1955. 145-72.

---. "Dostoevsky and Parricide (1928b)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 21, 1961. 173-94.

---. "Civilization and its Discontents (1930a[1929])." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 21, 1961. 57-145.

---. "Female Sexuality (1931b)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 21, 1961. 221-43.

---. "Brief an Siegfried Hessing (9.7.1932) (1933f)." *Gesammelte Werke*, Ed. Anna Freud. London: Imago Publishing Company. Nachtragsband, 1987. 670.

---. "Constructions in Analysis (1937d)." *Standard Edition*, Vol. 23, 1964. 255-69.

---. "Brief an Eliezer Lothar Bickel (28.6.1931) (1975c[1931])." in Heinrich Z. Winnik. "A Long-Lost and Recently Recovered Letter of Freud." *Israel Annual of Psychiatry*, 13 (1975): 1-3.

Freud, Sigmund, and Josef Breuer. "Studies on Hysteria (1895d)." *Standard Edition*, 2, 1955.

Friedman, Joel, and Sylvia Gassel. "Odysseus: The Return of the Primal Father." *The Psychoanalytic Quarterly*. 21 (1952): 215-23.

Gay, Peter. *Freud: A Life for Our Time*. New York NY-London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1988.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997.

Jung, Carl Gustav. "The Theory of Psychoanalysis." *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Ed. Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham and Gerhard Adler. Trans. R.F.C. Hull. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Vol. 4, 1961. 83-226.

---. "Ulysses: A Monologue." *The Collected Works of C.G. Jung*. Ed. Sir Herbert Read, Michael Fordham, Gerhard Adler and William McGuire. Trans. R.F.C. Hull. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul. Vol. 15, 1971. 109-34.

Knox, Bernard. "Introduction." in Homer. *The Odyssey*. Trans. Robert Fagles. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1997. 1-64.

Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar. Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. with notes John Forrester. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

---. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1994.

---. "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious." *Ecrits: A Selection*. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York NY: W.W. Norton & Company, 2002. 281-312.

Lord, Albert B. *The Singer of Tales*, 2nd Edition. Ed. Stephen Mitchell and Gregory Nagy. Cambridge MA-London: Harvard University Press, 2000.

Masson, Jeffrey Moussaieff (Ed.). *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess 1887-1904*. Trans. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson. Cambridge MA-London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1985.

Payne, Robert. *The Gold of Troy: The Story of Heinrich Schliemann and the Buried Cities of Ancient Greece*. London: Hale, 1958.

Porter, James I. "Homer: The History of an Idea." *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*. Ed. Robert Fowler. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 324-43.

Rank, Otto. "Homer, Psychologische Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Voksepos. I." *Imago*. 5 (1917): 133-69.

Schliemann, Heinrich. *Ilios: Stadt und Land der Trojaner. Forschungen und Entdeckungen in der Troas und besonders auf der Baustelle von Troja*. Leipzig: F.A. Brockhaus, 1881.

Slatkin, Laura M. "Composition by Theme and the Metis of the Odyssey." *Reading the Odyssey: Selected Interpretive Essays*. Ed. Seth L. Schein. Princeton NJ-London: Princeton University Press, 1996: 223-37.

Wiesmann, Peter. "Kirke und Odysseus. Versuch einer Deutung." *Schweizerische Zeitschrift für Psychologie*. 4 (1945): 124-36.

Wilson, Penelope. "Homer and English Epic." *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*. Ed. Robert Fowler. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 272-86.

Winterstein, Alfred R.F. "Die Nausikaaepisode in der Odyssee." *Imago*. 6 (1920): 349-83.

Wormhoudt, Arthur. *The Muse at Length: A Psychoanalytic Study of the Odyssey*. Boston MA: Christopher, 1953.

Zweig, Arnold. "Odysseus Freud." *Weltbühne*. January 19, 1932.

---. "Odysseus Freud." *Psychoanalytische Bewegung*. 4.2 (1932): 97-99.

---. "Odysseus Freud." *Almanach des Internationalen Psychoanalytischen Verlag*. 8 (1933): 45-47.

Notes

¹ In his acclaimed biography of Freud, Peter Gay has drawn attention to the fact that Freud's choice of ten good books was "relatively safe" and less adventurous than what could perhaps be expected from a maverick miner of the human soul, who "liked to say that he was spending his life destroying illusions". (Gay, *Freud*, 166-167).

² For a historical survey of the debates concerning the identification and definition of Homer, see James I. Porter, "Homer: The History of an Idea."

³ On Pope's Homer, see for example Penelope Wilson, "Homer and English Epic."

⁴ For Freud's subsequent rejection of the "Electra-complex", see Freud, "Psychogenesis" (155n1) and "Female Sexuality" (229)

⁵ For psychoanalytic interpretations of Homer's world, see Otto Rank, "Homer", Alfred Winterstein, "Nausikaaepisode", Peter Wiessman, "Kirke", Joel Friedman and Sylvia Gassel, "Odysseus", Arthur Wormhoudt, *Muse*.

⁶ In *Ilios* Schliemann reported on all the latest discoveries in his archaeological project of excavating the ruins of Troy at the hill of Hisarlik, on the northwestern corner of contemporary Turkey (Schliemann, *Ilios*).

⁷ For the "archaeological metaphor" in Freud's work, see Freud and Breuer, *Studies* (139), Freud, "Aetiology" (192), Freud, "Fragment" (12-13), Freud, *Civilization* (69-72) and Freud, "Constructions" (259-260).

⁸ For critical assessments of Schliemann's life and work, see Robert Payne, *The Gold of Troy* (London: Hale, 1958), Marjorie Braymer, *The Walls of Windy Troy* (London: Gollancz, 1972), Hervé Duchène, *The Golden Treasures of Troy* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1996) and Susan Heuck Allen, *Finding the Walls of Troy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

⁹ It may just be the case, however, that Ernst L. Freud, the editor of the Freud-Zweig correspondence, decided to cut these passages, as he did with the "all too frequent and exaggerated eulogies" of his father (Freud, E., *Letters*, vii).