

THE THIRD ANNUAL *HISTORY AND THEORY* LECTURE¹

THE INCOMMENSURABILITY OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AND HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

This article argues that, although psychoanalysis and history have different conceptions of time and causality, there can be a productive relationship between them. Psychoanalysis can force historians to question their certainty about facts, narrative, and cause; it introduces disturbing notions about unconscious motivation and the effects of fantasy on the making of history. This was not the case with the movement for psychohistory that began in the 1970s. Then the influence of American ego-psychology on history-writing promoted the idea of compatibility between the two disciplines in ways that undercut the critical possibilities of their interaction. The work of the French historian Michel de Certeau provides theoretical insight into the uses of incommensurability, while that of Lyndal Roper demonstrates both its limits and its value for enriching historical understanding.

Keywords: psychohistory, psychoanalysis, history-writing, ego-psychology, Freudian theory, transference.

“Clio to thee, O Muse, has been vouchsafed the power to know the hearts of the gods and the ways by which things come to be.” So wrote the Roman Valerius Flaccus in the first century CE.³ In the language of Lacanian psychoanalysis, we might say that this invocation takes the Muse of History to be an (imagined) authoritative subject, she who is supposed to know. Historians become, in this reading, Clio’s analysands, pinning our hopes for enlightenment on the knowledge we presume she can impart to us. In this way, we either/both attribute to the knowledge she reveals a standing independent of us, or/and turn to her for interpretation of the facts we have at hand. In another reading, though, Clio and the historian become one, she imbuing us with her authority, we identifying with her power. We become the analysts in relation to our subjects, those for and about whom we produce knowledge; to the extent that our own subjectivity matters, it

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2. I am extremely grateful to Brady Brower, Brian Connolly, Ben Kafka, Judith Surkis, and Elizabeth Weed, whose critical suggestions pushed me beyond my own limits and made this a much better essay than it otherwise might have been. I also wish to thank Peter Loewenberg for many helpful suggestions, and Sam Moyn and Ethan Kleinberg, who invited me to give the *History and Theory* lecture.

3. Valerius Flaccus, *Argonautica* 3: 15, transl. J. H. Mozley. Loeb Classical Library, vol. 286 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). <http://www.theoi.com/Text/ValeriusFlaccus3.html> (accessed October 26, 2011).

functions in the service of imparting meaning to their lives. It is important to note here that, in psychoanalytic theory, whoever is in the analyst's position is only imagined to have authoritative knowledge. The lack of distinction between real and imagined knowledge is at the heart of the transference, the setting in which unconscious desires are allowed to emerge.

The relationship between fact and interpretation has long preoccupied the discipline of history. The issue turns on the location of authority: who knows and how do we know? It is crucial for the coherent narratives we construct that they refer to reality: events and behaviors whose occurrence we can document, even as we know they are differently interpreted at different points in time. A whole body of disciplinary rules guides the collection of evidence, its organization, and presentation, and this, in turn, is meant to confer authority. But discipline achieves only a measure of the authority it seeks precisely because interpretations are always subject to revision. Revisionist controversies periodically disrupt the established order of things, calling into question facts, interpretations, the use of evidence, and the motives of historians. The repetition of such controversies about the meanings of the past in the present creates doubt: is it the facts or the interpretations that are produced by the historian? And do the facts ground the interpretation, or is it the other way around?

Periodically, solutions are offered in the form of outside help, various theories of causality come into and out of favor (the latest is neuro or cognitive psychology—brain science as the ultimate explanation for human behavior). They occasion heated debate and then fade, some becoming part of the eclectic grab-bag of explanation, some incorporated into disciplinary common sense (or the historian's "intuition") in ways that make their provenance virtually unrecognizable, still others marking out territory for a subgroup that sets apart its members within the mainstream. Psychohistory is an example of this last possibility and the focus of this essay.

Although the influence of Freud can be found in history-writing throughout the twentieth century, the emergence of something like a movement came only in the 1970s, at least in the United States. Then, inspired by Erik Erikson's ego-psychological approach to Martin Luther⁴ and by a body of advocacy and example developed in the 1950s and 60s, historians founded journals and training institutes, and published compendia of essays to elaborate and demonstrate the importance of psychoanalysis to historical thinking.⁵ Uncovering the hidden motives for individuals' actions would offer new insight into issues that had long

4. Erik Erikson, *Young Man Luther: A Study in Psychoanalysis and History* (New York: Norton, 1962).

5. Articles and books will be mentioned later in this article. Among the journals founded were the *History of Childhood Quarterly* (1973) and the *Journal of Interdisciplinary History* (1969). In 1971, UCLA established research training fellowships, in conjunction with the Southern California Psychoanalytic Institute, for scholars with PhDs in academic fields who wanted psychoanalytic training. Those involved—Peter Loewenberg was a key figure—managed to win repeal of a California law in 1977 that had prohibited the practice of psychoanalysis by anyone other than a certified psychologist. This training program still exists today. For a full account, see Peter Loewenberg, "Psychoanalytic Research Training: A California Success Story," *American Psychoanalyst* 27, no. 2 (1973), 11-12.

perplexed the field; “the dead do not ask to be cured,” Frank Manuel commented, “only to be understood.”⁶

Manuel, not a psychohistorian himself, talked about psychoanalysis as “a historical instrumentality.” William Langer suggested, in 1957, that psychoanalysis become part of the “equipment” of young historians.⁷ A generation later, Peter Loewenberg, who played a key role in establishing the institutions as well as the scholarship of the subfield, wrote of the way in which analysis sensitized the historian to his own unconscious investments as well as to those that inhered in material from the past.⁸ What all of these examples share is the idea that history can usefully appropriate psychoanalytic authority for its own ends.

That is surely one way to think about interdisciplinarity—as the importation of useful concepts into an existing field, expanding its scope, augmenting the stock of its explanatory arsenal. But there is another way, as well, one that looks to the encounter as disruptive and ultimately unreconcilable. Elizabeth Wilson (speaking of neuroscience and psychoanalysis) refers to the productive qualities of “incommensurability.”

If a theory of the unconscious is unruly, at its core and necessarily so, this will make efforts to synthesize psychoanalysis with other kinds of epistemological projects difficult; for it will demand from any prospective partner a high degree of tolerance for disjunction, overdetermination and displacement, and a waning interest in consilience as an epistemological goal. These difficulties strike me as uniquely productive: when methodologically disparate, perhaps antagonistic, domains are brought into a relation of mutuality, this is often when interdisciplinarity is most acute, most unstable and most promising. This kind of interdisciplinarity procreates not through conventional plots of compatibility but through the logic of incommensurability.⁹

I want to argue that, by endorsing the “plot of compatibility,” psychohistory, as developed in the United States, tended to reaffirm the discipline of history’s concept of itself. A more critical approach, one exemplified in the work of the French historian and Lacanian analyst Michel de Certeau, used psychoanalysis to pose a challenge to history’s conventional self-representation.

