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Michael R. Finn, *Figures of the Pre-Freudian Unconscious from Flaubert to Proust*. Cambridge, United Kingdom, and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017. ix + 242 pp. Notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.99 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-107-18456-5.

Review by Laurence M. Porter, Affiliate Scholar in Comparative Literature, Oberlin College.

Michael Finn has written a severely truncated, conceptually confused study of French literary depictions of the unconscious from about 1850 to 1921; on “the influence of medical and psychological discourse over the existence [sic] and/or potential nature [sic] of the unconscious...the resistance of feminists opposing medical diagnoses of the female brain as the seat of the unconscious, the hypnotism craze of the 1880s and the fascination, in fiction, with dual personality and posthypnotic crimes...[on] how the unconscious inserts itself [sic] into the writing practice of Flaubert, Maupassant, and Proust. Through the presentation of scientific evidence and quarrels about the psyche Michael R. Finn is able to show the work of such writers in a completely new light [sic].”

This summary on the flyleaf reveals the basic flaws of Finn’s study taken on its own terms: he hypostatizes and anthropomorphizes “medical and psychological discourse” as causes of unconscious mental processes; he does the same with “the unconscious,” transforming it into a conscious agent invading literary words; he quaintly presents the oxymoronic entity, “scientific evidence and quarrels” (basic theoretical disagreements about reality) as mysteriously enabling him to offer “completely new” insights into literature. One could characterize his reasoning either as the absurdity *ante hoc, ergo propter hoc*, or more indulgently, as relying on the magical principles of similarity and contagion, for Finn asserts that certain ideas that had been floating around in some French circles between 1850 and 1920 must inevitably have influenced his chosen French writers. (The ARTFL database might have helped him be more comprehensive and accurate.) Ad nauseam, he resorts to the special pleading of modal verbs and adverbs: an idea or person “must have,” “might have,” “probably,” or “possibly” transformed a literary work that does not mention such sources. If wishes were evidence, Finn’s arguments would ride.

Finn explains, “My objective is to provide a broader, better contextualized picture than now exists of the attentiveness of literature and its authors to evolving French medico-psychological theory concerning the structure of the psyche and the mind” (p. 3). He does not realize that this “evolving theory” is itself narrower than Freud’s: it dealt with psychosis rather than neurosis (Freud never claimed to be able to cure psychosis); its physical brutality and immoral medical tourism (inviting spectators to observe patients judged insane) were major steps backward from the humane, autobiographical insight therapy of Doctor Blanche (see Nerval’s *Aurélia*); and it mainly influenced only minor literary works (admittedly, some by great authors). Freud’s return from his early medical work on hysteria to humanistic “pre-Freudian” traditions was a corrective. Yet Finn excludes evidence (the treatment of dreams, for example) that reveals the similarities between Freud’s ideas and those of his predecessors.

Freud called dreams “the royal road to the unconscious.” Freud’s *Traumdeutung* (“The Interpretation of Dreams”) is one of his major works. Lengthy accounts of dream interpretation appear in most of his case studies. But Freud does not even appear in Finn’s bibliography: the term “Pre-Freudian” in his title is spurious or meaningless. Freud himself characterized the “Pre-Freudian” when he modestly said “turn to the poets” (meaning, “imaginative writers”) to learn more about the unconscious than he himself could tell us. Nineteenth-century France, like Freud, drew upon four vast repositories of “Pre-Freudian” common knowledge of the unconscious that Finn ignores. One is the Classical Tradition in Greek and Latin. French secondary schools provided a thorough grounding in Latin language and literature, plus readings in Greek from the *Iliad*. In the latter, Achilles says “there are two souls within my breast,” an acknowledgment of the divided self, borrowed by Goethe’s *Faust*. Another source is the Vulgate Bible, which inspired psychoanalysis with the idea of “the King David complex,” betrayed by our indignation upon hearing of vile acts which we ourselves once performed before we suppressed our memory with our guilt (2 Samuel 12-13). A third source is “the archetypes of the collective unconscious”—widespread myths of creation, foundation, decline, and the end times, presented on familial, national, and cosmic levels. And the fourth includes such near-contemporary works as Nodier’s *Smarra* or Jean-François les *bas-bleus*, Mérimée’s *La Vénus d’Ille*, Nerval’s *Aurélia* (a particularly regrettable omission), E.T.A. Hoffmann’s tales, some early Balzac, Lautréamont’s *Chants de Maldoror*, and so on. *Avant la lettre*, all these authors clearly illustrate the “Freudian” psychological defense mechanisms of suppression and repression, and the first three are clearly aware of the “collective unconscious” later explored by Jung in the role of a cultural anthropologist.

