FREUD AS VIRGIL: THE ANTHROPOLOGIES OF PSYCHOANALYSIS AND THE COMMEDIA

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Abstract: This essay explores the “existential cosmologies” of Freud and Dante. I highlight the use of autobiography in Freud’s body of work and the Commedia, and discuss why autobiography is thought to fundamentally weaken Freud’s claims while enriching Dante’s. I argue that the overlap in their existential cosmologies suggests that we take Freud’s claims more seriously, but that this will entail re-characterizing the nature of his epistemological and moral enterprise. After describing some examples of convergence between Dante and Freud that have not been explored before, including the central place of pride for Dante and narcissism for Freud, I suggest an analogy between Freud and Dante’s Virgil, with Freud as a pivotal figure on the frontier of the “creaturely” and the “soul-ful,” unaware of the limits of the positivism he vigorously espoused, but pointing the way, as Jonathan Lear has put it, toward re-imagining what an epistemology of the soul might look like.

Freud as Virgil? Readers of the Commedia soon come to appreciate the developmental aspects of the relationship between Virgil and the pilgrim. At the start of the journey, Virgil serves as a reliable, knowledgeable, and confident guide to a lost pilgrim who is psychologically and existentially immature. As the journey continues, however, things change gradually but dramatically. In Purgatory, it is Virgil who is not at home, and the pilgrim who grows into his task. At the very center of the poem, after he offers his discourse on love, Virgil fades into the background as the baton is passed to Statius. The pilgrim continues to venerate Virgil as teacher and master, but from the time Statius appears on the scene, Virgil is reduced to a gentle shade who must be superseded by other guides who know the terrain of faith. In one of the more moving scenes in the Commedia, Statius describes Virgil as “the first who, after God, enlightened me. / You did as he who goes
by night and carries / the light behind him—he is of no help / to his own self but teaches those who follow.”

Within the interdisciplinary context of biological psychology, psychiatry, and the neurosciences, and in a metaphorical sense of course, I see Freud as Statius saw Virgil, as someone who illuminated a path for others to follow, even though he was himself somewhat in the dark, particularly in his stubborn insistence that psychoanalysis is science in the usual sense. Freud was a revolutionary, and as Jonathan Lear has put it, “it is in the nature of things that one cannot both give birth to a revolution and then be there at the end of the process to appreciate its consequences.” My aim in discussing Dante and Freud together (always keeping in mind that Freud’s claims are problematic from an empirical point of view), is to consider those ways in which we can use his anthropology as a springboard for the consideration of ethical issues which arise from the ongoing revolutions in neuroscience and biological psychiatry, research communities which are in turn the source of influential critiques of that anthropology.

That there are surface correspondences between Freud and Dante—that the Freudian world and the Freudian project are in some sense Dantean—has been often noticed. For example, one picks up the central psychoanalytic text, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and notices the epigraph from book seven of the *Aeneid*: *Flectere si nequeo, Acheronta movebo*. One is also struck by how Freud envisioned the book when it

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1 One of the goals of our seminar was for a fruitful engagement of the medieval and the modern. As he said in his invitation to the seminar, Richard Newhauser is committed to transmitting the ways in which our concepts about what it means to be human are historically constructed, and thus worthy of humanistic study. In specific terms, this comes down to having medievalists talk to non-medievalists (and vice versa) more than they evidently do. Newhauser’s goals converged with my own. I am a teacher of biological psychology with a scholarly interest in Freud. For several years, I have been reading Dante and taking notes—in the margins of my books, in growing electronic files—of the correspondences I see between the anthropologies of Freud and Dante. This essay explores some of these connections. I am grateful to Richard Newhauser for including me in the seminar and for his support of this project.