When I say a challenge to history’s concept of itself, I don’t mean the things that historians who scorn psychoanalysis rail against: that abstract “psychological theory” is being substituted for solid “documentary proof”; that reliable evidence cannot be produced to document unconscious motivation; that “Freudian

6. Frank Manuel, “The Use and Abuse of Psychology in History,” *Daedalus* (Winter 1971), 209.

7. William L. Langer, “The Next Assignment,” *American Historical Review* 63, no. 2 (January 1958), 283.

8. Peter Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach* (New York: Knopf, 1983). See especially 3-8.

9. Elizabeth Wilson, “Another Neurological Scene,” *History of the Present* 1, no. 2 (2011), 156. Writing in 1977, literary scholar Shoshana Felman argued that the traditional method of applying psychoanalysis to literary study was a mistake. She offered instead the notion of “implication,” something similar to the idea of incommensurability proposed by Wilson. “[T]he interpreter’s role would here be not to *apply* to the text an acquired science, a preconceived knowledge, but to act as a go-between, to *generate implications* between literature and psychoanalysis—to explore, bring to light and articulate the various (indirect) ways in which the two domains do indeed *implicate each other*, each one finding itself enlightened, informed, but also affected, displaced, by the other.” Shoshana Felman, “Literature and Psychoanalysis: The Question of Reading: Otherwise,” *Yale French Studies* 55/56 (1977), 8-9. Wilson cites others, among them Eve Sedgwick, who have made similar suggestions.

biological determinism” is a poor explanatory substitute for rational calculations based on economic interest; that a focus on passion feeds the anti-intellectualism of the general population; that psychoanalysis was developed to treat individual neurotics and so cannot offer insight into collective action; that Freudian theory is a product of Western modernity and so cannot be used to think about other cultures and other times; and that the reason of historical actors deserves respect.¹⁰ A particularly outraged reaction on that last point came in the pages of *History and Theory* from Gerald Izenberg in 1975:

Intellectual historians often deal with complex and sophisticated systems of ideas which are carefully thought through and intellectually well defended. What right does the historian have to dismiss or denigrate the importance of the intellectual processes by which historical thinkers have arrived at their beliefs and refer instead to unconscious impulses, phantasies, defenses, or conflicts in order to explain them?¹¹

Figuring the unconscious as a threat to reason (its denigration or outright erasure) is characteristic of historians’ resistance to psychoanalytic thinking and has played an undeniably powerful role in curbing its influence. Yet these objections seem to me predictable, almost banal, a displacement of more disturbing worries. The critical challenge of psychoanalysis lies elsewhere, in the way it can be understood to conceive of history itself.

From one perspective, history and psychoanalysis have some things in common, but these similarities mask their different epistemological approaches. Like psychoanalysis, the discipline of history acknowledges that facts are in some sense produced through interpretation, but each understands this production to take place differently. Historians refer to a rational interpretive process that attributes different meanings to established facts, depending on the context or framework within which a scholar works. In contrast, Freud used the term *nachträglichkeit* (“deferred action”) to indicate the way in which events acquired significance through revision, “rearrangement in accordance with fresh circumstances . . . a re-transcription.”¹² As he wrestled with the timing of the primal scene in the Wolf Man case, Freud insisted on “the part played by phantasies in symptom-formation and also the ‘retrospective phantasying’ of later impressions into childhood and their sexualization after the event.”¹³ Although he concluded that the obsessional neurosis of his patient must have originated when he witnessed his parents’ coitus, there was no way finally to establish that fact. Freud acknowledged the difficulty of attributing the dream of a four-year-old

10. Examples of these views are: Edward Saveth, “Historians and the Freudian Approach to History,” *New York Times Book Review* (January 1, 1956); Richard L. Schoenwald, “The Historian and the Challenge of Freud,” *Western Humanities Review* 10 (1956), 99-108; Philip Pomper, “Problems of a Naturalistic Psychohistory,” *History and Theory* 12 (1973), 367-388; Merle Curti, “Intellectuals and Other People,” *American Historical Review* 60, no. 2 (January 1955), 260-281; William Reddy, “Against Constructionism: The Historical Ethnography of Emotions,” *Current Anthropology* 38, no. 3 (June 1997), 327-351.

11. Gerald Izenberg, “Psychohistory and Intellectual History,” *History and Theory* 14 (1975), 140.

12. Cited in J. Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, transl. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Norton, 1973), 112.

13. Sigmund Freud, “The History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (The Standard Edition), transl. and ed. James Strachey. 24 vols. (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1976), XVII, 103.

boy, recalled by a grown man undergoing analysis some twenty years later, to a trauma experienced by a one-and-a-half-year-old child. But finally he dismissed the effort at precision as beside the point: "It is also a matter of indifference in this connection whether we choose to regard it as a primal *scene* or a primal *phantasy*."¹⁴ Events are not the starting point of the analysis, but are deduced from their effects. As Certeau puts it, "Analysis establishes history by virtue of a relation among successive manifestations."¹⁵ Historians, in contrast, replace one set of interpretations (of facts or events) with another.¹⁶

If historians assume that the linear narratives they create capture the past's relationship to the present (and, in some cases, the present's to the past), psychoanalysts take the transference to operate in more than one temporal register. There is the time of the analysis and the times remembered in analysis, and these don't add up to a single chronology. Brady Brower puts it this way: "Within the practical time of the analysis, the analysand's speech designated a second temporality, one that made it possible for the analyst's speech to be attributed a role with little or no correspondence to his actual personal characteristics or his formal capacities as an analyst."¹⁷ Unlike the historian who makes an object (an other) of the denizens of the past, the analyst refuses objectification, seeking instead to bring the analysand to recognition of the unconscious agency—the condition and limits—of his or her own subjectivity. It is not, as some have noted, that for Freud, the past always haunts the present, but that the objective times of past and present are confused, often indistinguishable. The point is that time is a complex creation, a constructed dimension of subjectivity, not a chronological given. Freudian theory is skeptical of the evolutionary chronology that shapes professional historians' presentations, instead attending to the role repression or nostalgia play in the construction of memory, and to the interruptions and discontinuities that characterize the necessarily uneven and often chaotic interactions of past and present in the psyche.

Above all, though, it is the unconscious that knows neither time nor contradiction that distinguishes the psychoanalytic version of history from that of the disciplined historian. Not because it denies the operations of reason, but because it influences them in unpredictable ways, defying reliable or systematic explanation. Indeed, reason itself is read as the outcome, at least in part, of its engagement with what Wilson refers to as the "unruly" unconscious. Reason and unconscious are thus not diametrically opposed in Freudian theory, as Izenberg's complaint insists, but are taken to be interacting, inseparable facets of thought.

14. *Ibid.*, 120.

15. Michel de Certeau, *The Writing of History*, transl. Tom Conley (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 303. It is noteworthy that Certeau was largely neglected by American psychohistorians as well as by those historians who turned to post-structuralism in the 1980s and 90s in the writings of Foucault, Derrida, and even Lacan (a primary influence on Certeau).

16. This is how Philip Rieff put it: "If for Marx the past is pregnant with the future, with the proletariat as the midwife of history, for Freud the future is pregnant with the past, with the psychoanalyst as the abortionist of history." Philip Rieff, "The Meaning of History and Religion in Freud's Thought," *Journal of Religion* 31, no. 1 (April 1951), 114-131, reprinted in *Psychoanalysis and History*, ed. Bruce Mazlish (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1971), 23-44. Citation is on 28.

17. M. Brady Brower, "Science, Seduction, and the Lure of Reality in Third Republic France," *History of the Present* 1, no. 2 (2011), 172.