Finn devotes little thought to contemporary developments in the domain of psychotherapy. He mentions Janet often, but neglects how much the French psychoanalyst anticipated Freud. Had he studied Janet Beizer’s luminous book on hysteria, he would have found ample evidence for how much female asylum inmates’ startling susceptibility to hypnotic suggestion, and their physical contortions, were artifacts of their treatment: these behaviors often stemmed from a desire for the attention and praise that rewarded their performances. Like “Clever Hans,” the trained horse that appeared to find answers to simple arithmetical problems, they were responding to cues from their ringmasters, following a learned routine that had little to do with expanding psychiatric knowledge. The more therapeutic “talking cure” was developed by Nerval’s therapist, Doctor Blanche, in the 1850s. *Aurélia*, Gérard de Nerval’s masterpiece, traces the progress of an enlightened, humanistic cure through introspective autobiography. Because Nerval insisted on being released prematurely, his cure ended tragically with delusions of spontaneous remission—a patient believes that he has cured himself, and can cure others—and suicide. Today, we know that “the talking cure,” even if conducted by non-judgmental lay people, can be quite effective in persuading clients to want to change, but that it still will usually fail if the client must return to a dysfunctional family and/or society, is socially isolated, or remains stigmatized by labels of criminality, deviant sexuality (according to the mores of the time), or insanity, or simply lacks needed medication.

To be sure, psychological speculation blossomed in France after 1870. The centralization of French intellectual life in Paris facilitated exchanges among psychotherapists and authors. Several of the latter, Finn knows, befriended therapists, visited mental hospitals, and witnessed treatments, notably, hypnosis. However, his massive documentation of these events as seen by contemporaries fails to achieve critical detachment, suffers from tunnel vision, and lacks originality. All too often, he provides bland synopses of writings by minor psychotherapists of his period, without providing any evidence that his authors read or were influenced by them.

Finn does discuss Flaubert’s intense capacity for mental absorption, epileptic seizures, and male hysteria, but treats them *projetés dans le vide* so as to privilege them as “pre-Freudian.” All the rest of nineteenth-century French literature is “pre-Freudian” as well, not only chronologically, but also psychodynamically. Even though Proust’s *A la recherche* began to appear after Freud had done most of his best work, it treats not the suppression, but the recovery of memory by the protagonist as the prime

creative process, and leaves suppression to the implied author's emplotment: for example, he silences the bisexual Albertine by having her ride her horse into a tree.

Finn spends a good deal of time on the "hidden persuaders" inserted into a subject's mind by hypnosis (or today, by advertising). But this is the least common type of unconscious content during the period he studies. Moreover, he does not distinguish between suppression and the repression betrayed by "Freudian slips" and parapraxes, including convenient accidents. Consider the pre-Freudian *Song of Roland*, ca. 1100 AD: when the crusader Olivier, blinded by blood, strikes Roland over the head with his sword, the hero asks "Did you do it on purpose?" because the two had recently differed vehemently over whether to call for reinforcements. Nietzsche's aphorism explains suppression: "Memory says, you did this. Pride says, I could not have done this. Eventually, memory yields." Repression never allows unwelcome thoughts to reach consciousness until analysis brings them to light. The *Roland* leaves Olivier's motivation undetermined.

To analyze psychologically sophisticated literature such as Flaubert's and Proust's, one must also treat modes of unawareness other than suppression and repression. Finn does not do so. A major psychic dimension of both Emma Bovary and Proust's anonymous *narrateur-témoin* is unawareness through naiveté (compare Henry James' *What Maisie Knew* [1897] for a full-length depiction of this state of consciousness and its evolution). For example, near the end of *Madame Bovary*, the anti-heroine goes to her former lover Rodolphe to ask for money "sans se douter le moins du monde de cette prostitution." Nor does Finn pay much attention to unconscious creative processes (note the French proverb "la nuit porte conseil"). As Baudelaire understood, when latent memories return from the forgotten domain of childhood, they nurture creativity. Although privileged moments have been studied and over-studied in Proust, more could be said about their evolution. Proust's special richness of character portrayal substantially depends upon his narrator emerging from his past naiveté as one childhood memory allows him to recall another, and to perceive both their relationship and also their significance for the present-day social networks in which he finds himself. At the Guermantes' last party, memories culminate for the narrator in a mode of contemplation more highly conscious and synthetic than before. Their long prior gestation in his preconscious was essential to enable them to come to light. Finn's statement (p. 9) that many doctors and psychiatrists denied the existence of "affective" (involuntary) memory as late as 1914 makes one wonder how their squabbles can possibly contribute to a better understanding of literature, which deploys accounts of affective memory from the beginning. For example, in the "Old Babylonian" (i.e., the newest, ca. 1,000 BCE) version of the Epic of Gilgamesh, the hero is motivated and traumatized throughout by memories of his best friend Enkidu's death by his side in combat.