On the question of time and causality, subject and object there is thus an incompatibility between psychoanalysis and history. Certeau captures the disparity: "Now I must ask: what disturbing uncanniness does Freudian writing trace within the historian's territory, where it enters dancing? Reciprocally, in what fashion will my question, born of an archival and scriptural labor that cultivates this territory, and seduced by the fiction of psychoanalytical history, be enlightened/distorted through Freud's analysis?"¹⁸ For Certeau the seductive dance of Freudian analysis necessarily distorts even as it sheds new light on the territory of the historian. He designates writing as "fiction" in the sense both of fabrication and deception. The Freudian "dance" is counterposed to the historians' "labor"; "dance" refers to the multiple and mobile forms taken by imaginative representation, whereas "labor" stresses the imposition of order on the materiality of archives and their transcription. Historical writing, he says, is the unconscious or unacknowledged way of working through the historian's relationship to death, at once erasing it by resurrecting the past and avowing it through its very erasure. For Certeau the crucial term is "uncanniness"—psychoanalysis brings back something once familiar, but now estranged through the operations of distance and repression. The "uncanny" refers to that which historians know but must deny: "Historiography tends to prove that the site of its production can encompass the past: it is an odd procedure that posits death, a breakage everywhere reiterated in discourse, and that yet denies loss by appropriating to the present the privilege of recapitulating the past as a form of knowledge. A labor of death and a labor against death."¹⁹

It is the clash, not the compatibility, of the two different concepts of history, that proves productive for Certeau. "[T]he interdisciplinarity we look toward would attempt to apprehend epistemological constellations as they reciprocally provide themselves with a new delimitation of their objects and a new status for their procedures."²⁰ Any other approach simply reproduces, with new terminology, history's conventional self-representations.

I suggest that—at least in the United States—psychohistory has, for the most part, selected aspects of psychoanalytic theory that are least challenging to history's epistemology and so have constructed "conventional plots of compatibility." In contrast, Certeau and some others illustrate the critical possibilities that inhere in a relationship of incommensurability.

INSTRUMENTALIZATION

The designation of the subfield as "psychohistory" suggests, if not a marriage, then a certain mutuality. Psychohistorians made the case for compatibility by instrumentalizing psychoanalysis, conceived as equipment or tools for approaching the past. These tools were diagnostic labels and developmental narratives that comported comfortably with established historical chronologies.

Diagnostic categories proved useful for introducing new arguments about causality. There was, for example, Preserved Smith's 1913 article on Martin

18. Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 309.

19. *Ibid.*, 5.

20. *Ibid.*, 291.

Luther, which anticipated by nearly half a century Erik Erikson's monumental study of the Protestant reformer. Smith published "Luther's Early Development in the Light of Psycho-Analysis" in the *American Journal of Psychology*. Citing Freud, Otto Rank, Ernest Jones, and William James, among others, Smith probed Luther's life for intimate expression and found him to be "a thoroughly typical example of the neurotic, quasi-hysterical sequence of an infantile sex-complex; so much so, indeed, that Sigismund [sic] Freud and his school could hardly have found a better example to illustrate the sounder part of their theory than him."²¹ Smith turned to psychoanalysis, he said, for greater understanding of Luther's spirituality. "Far more than we realize or like to admit," he wrote, "our highest impulses of love, religion, and morality are rooted in physical, even in pathological conditions. If the branches of the tree reach toward heaven, its roots strike deep into the dark bowels of the earth."²²

Smith wrote as a secular thinker, deeply committed to science. Having studied for his PhD (1907) in history with James Harvey Robinson at Columbia, Smith believed in "science and the idea that knowledge of history was a way to improve human prospects for the future." In his essay on Luther the science of Freudian analysis becomes a tool of secularity in its struggle against religion, reducing religious belief to sexual fantasies shaped in early childhood.²³

Diagnostic labels were used, too, to probe the effects of historical events on psychic experience. William Langer's presidential address to the American Historical Association in 1957 is an example of this approach. Langer was a European diplomatic historian, so his field made his words doubly surprising. Entitled, "The Next Assignment," the speech called for historians to deepen their historical understanding "through exploitation of the concepts and findings of modern psychology."²⁴ Langer went on to suggest that "some of our own younger men" ought to undergo psychoanalytic training as a way of broadening their scholarly "equipment."²⁵ He pointed to Freud's work on Leonardo da Vinci as an example of how biography could be illuminated by psychoanalytic concepts, and he took the Black Death of 1348–49 as an illustration of the way psychoanalysis might be used to think about collective (cultural or social) states of mind. The historical experience of mass death could be illuminated, he said, by Freudian concepts of trauma and survivor guilt, which, in individual cases, pointed back to "the curbing and repression of sexual and aggressive drives in childhood and the emergence of death wishes directed against the parents." There was reason to believe that when disaster and death threatened an entire community, these same

21. Preserved Smith, "Luther's Early Development in the Light of Psycho-Analysis," *American Journal of Psychology* 24 (1913), 362.

22. *Ibid.*, 361.

23. Smith's work probably served another end as well, the vindication of his father, biblical scholar Henry Preserved Smith (1847–1927). Henry was tried for heresy by the Presbytery of Cincinnati in 1892 for teaching that there were errors in the books of Chronicles. The son's attack on religion as rooted in "the dark bowels of the earth" was in effect a denial of the independent force of religious spirituality, the reduction of it to psychic pathology—perhaps a way of avenging his father's suffering. For a recent rereading of Luther, see Lyndal Roper, "Martin Luther's Body: The 'Stout Doctor' and his Biographers," *American Historical Review* 115, no. 2 (April 2010), 351–384.

24. Langer, "The Next Assignment," 283.

25. *Ibid.*, 303.

forces could engender “a mass emotional disturbance, based on a feeling of helpless exposure, disorientation, and common guilt.”²⁶

Seeking to explain what many of Langer’s dismayed colleagues took to be a mad moment in the life of a distinguished historian (his Harvard colleagues wondered if he’d lost his mind; Princeton historians thought him “a strange man lacking in common sense”),²⁷ Peter Loewenberg offered a diagnosis of his own. Loewenberg, whose practice of psychohistory came into its own in the 1970s and for whom Langer was a prescient forefather, offered an explanation of the AHA president’s apparently perplexing turn in a 1980 essay. In it, Loewenberg acknowledged the more obvious explanations for Langer’s interest in psychoanalysis: his role in wartime intelligence at the Office of Strategic Services and then in the CIA, where researchers were developing psychological profiles of Soviet politicians and others to advance Cold War objectives. Langer also had a younger brother who was a psychiatrist and who had provided the OSS with expert diagnoses of Hitler’s character. Given these experiences, it made sense to think about equipping historians with methods that could help serve the nation’s policy objectives. But Loewenberg took these reasons to be “superficial,”²⁸ and he provided instead a compelling reading (based on both Langer brothers’ memoirs) of the unconscious motives at work in William Langer’s speech. These included the early loss of his father associated with “a vague childhood recollection of hearing about the assassination of President McKinley in 1901” and memory traces of the “intense grief, anxiety and panic of his [fatherless] childhood home.”²⁹ Such unconscious influences, Loewenberg suggested, led the historian of modern Europe to choose catastrophic death in the Middle Ages as his example. As for the turn to psychoanalysis itself, Loewenberg revealed that Langer had developed a “crippling” neurotic symptom, a phobia about speaking in public, which analysis with Hanns Sachs helped him manage but not cure. Loewenberg understood Langer’s “stage-fright” in terms of a dynamic in which shame is erected as a defense against “exhibitionist impulses” driven by ambition and competitiveness.³⁰ He took Langer’s appreciation for psychoanalysis to be a recognition of the role of the unconscious in human behavior—and more: “Would that we may have the freshness of mind and the personal insight to apply creatively our neuroses and personal misfortune to new perspectives and innovations in research method as he did.”³¹ The diagnostic tool is doubly applied here as Langer’s own preoccupation with death becomes the occasion for his insight into the medieval emotional response to a massive epidemic. Psychoanalysis is both cause and effect; as the title of the article asserts, psychobiography is the “background” to psychohistory.

Langer’s address to the AHA elicited enormous disapproval among orthodox disciplinarians, but it did not come out of the blue. In the 1950s, as he wrote, psy-

26. *Ibid.*, 299.

27. The Harvard story was told to me by a then-grad student there; the Princeton story is cited in Peter Loewenberg, “The Psychobiographical Background to Psychohistory: The Langer Family and the Dynamics of Shame and Success,” in Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past: The Psychohistorical Approach* (New York: Knopf, 1983), 81.

28. *Ibid.*, 83.

29. *Ibid.*, 82-83.

30. *Ibid.*, 87.

31. *Ibid.*, 94.

choanalysis was very much in the air.³² Though much of the theoretical discussion was located outside of the discipline, in sociology and anthropology particularly, historians were not immune to the possibilities of Freudian analysis. The argument that attention to the psyche could illuminate human behavior became increasingly attractive in the 1940s as scholars tried to explain the rise of Nazism in Germany and the appeal of communism, and then extended their investigations to other historical instances. As was the case with Langer's analysis of the effects of the Black Death, these accounts tended to focus on cases considered excessive or pathological, examples of extraordinary aggression, overreaction, or seemingly irrational politics. Thus Richard Hofstadter explained the American conquest of Cuba and the Philippines in terms of a national psychic crisis. And, turning to political groups he called "pseudo-conservative" (using Adorno's term), he wrote of their "paranoid style." "Of course, the term 'paranoid style' is pejorative, and it is meant to be; the paranoid style has a greater affinity for bad causes than good. But nothing entirely prevents a sound program or a sound issue from being advocated in the paranoid style."³³ Despite this qualification, the power of the argument rested on the light the diagnostic label could shed on "bad causes." In a similar vein, seeking to explain the appeal of Hitler to Nazi youth, Loewenberg suggested that the attraction of young Germans to the demagogue could at least in part be explained by the extreme deprivation they had suffered after World War I: food shortages had a dramatic impact on maternal lactation; fathers were killed or maimed in the war; military defeat undermined belief in national values. This led to identification with a distant, idealized father-figure who promised not only economic but moral and psychological salvation.³⁴

Of course, not all psychoanalytic readings of history sought to diagnose pathology; some wanted to shed light on the idiosyncratic, or on the private lives and hidden motives of public figures (Luther, Gandhi, Woodrow Wilson, Thomas Jefferson, Benjamin Franklin, Kaiser Wilhelm, Henry VIII, Freud himself). Other work extended insights about individuals to groups, locating the psychic bases for social cohesion in Oedipal struggles, rituals of mourning, displacements of aggression, and the like. These studies are surely important, for they provide new and often neglected causal factors to consider, but they do little to disrupt the temporal logic of disciplined history, to question the present's relationship to the

32. A very small sampling of the preoccupation with psychology and psychoanalysis in relation to history in the 1940s and 1950s includes: Goodwin Watson, "Clio and Psyche: Some Interrelations of Psychology and History"; and Franz Alexander, "Psychology and the Interpretation of Historical Events," both in *The Cultural Approach to History*, ed. Caroline Ware (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940); Sidney Ratner, "The Historian's Approach to Psychology," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 2, no. 1 (January 1941), 95-109; Clyde Kluckhohn, "Politics, History, and Psychology," *World Politics* 8, no. 1 (1955), 102-119; Carl Schorske, "A New Look at the Nazi Movement," *World Politics* 9, no. 1 (1956), 88-97; Harold Laswell, "Impact of Psychoanalytic Thinking on the Social Sciences," in *The State of the Social Sciences*, ed. Leonard D. White (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1956), 84-115; Hans Meyerhoff, "On Psychoanalysis as History," *Psychoanalytic Review* 49B (1962), 3-20.

33. Richard Hofstadter, *The Paranoid Style in American Politics and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1964), 5. See also his *Anti-Intellectualism in American Life*. (New York: Knopf, 1966).

34. Peter Loewenberg, "The Psychohistorical Origins of the Nazi Youth Cohort," in Loewenberg, *Decoding the Past*, 240-283.

past, or historians' attraction for their subject(s). Indeed, with diagnostic categories, historians act not as subjects "supposed to know," but as those who *do* know, whose authority is vested in their ability to deploy psychoanalytic terminology.

Diagnostic categories usually referred to developmental narratives, chronological stages from infancy to adulthood. For example, when Loewenberg interpreted the effects of childhood deprivation on German youth, he followed, he said, Freud's account of "the phase-specific psychosexual development of the child . . . the traumas of the oral phase, of separation-individuation from the mother, the struggles with aggression and control that constitute the anal phase, the oedipal conflict, the latency years of grade-school political socialization, to the crisis of adolescence that precedes adulthood."³⁵ John Demos, locating Puritan personality traits in the child-rearing practices of these early Americans, invoked Erikson's adaptation of this Freudian model according to which there were "eight stages of man." Having studied the treatment of infants and young children in these terms, Demos concluded: "It is tempting, indeed, to regard Puritan religious belief as a kind of screen on which all of their innermost concerns—autonomy, shame, doubt, anger—were projected with a very special clarity."³⁶ The seeming compatibility between psychoanalysis and history rested, in part at least, on the familiarity of chronology. Despite the differences in the narratives, there was coherence, a logic of succession from past to present, "a long and continuing sequence of growth and change."³⁷ The adult was foreshadowed by the child, as the present was the outcome of the past.

The move from individual to collective psychology always involved analogy: individuals shared a developmental narrative that resulted in common traits within a specific cultural/historical context. It was already evident in Freud's writing (*Group Psychology* and *Totem and Taboo*.) In *Moses and Monotheism* he wrote of tradition—the culturally or socially transmitted legacy of a people—as "equivalent to repressed material in the mental life of the individual."³⁸ This analogical reasoning was extended by anthropologists, psychologists, and others associated with the "culture and personality" school in the 1950s and 60s (among them Abram Kardiner, Margaret Mead, Clyde Kluckhohn, Erik Erikson, and Theodor Adorno), who directly influenced historians like Demos. Here the attempt was to think about personality in its social and cultural contexts and to collectivize individual trajectories as theorized by Freud. Taking into account the diversity of individuals in any society, Kardiner, for example, proposed a "modal personality," defined as "that constellation of personality characteristics which would appear to be congenial with the total range of institutions comprised within a given culture."³⁹ The emphasis was on institutions (the family, the school, religion, law—topics familiar to historians and increasingly so as social history

35. *Ibid.*, 267-268.

36. John Demos, "Developmental Perspectives on the History of Childhood," in *Varieties of Psychohistory*, ed. George M. Kren and Leon H. Rappoport (New York: Springer Publishing Co., 1976), 188. Here, as in the case of Preserved Smith, there is a secular impulse informing the turn to psychoanalysis, taking religion not as a credible system of belief, but locating it in a deeper, irrational psychic cause.