Finn's Flaubert chapter occasionally seems a naïve extrapolation from that author's occasional remarks on impersonality to his entire *œuvre*. On pp. 55-73, Finn does review many familiar examples of second states of consciousness and fantasies of past lives. But he fails to point out the essential difference between these examples and Freud's theories: Flaubert is not *psychodynamic*--that is, he does not treat conflicts between the conscious and unconscious minds in a single individual, such as we see in the unreliable narrator of Mérimée's *La Vénus d'Ille* or Lautréamont's *Chants de Maldoror*. Nor does he recognize that--as recent criticism has shown--Emma Bovary's fundamental psychopathology is a Histrionic Personality Disorder, an unquenchable desire for attention that often involves sexual acting out (see the list of diagnostic traits in *Medline Plus*), and that the initial suggestions that inspire her behavior come from the novels smuggled in to her convent by a formerly aristocratic washerwoman. In depicting Emma's last days, Flaubert arbitrarily but spectacularly overlays his characterization with reminiscences from his own epileptic visions. Elsewhere, he said Emma is "moi. D'après moi."

Finn's more successful chapter three, on Maupassant, rightly questions critics' overemphasis on that author's relationships with the alienist Charcot, but provides an undeveloped, pointless, speculative enumeration of members of *L'École de Nancy* as possible sources for Maupassant. He misses a major precursor in depicting Night Terror in Nodier's *Smarra* (compare Goya), but offers a good genetic

description of the development of Maupassant's interest in hypnotism across two versions of *Le Horla*, including the influence of Paul Bourget's novella *L'Irréparable* (1884). Concerning Finn's useful mention of negative autoscopy (inability to recognize oneself in a mirror), he could have added that recent research has associated that mental disturbance with frontal lobe dementia. Instead, and in general, he binds himself down to the state of neurological knowledge over a hundred years ago.

Chapters four and five awkwardly attempt to multitask: to present more background on hypnosis and to treat fin-de-siècle examples from literature. Chapter four, on hypnosis, rightly reminds us that even many independent women have been brainwashed by oppressive social views concerning their supposed inferiority. Finn notes that such views affected that formidable dominatrix, Rachilde, and seeped into women's unconscious (drawing on Pierre Bourdieu's *La Domination masculine*). He should have added that this idea anticipates Freud's notion that "anatomy is destiny," which fueled the phallocratic political unconscious. Conversely, he misses a good chance to demonstrate how Rachilde's tyrannical protagonist reverses the male/female hierarchy with Operant Conditioning in *Monsieur Vénus*. And when he mentions that Rachilde's mother held séances (*tables tournantes*), he overlooks the tradition of this diversion in the nineteenth century (Victor Hugo, for example, held séances every week during the first two years of his exile; complete transcripts of them have been published). One can explain the psychoanalytic significance of this activity. It replaces a subservient attitude toward the supernatural with a domineering one, nurturing fantasies of human power over the spiritual order, which has conveniently been cut down to a manageable size through anthropomorphism (the spirits are dead humans who "speak" to us in our own language).

Chapter five, "Hypnotism, Dual Personalities, and the Popular Novel" is less a book chapter than a *fichier*. When Finn mentions Freud's essay on the uncanny, defining it as an apparent coming to life of inanimate objects, he overlooks the many examples of such animation in Maupassant (whom he claims as one of his three major authors) and Gautier, to say nothing of Madame de Stael's comical feminist take-off on E. T. A. Hoffmann's Olympia. Given the prior psychological novels by Benjamin Constant and Madame de Stael, and the Realistic novels by Balzac, Stendhal, and Flaubert, it is strange to see Finn's passive acceptance of Paul Bourget's claims in his essays (1883, 1885) that a "new" form has arrived with "the novel of psychological analysis" exemplified by Maurice Barrès's *Sous l'oeil des barbares* in 1888. What, then, are we to make of Balzac's *La Physiologie du mariage* (1829), with a sensitive passage on how it feels to be pregnant, quoted by France's Doctor Spock, Laurence Pernoud? This chapter ends with a mishmash of unmoored speculation.

The final chapter, on Proust, begins with a skimming treatment of cultural background, which trivializes Romain Rolland's "unanimism" without recognizing it. Finn does provide a sensitive speculation on how Maeterlinck's depictions of the instinctual life of plants influenced Proust, and about possible models for "deep instinctual themes" (i.e., motifs) in Thomas Hardy, Balzac, and Stendhal, but these are decorative sideshows for the unanalyzed major sequences of psychic adventures in Proust.

Finn doesn't seem to have much interest in literature. His brief postscript is anticlimactic: he claims that Proust's contemporary, the French psychoanalyst Pierre Janet, reflects (?) Proust's theory of the ambiguity of expectations—desire is kept alive by the imagination but becomes moribund when satisfied in daily life—but adds that Janet is obtuse in "applying a medical assessment to one of the most persuasive and poetic treatments of psychology and the teachings of the unconscious (sic) to come out of the twentieth century" (p. 189). *Comparaison n'est pas raison*: Finn's book jumps the rails. Despite all his references to secondary sources, one must conclude *laborat mons, nascitur ridiculus mus*.

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