37. *Ibid.*

38. Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, in *The Standard Edition*, XXIII.

39. Cited in Demos, "Developmental Perspectives," 182.

assumed predominance in the 1970s and 80s) that shaped behavioral characteristics—what would later become “cultural construction,” with attention moved from psychodynamics to regulatory norms. The assumption was that individuals identified with the social representations offered them; so, for example, women and men were said to internalize the prevailing gender system, realizing in their lives the idealized images of their cultures. Changes in the culture led to changes in personality. The process of internalization depended, if only implicitly, on the narrative of individual psychological development. This focus on “modal personality” as a reflection of cultural institutions had a deeply normative aspect to it; difference was either ignored or diagnosed (according to Freudian categories) as deviation or pathology.⁴⁰ The appeal to historians had to do with the cultural side of things; attention to the psychological consequences of institutional change did little to disrupt the frame within which they already operated. As Frank Manuel put it, the future use of psychology for history lay in its ability to address the question of “what change signified on an unconscious psychic level.”⁴¹

Manuel wrote in 1971 in a special issue of *Daedalus* devoted to a survey of historical studies. His piece, gesturing to Nietzsche, was called “The Use and Abuse of Psychology in History.” Like Preserved Smith’s invocation of the deep “dark bowels of the earth,” it emphasized the need to glance “below the navel,”⁴² to get at the sexual side of human motivation:

Few historians have yet coped with the intricacies of presenting to their readers the varying patterns of libidinal satisfaction in different epochs. . . . The history of fashion, clothes, sexual and marital custom, punishments, style, and a hundred other questions which have traditionally belonged to *la petite histoire* and the antiquarians need to be explored for their symbolic content. Freud’s second most important legacy to a historian may well be the dissolution of a hierarchy of values among historical materials. If all things can become vehicles of expression for feelings and thoughts, then the state document, grand philosophical affirmation, and scientific law may lose some of their prestige to other more intimate records of human experience. The day of Dilthey’s elitist psychological history is over. Conversely, classical psychoanalysis, with a dubious future as a therapy, might be reborn as a historical instrumentality.⁴³

There are several interesting aspects about this comment, the first the imperial gesture—the subordination of psychoanalysis as a “historical instrumentality.” The second, even more telling, is that, in the 1970s and 80s, social historians stripped the erotic dimension from the topics Manuel set out—the family, childhood, emotions, sexual custom, and punishment—and invested them instead with concepts of power, politics, and social reproduction.⁴⁴

40. Given the normative disposition of so much of psychohistory, it is ironic that those who attacked it found that it threatened notions of the normative or normal. Hence Izenberg insisted that attention to the rational was the object of historical investigation because rationality was defined by its acceptance of cultural norms. It was only irrational actions (by those few who refused such norms), he said, that called for inquiry into “unconscious motives and intentions.” Izenberg, “Psychohistory and Intellectual History,” 146-147.

41. Manuel, “Use and Abuse,” 196.

42. *Ibid.*, 192.

43. *Ibid.*, 209.

44. Lynn Hunt in “Psychoanalysis, the Self, and Historical Interpretation,” *Common Knowledge* 6 (1997), 10-19, noted the connection: “The effacement of the psychological . . . seems paradoxically connected to the rise of social history.” I would argue that there was nothing paradoxical about it. In

The reasons for this are many, and I don't have the space here to discuss them all. The key points have to do first with social history's focus on power, whereas psychohistory had a more normative approach. And second, with psychohistory's turn away from sex and sexuality, another of the factors that assured its compatibility with conventional history. Even as Manuel wrote about the need to look "below the navel," attention was already focused on the upper regions. The influence of ego-psychology is particularly important here and can be traced in a series of studies issued by the Social Science Research Council in 1946 and again in 1954. The 1954 bulletin was called "The Social Sciences in Historical Study," and its various sections (on political science, economics, sociology, anthropology, and psychology) were based on memoranda submitted by members of those disciplines (Clyde Kluckhohn and Alfred Kroeber for anthropology; Gardner Murphy and M. Brewster Smith for social psychology).

The section on social psychology provided a rundown of various approaches to the field (behaviorism, Gestalt, psychoanalysis), emphasizing the importance of Freud's discoveries for a "theory of motivation" and the non-rational components of human behavior. It stressed the influences of culture ("the impact of society") on individuals, and the importance of group experience (shared symbol systems, beliefs and expectations of others' actions) in the formation of personality. It also provided a kind of theory of social change, though it was one that would make it hard to account for revolutionary upheaval or major epistemic shifts: "Each person assimilates culture in his own idiosyncratic version—so he contributes to change even as he sustains continuity."⁴⁵ The emphasis on the formative role of culture diminished the side of Freud that was so appealing to Preserved Smith—the sexual fantasies of children and their unconscious influence on adult behavior—even as it stressed the need to study family influences and methods of child rearing.⁴⁶

Neo-Freudians like Karen Horney and Erich Fromm have rejected the biological assumptions of libido theory (the dominant importance of the sexual drive and its assumed transformations) and have attempted to assimilate into psychoanalysis the theories of sociology and cultural anthropology regarding the cultural and social determination of many factors Freud believed to be biologically ordained. . . . Recent developments in "ego-psychology" have shifted the emphasis from the realm of irrational urge and wish (the id) to that of the constructive operations of personality in mediating between wish and outer reality (the ego).⁴⁷

There were, in this period and in the decades that followed, any number of experiments by historians using various kinds of psychoanalytic approaches. There were also notable attempts—by philosopher Herbert Marcuse, classicist

the article, Hunt suggests that the incompatibility between psychoanalysis and history has to do with an opposition between the universalist and scientific emphasis of psychoanalysis and the historians' preference for contextual social explanation. She calls for a "historicization of the self," as if that were not the project of psychoanalysis, when it seems to me to be at the heart of its theoretical and practical work.

45. Social Science Research Council, *The Social Sciences in Historical Study* (New York: SSRC (1954), 64.

46. *Ibid.*, 65.

47. *Ibid.*, 62-63.

Norman O. Brown, political scientist Michael Rogin, and others outside of the discipline—to bring psychoanalysis, especially theories of the unconscious, to bear on history.⁴⁸ But among psychohistorians the approach associated with ego-psychology seems to have predominated.

Assuming that sexuality was “biologically ordained” placed it on the side of the immutable and irrational (outside history’s domain), whereas rational human action was on the side of the social and the cultural (the province of history). A good example is H. Stuart Hughes’s 1961 lecture on history and psychoanalysis presented to a psychiatric training group at Beth Israel Hospital in Boston (thus an accounting to psychiatrists of historians’ ambivalence about and attraction to their work). It is instructive for what it emphasizes and leaves out. Hughes rejected the utility of a “one-to-one relationship between the causality of a childhood event and later behavior,” preferring instead to focus on adolescence and early manhood.⁴⁹ This was Erikson’s approach, he said, and was “far more congenial to the historian’s mind than the earlier (and almost exclusive) stress on the first six or seven years of life. Almost by definition, history prefers to deal with epochs of full consciousness, whether in the evolution of peoples or in the career of an individual.”⁵⁰ The link between individuals and groups, Hughes observed, lay in shared “emotional affinities.”⁵¹ What is striking about the piece is, first, its rejection of one of the fundamental premises of Freud’s theory, that early childhood experiences are not objectively distinct from what comes later, but are constantly revisited and revised in dreams, fantasies, and memories; the past is not only returned to, but reimagined in subsequent contexts so that “later behavior” cannot be understood without its complex relation to a regularly reimagined past. No linear narrative can capture these workings of the mind. Second is its omission of any discussion of the unconscious and its links with sex and sexuality. Eliminating early childhood meant effectively ruling out infantile sexuality and, with it, the conundrum of sexual difference that young children face. The elimination of sexual difference—that original psychic incommensurability—effectively foreclosed acknowledgment of incommensurability *tout court*, including that of history and psychoanalysis. Hughes referred, oddly, to an individual’s “spiritual biography,” which somehow meant conscious self-creation, and he repeated several times that “individual consciousness” was the “bedrock” both of psychoanalytic and historical knowledge.

The de-emphasis on sex and sexuality (the preference for the ego over the id) and the emphasis on social and cultural factors reproduced the binaries that traditional historians used to refuse psychoanalysis: sex vs. reason; heart vs.

48. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955); Norman O. Brown, *Life against Death: The Psychoanalytical Meaning of History* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1955); Brown, *Love’s Body* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); Michael Rogin, *The Intellectuals and McCarthy: The Radical Specter* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967); and Rogin, *Fathers and Children: Andrew Jackson and the Subjugation of the American Indian* (New York: Knopf, 1975).

49. H. Stuart Hughes, “History and Psychoanalysis: The Explanation of Motive” (1961), reprinted in Hughes, *History as Art and As Science: Twin Vistas on the Past* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), 58.

50. *Ibid.*, 59.

51. *Ibid.*, 64.

head; body vs. mind; the lower parts vs. the upper regions; passion vs. interest; unconscious vs. conscious. (Interestingly, these were the same binaries the ego-psychologists embraced, hence assuring compatibility between the disciplines.) The turn away from sexuality also blurred the lines between social history and psychohistory, assuring compatibility, on the one hand, and a certain loss of prominence for psychohistory, on the other—and this at the very moment when the history of sexuality became an increasingly important area of inquiry, whether in the translation of Foucault's first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (1978), in Albert Hirschman's *The Passions and the Interests* (1977), or in the manifestos that emerged from women's and gay liberation movements.⁵²

The 1970s and 80s were a period of tumultuous disciplinary and national politics marked by calls for the inclusion in the annals of history the histories of neglected groups: workers, peasants, women, African-Americans, homosexuals, and others. The advocates for these histories did not turn to psychohistory though it was a lively and expanding area at the time. One reason was that psychohistory was primarily the province of intellectual history, a largely (white) male field.⁵³ Another was that the quest for inclusion involved proving that those who had been left out of historical accounts were credible historical subjects, and this meant presenting them as rational actors, agents, heroes of their own lives. Although the "new social history" usually involved exposing prevailing biases among conventional historians, its practitioners worried that a resort to psychological interpretation might be perceived as "hitting below the belt," impugning scholarly motives with dubious Freudian theories. But the main issue was that psychohistory had no ready way to theorize inequality. Indeed, for those seeking critical analysis of prevailing power relations, psychohistory's normative predisposition—accepting Freudian categories not simply as descriptive of the psychic organization of modern bourgeois society (as British feminist Juliet Mitchell argued they were), but as prescriptive—was part of the problem. If the direction of desire was always already known—a function of the Oedipal crisis—then deviations from it could be explained only as pathologies. Thus feminist historians were appalled by Christopher Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World* (1977), a book that attributed the ills of contemporary society to imperfect "oedipalization," and the subsequent loss of patriarchal authority in families.⁵⁴ And they found little enlightenment in

52. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Volume I: *An Introduction*, transl. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978); Albert O. Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests: Political Arguments for Capitalism before its Triumph* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977). I now read Hirschman's book as a jab at orthodox political economists who argued that rational self-interest was the motive for economic behavior. Hirschman shows how this discourse emerged from an earlier one on the passions. Some eighteenth-century theorists argued that capitalism would make avarice the ruling passion, subsuming all the others. Self-interested behavior is then understood not as rational, but as the effect of greed, now the dominant passion!

53. In Kren and Rappoport, eds., *Varieties of Psychohistory*, all the authors are male, with the exception of a husband and wife co-authorship. Similarly, in Mazlish, *Psychoanalysis and History*, all the authors are men. More recently, in *Rediscovering History: Culture, Politics, and the Psyche. Essays in Honor of Carl E. Schorske*, ed. Michael Roth (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994), all but three of twenty-six authors are men, and the women are notably not feminist in subject matter or approach.

54. Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York: Basic Books, 1977). For one feminist critique, see Susan Faludi, *Backlash: The Undeclared War against*

the many articles that diagnosed historical figures in terms of their narcissistic projections and regressive tendencies, or that attributed what for feminists were oppressive gender relations to psychic norms of masculinity and femininity. For the emerging gay liberation movement the diagnosis of homosexuality as a failure of masculine or feminine identification made psychoanalysis suspect, if not completely unacceptable. And on matters of race, there was general skepticism about white theories of any kind. As Audre Lorde warned, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house.”⁵⁵

It wasn’t that interest in sex was lacking; witness the questions posed by feminists in the introduction to a 1983 volume of essays, *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*. “Every assumption about sex lies in uncharted terrain,” the editors wrote. “Is there a basic energy source, a primary, early experience of pleasure necessarily connected to sex? Should we define heterosexuality as one sexual mode among many, or is it politically important to identify it as a primary institution of women’s oppression? Is monogamy a possibility of sexual liberation or will it wither away, like the state?”⁵⁶ The mix here of the political and the sexual is telling, as is the assumption that political intervention is possible in matters of sex. What is at stake is both understanding sex and sexuality in the past and present and searching for a way to theorize—and enact—change in the power dynamics of sex and gender relationships.

When feminist historians did turn to psychoanalysis, they did not define themselves as psychohistorians, but they did instrumentalize Freudian theory in a similar way. Taking as a given the male–female relationship to be one of domination and subordination, they showed, for example, how it was maintained by “libidization.” Cultural symbols and rituals invested gender relationships with sexual energy; in this way “cultural construction” achieved its aim at the level of the unconscious.⁵⁷ What the essays didn’t interrogate were the operations of sexual difference, assuming instead fixity in the male–female division, even though it was one they wanted to change. Nor did they pose critical questions about the history they were writing. In this way, feminist history paralleled psychohistory. In both cases the compatibility of psychoanalysis and history was taken for granted; psychoanalysis was seen as an authoritative instrument to be applied in the practice of history.

Women (New York: Crown Books, 1991), 281.

55. Audre Lorde, “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House,” in her *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley: Crossing Press, 1984), 110–114. There was also, perhaps, a warning in the reaction by mainstream historians to Fawn Brodie’s 1974 “intimate history” of Thomas Jefferson. Her suggestion that Jefferson’s sexual relationship with Sally Hemings and the children he fathered with her had something to do with his failure to free his slaves, and with his political views more generally, was met with hostility, scorn, and indifference. For details and the reviews of the book, see Newell G. Bringhurst, *Fawn McKay Brodie: A Biographer’s Life* (Norman OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999).

56. *Powers of Desire: The Politics of Sexuality*, ed. Ann Snitow, Christine Stansell, and Sharon Thompson (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1983), 41.

57. An example is Anne Boboroff, “Russian Working Women: Sexuality in Bonding Patterns and the Politics of Daily Life,” in *ibid.*, 208 and 212.

INCOMMENSURABILITY

The alternative to treating psychoanalysis as simply a tool for historians is to take up Wilson and Certeau's notion of incommensurability. For Certeau the notions of subject, time, desire, and unconscious provide a way of thinking differently about history, allowing him to question the unexamined premises of the discipline. So the quest for "meaning" is read as a quest for the Other, which at once establishes and conceals "the alterity of this foreigner."⁵⁸ So chronology and periodization are "less the result obtained from research than its condition," a way of selecting not only what must be understood, but "what must be forgotten in order to obtain the representation of apparent intelligibility."⁵⁹ So narrative "makes oppositions compatible . . . substitutes conjunction for disjunction, holds contrary statements together, and, more broadly, overcomes the difference between an order and what it leaves aside."⁶⁰ So the event is not an undisputed factual occurrence, but rather "the hypothetical support for an ordering along a chronological axis; that is, the condition of a classification. Sometimes it is no more than a simple localization of disorder: in that instance, an event names what cannot be understood."⁶¹ History at once memorializes the dead and, by bringing them to life, covers over their absence. It is the way "a society furnishes itself with a present time," but so also creates the "rift of a future," that points not just to change, but inevitably to death.⁶² This kind of thinking about history allows the historian a critical reflexivity, but one that is not at all the same as the self-reflection psychohistorians invoke. There it is a matter of examining their own motives, perhaps their personal reasons for taking up or avoiding certain projects, but it does not place them in critical relationship to the assumptions and practices of the discipline as a whole.

For Certeau it is not diagnostic labels borrowed from psychoanalysis that usefully inform history's mission. He writes:

In both ethnology and history, certain studies demonstrate that the general use of psychoanalytical concepts runs the risk of blossoming into a new rhetoric. These concepts are thus transformed into figures of style. Recourse to the death of the father, to Oedipus or to transference, can be used for anything and everything. Since these Freudian "concepts" are supposed to explain all human endeavor, we have little difficulty driving them into the most obscure regions of history. Unfortunately, they are nothing other than decorative tools if their only goal amounts to a designation or discreet obfuscation of what the his-

58. Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 2.

59. *Ibid.*, 4.

60. *Ibid.*, 89.

61. *Ibid.*, 96.

62. *Ibid.*, 101. Of history, Certeau writes: "As it vacillates between exoticism and criticism through a staging of the other, it oscillates between conservatism and utopianism through its function of signifying a lack. In these extreme forms it becomes, in the first case, either legendary or polemical; in the second, it becomes reactionary or revolutionary. But these excesses could never allow us to forget what is written in its most rigorous practice, that of symbolizing limits and thus of enabling us to go beyond those limits." *Ibid.*, 85.

torian does not understand. They circumscribe what cannot be explained, but they do not explain it. They avow an unawareness. They are earmarked for areas where an economic or a sociological explanation forcibly leaves something aside. A literature of ellipsis, an art of expounding on scraps and remnants, or the feeling of a question—yes; but a Freudian analysis—no.⁶³

An instrumental use of psychoanalysis is effectively impotent—“decorative tools” don’t do any work. For Certeau a Freudian analysis consists in recognizing one’s complicated connection to the others: that it is we who impose a certain temporality on our relationship with them, that it is our (unconscious) desire that (at least in part) motivates the search for their meaning, that historical facts, like those presented by analysands, are always in some sense “fabrications”⁶⁴—impositions of order on the confusions of reality, fantasy, memory, and desire—and that the place from which we write inevitably informs “the situation created by a social or analytical relation.”⁶⁵ This is a dynamic notion of the transference, one that necessarily disrupts the temporal order of conventional history.⁶⁶

But it goes beyond that, to the nature of the analysis offered as well. Here it is not a standardized developmental narrative that is required, but attention to language and the ambivalence, ambiguity, and tension it reveals. Language operates in two ways, as a structure of subjectivation (the inauguration of a subject into the social/symbolic order) and as a vocabulary (the cultural repertoire through which psychic states such as ambivalence are expressed), and it is this double operation that Certeau argues psychoanalysis brings to historians’ attention. So he cites Freud’s treatment of a seventeenth-century case of demonological neurosis as a way of thinking both psychoanalytically (about ambivalent identifications) and historically (ambivalence is expressed in this period in terms of allegiances to God or the Devil). And he undertakes his own histories of early modern religion in these terms as well.

The English historian Lyndal Roper offers brilliant readings of similar phenomena in *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (1994) and *Witch Craze* (2004).⁶⁷ Arguing for the importance of the body and sexual difference as a physiological and psychological fact, she employs “a dynamic model of the unconscious” to examine the “constant interaction between desire and prohibition.”⁶⁸ Like Certeau, she rejects the idea of “cultural construction,” insisting on its ahistoricity. “What I want to avoid is a developmental account of collective subjectivities which turns individual acts into mere exemplars of a narrative of collective historical progression.”⁶⁹ Or, as Certeau puts it a bit differently: “The labor by which the subject authorizes his

63. *Ibid.*, 289.

64. *Ibid.*, 296.

65. *Ibid.*, 69.

66. This is a somewhat different notion of the transference from the one evoked in Dominick LaCapra, “Is Everyone a *Mentalité* Case? Transference and the ‘Culture Concept’,” in LaCapra, *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 72-73.

67. Lyndal Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil: Witchcraft, Sexuality and Religion in Early Modern Europe* (New York: Routledge, 1994); and *Witch Craze* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

68. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*, 8.

69. *Ibid.*, 13.

own existence is of a kind other than the labor from which he receives permission to exist. The Freudian process attempts to articulate this difference.”⁷⁰

Roper goes on to analyze fantasies of witchcraft in terms of “women’s condensations of shared cultural preoccupations.”⁷¹ Her psychoanalytic approach enables her to listen differently to the testimonies of those accused of witchcraft, even as she attributes a shared repertoire of images and anxieties to them. “Sexual fantasies to which witches give voice often also display a . . . vision of a disorganized body. . . . [W]hat we encounter . . . is a disordered imagination in which anal and oral sex *don’t* reinstate the heterosexual norm of which they are the inverse, but dissolve the categories of the discrete, functioning body altogether.”⁷² Criticizing notions of fixed masculinity, she opts instead for an examination of the relationship between “the rigors of repression” and the “exuberance of excess.” “At every turn . . . civic authorities found themselves confronted with the anarchic disruption caused by masculine culture—the feckless husband, the drunkard, the threatening collectivities of guild and gang. So far as its public manifestations were concerned, masculinity was far from functional for the patriarchal society of the sixteenth century.”⁷³

Psychoanalysis allows Roper to look beyond categorical distinctions and normative representations of masculinity and femininity. Not only does she think in terms of the distinctive process of subject formation—it is precisely not the predictable fulfillment of cultural representation, but an engagement with it, affected by fantasy, the unconscious, slippages of language, particular investments of symbols and objects with psychic significance, and the ways in which identification with others affects individual identity—she also adds contradiction and ambivalence to her interpretation of collective behavior (the relationship of desire to law and its transgression).⁷⁴ Indeed desire, in her account, follows unpredictable directions, its attachment to objects can neither be stabilized nor predetermined. Desire—its perpetual quest and the impossibility of its satisfaction—is a psychic determinant with historical effects. Her approach eschews diagnostic categories and instead engages with the indeterminacies of human behavior; the point is to operate as an analyst would in a transference relationship, to “uncover the psychic logic [of the tale before we can guess at its meaning].”⁷⁵ The use of the term “logic” here has nothing to do with the insistence on rationality that critics of psychoanalysis regularly evoke. Nor does it refer solely to the Oedipal struggles of individuals within their private families (a favorite theme of early psychohis-

70. Certeau, *The Writing of History*, 303. On this point Joan Copjec, a literary and film theorist working with Lacanian psychoanalysis, wrote in 1989: “We are constructed, then, not in conformity to social laws, but in response to our inability to conform to or see ourselves as defined by social limits. Though we are defined and limited *historically*, the absence of the real, which founds these limits, is not *historicizable*. It is only this distinction, which informs the Lacanian definition of cause, that allows us to think the construction of the subject without being thereby obliged to reduce her to the images social discourses construct of her” (Joan Copjec, “Cutting Up,” in *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*, ed. Teresa Brennan [New York: Routledge, 1989], 241-242).

71. Roper, *Oedipus and the Devil*, 20.

72. *Ibid.*, 25.

73. *Ibid.*, 111.

74. *Ibid.*, 228.

75. *Ibid.*, 233.

tory). Rather, “psychic logic” is (in Brady Brower’s terms) “the relation between the . . . desire for knowledge and the already constituted field of knowledge. The desire for knowledge is conditional on the transgression of the established field of knowledge, and this transgression is, in turn, always ambivalent toward the constituted laws that it breaks. . . . [I]nnovation is the product of this ambivalence.”⁷⁶

Psychoanalysis does not provide Roper with a clear causality nor with a theory of change. It cannot account definitively for the rise and fall of the mass phenomenon she describes as a “witch craze” in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (with a focus on Germany). “The problem I faced was how to build the details of subjectivity and the sheer power of unconscious forces as they emerged in the confessions [of witches] into a history that would be about a whole society and not just individuals, and that would deal with historical change.”⁷⁷ For that she returns to history: to the influences of social and cultural contexts; demographic pressures; anxieties about fertility and reproduction; shared vocabularies of maternity, sex, and theology. As a result of urbanization, the growth of a middle class, an end to widespread scarcity, changes in household structure, in childbirth practices and moral codes,

the demographic regime that had underpinned belief in witchcraft gradually vanished. The iron grip of population control relaxed. . . . The moral codes of the Reformation and Counter-Reformation years, which punished fornication and adultery, forbade swearing and regulated dress, had fallen into disuse. They became matters of convention and education, not of law and politics. . . . The baroque imagination, which had made witches fearsome and required their actual death, had finally faded away.⁷⁸

Psychic logic here gives way to the logic of history, individual fantasies are contained within the frames of changed social norms, a coherent narrative is imposed on what has been a story of the “unruly” unconscious.

This account of change, although it does not eclipse the book’s emphasis on the operations of fantasy and unconscious influences on behavior, suggests a certain collective conformity of individual imagination and desire to objective conditions. On the one hand, fantasy has been the primary focus and explanation for people’s “acts of appalling ferocity against apparently harmless old women.”⁷⁹ “Witchcraft was a fantasy. . . . it had deep roots in the unconscious. The fantasies of witchcraft were formed in a particular period of European culture, but they drew their force from their relationship to the primary material of infantile experience, feelings about feeding and eating, about where the body of the child begins and the mother’s ends, about emptiness and death.”⁸⁰ On the other hand, the end of witchcraft is attributed to conditions that surely influence, but are also external to these concerns. What is the relationship between infantile experience and cultural custom? There is a necessary and uneasy tension around the question of how and under what conditions psyches change and of how (and which) psychic elements taken to be universal matter in the making of history.

76. Brower, personal email correspondence, March 17, 2011.

77. Roper, *Witch Craze*, xi.

78. *Ibid.*, 251.

79. *Ibid.*, xi.

80. *Ibid.*, 10.

The productive incommensurability of psychoanalysis and history emerges in the course of *Witch Craze*. Psychoanalysis provides a way of thinking about fantasy as a universal human psychic operation and so brings the puzzle of witchcraft past into the understanding of present-day readers. Its elements are familiar, and they include aggression, anxiety (about sexual difference, birth, and death), the displacements enabled by humor, the difficulty of drawing sharp lines between illusion and reality, the notion that pleasure can be found in experiences of terror and pain. History provides the repertoire of language and imagery to situated actors; it gives them collective preoccupations even as they are experienced in peculiarly individual terms. It also provides historians with a way of thinking about long-term or large-scale processes of change.

But the conceptions we have of change, rooted as they are in modernist demands of narrative and periodization, can serve to distract us from the insights psychoanalysis provides.⁸¹ The “unruly” unconscious gets tamed by the requirements of narrative. Historical time has different rules from the time of the psyche. Thus, Roper concludes *Witch Craze* with a discussion of the reasons for the end of fantasies about witchcraft, and, in so doing, implies that the forces of “history” tamed the psychic excesses of early modern Europe. The arrival of modernity relegated the questions of sex and reproduction, fear and damnation, to matters of individual psychology;⁸² in the course of these developments, fantasies of witchcraft declined and disappeared. The implication, if not the actual conclusion, is that collective obsessions of the kind described in the book—perhaps the very phenomenon of fantasy itself—belong to another age; the fantasies of these early modern “others” serve to confirm our own fantasies of a new and improved modernity. We are likely to forget Roper’s introductory assertions about fantasy as a perpetual feature of the human psyche and instead conclude that it is a historical artifact. Despite her best intentions, Roper’s story can be read as effectively consigning fantasy (along with witchcraft) to an era long past.⁸³

I don’t think there is an easy resolution to this lack of fit between the disciplines. Instead it provides the ground for continued conversation and debate about the possibilities, and also the limits, of a collaboration between the different temporalities of psychoanalysis and of history. Recognizing these limits can have the paradoxical effect not of securing boundaries but of loosening them. Certeau referred to history-writing as a form of labor that necessarily addressed the ambiguities and tensions inherent in any confrontation with the past. Writing becomes, for him, a way of “working through” these matters, but never finally resolving them (death is the only resolution). This “working through” provokes critical assessment not only of what counts as knowledge within disciplinary parameters, but also of how that knowledge is produced through interdisciplinarity. The point

81. Kathleen Davis, *Periodization and Sovereignty: How Ideas of Feudalism and Secularization Govern the Politics of Time* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008).

82. Roper, *Witch Craze*, 256.

83. I would have been happier with a conclusion that gestured to the effects of fantasy in later periods of history, the one, for example, that made working women the object of collective fear and solicitude (witness in France Jules Simon’s 1861 tract called, fittingly “L’Ouvrière: Mot Impie, Sordide”), or the various nineteenth-century obsessions with the masturbatory excesses of young single men, or, for that matter, since Germany is Roper’s focus, the recurring fantasies there about the dangers Jews posed for their fellow countrymen.

of such interdisciplinarity, writes Brian Connolly, “should be to live in the incommensurable interstices of disciplines.”⁸⁴ That often unsettled, but tremendously exciting, place is where rethinking can occur, a rethinking that “makes history,” in the sense both of its writing and of effecting change.

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84. Brian Connolly, personal email correspondence, March 15, 2011.