PSYCHOANALYTIC MYTHOLOGIES
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*Psychoanalytic myth is a representational practice – Psychoanalytic myth as a textural system – The subsistence of the concepts – The implication – Reading and deciphering psychoanalytic myth – Tracing what is lost in psychoanalytic myth – Recoding bourgeois subjectivity – Psychoanalytic myth is depoliticised speech – Psychoanalytic myth on the Left – Psychoanalytic myth on the Right – Necessity and limits of psychoanalytic mythologies*
These little essays on what it is to be a human subject in a culture permeated by psychoanalytic sign systems were first published between 1994 and 2008. The first of these predate the publication of my academic studies of the social construction of contemporary psychoanalysis, and most were written before and during my training as a psychoanalyst. These are occasional pieces, and so they address quite diverse cultural phenomena in order to make sense of how they hook their audiences, us.

Many of the essays were published in the organs of psychological, psychotherapeutic and psychoanalytic bodies. This is because an argument needs to be made against those who too easily assume that only their particular concepts capture and describe fantasy and reality. I have tried, often in vain, to disturb the strongly held belief of those in thrall to psychoanalysis that it is universally true. What I describe in the essays is how psychoanalysis functions as something that is only locally true. The argument applies to each of different varieties of psychoanalysis I find at work in the phenomena I explore, and it is important to recognise the different functions that different ideas in psychoanalysis serve, as their proponents battle against each other and pretend that they alone have the keys to unlock our secrets.

You will learn something about psychoanalysis as you read these pieces, but you will also learn something about what you already know. That is, the essays rehearse and unravel what you must already know about psychoanalysis to be able make sense of the way these cultural phenomena circulate in Western culture so you can share interpretations with friends and apply them to enemies. The theoretical framework I use to make sense of how I have read these phenomena is set out in the longer essay, ‘Psychoanalytic Myth Today’, at the end of the book. Here I elaborate a way of reading and writing, of engaging with and taking a distance from these seductive mythologies.

This collection is indebted to the work of Roland Barthes, whose book *Mythologies*, was originally published in 1957 in France and then translated into English in 1972. Barthes’ study of ‘Myth’ as a second-order sign system was a groundbreaking exploration of phenomena as diverse as margarine and wrestling. His work also led the way for the activity of code breaking in culture, so that students of his approach could then identify the ways they had been recruited into ideologically loaded images and patterns of language. Now more than ever, however, psychoanalysis pretends to be the code of codes, and so we need some specific strategies to break into it, and out of it.
Acknowledgements


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PSYCHOANALYTIC MYTHOLOGIES
Points of view

The word ‘ego’ has become part of everyday language to describe who we are. Sometimes the word evokes a little shiver of recognition, that it comes from the writings of Sigmund Freud, but often those hints at psychoanalysis – sexual repression, objects of desire, the unconscious, and so on – are wiped away so that the ‘ego’ can appear to us as something more innocent than it really is. When the word appeared in English as a psychoanalytic term (alongside the ‘superego’ and the ‘id’) it was actually designed by the translators of Freud to function as a more scientific designation of the everyday German terminology employed by Freud when he spoke of the ‘Ich’, which was our old friend, the ‘I’.

When psychoanalysts describe the bizarre ways that ‘I’ functions – piecing itself together out of images of significant others, splitting itself into bits that are held close or spat out, gluing the whole of our being to it and insisting that others are understood within its frame – it is actually more disturbing to keep in mind that this is what we build our everyday reality upon. This, already, is the stuff of fantasy, this ‘I’. The unconscious material that swells around its edges, and which we like to keep at a distance when we see it represented by those schooled in psychoanalytic theory, is already washing around inside our thoughts, colouring our perceptions of every object around us.

Freud struggled to find a model for the mind, but eventually found one and discussed it in 1925 in his paper ‘A Note Upon the “Mystic Writing-Pad”’. The ‘mystic writing pad’ is the device we still find in toyshops; a cardboard frame with a cellophane screen onto which we create a picture by pressing the plastic stylus through the cellophane to connect the second layer of greaseproof paper against the wax slab at the back. One can think of the wax slab as being like the unconscious, and the fleeting images that appear when the outside world intrudes by way of the stylus could be consciousness. The temptation is then to imagine that when we pull the slide across the screen the image will disappear forever, as if when you leave a cinema, the images can be evacuated and then conveniently replaced with perceptions of the real world on the journey home.

As Freud pointed out, however, the impressions made by the stylus remain on the wax; pull away the protective screen and the paper behind it and you will see the indentations, ripples of the history of the wax made from marks upon marks that press it into a bumpy mess. And a consequence of this uneven surface is that whenever a line is drawn on the cellophane, the history of past impressions is present in the gaps; in these imperfections of consciousness there is, every
time, the unconscious. The ‘ego’, then, is no safe space outside the effects of the unconscious, and all of the fantastic things that happen in the unconscious also riddle my understanding of who ‘I’ am.

This ‘ego’ – something we are invited to attend to when we boost our ‘self-esteem’ – is the most appealing aspect of ourselves, of course, and we understand it better than anyone else. We might even imagine that it could be made entirely transparent to ourselves, if not to others; that heightened awareness of what is most precious about our self-identity could only be a good thing. But this ‘ego’ – this ‘I’ that is jealously defended against anything that would disturb it or question its right to be captain of the soul – is also a dangerous obstacle.

One has only to think of how well the racist ‘understands’ those that the racist ‘I’ hates so much to know that what the ego incorporates into itself and finds acceptable is often the worst of distortions, even if they are distortions necessary for that person to hold their reality in place. The obsessive attention that sexual puritans pay to the filth that threatens them also draws attention to the way that the lure of self-knowledge the ego encourages us to enjoy is misleading if not dangerous. Little wonder that the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan returned to Freud, returned to the founding moment of the ego, to show how it emerges in an ‘imaginary’ mirror-relation to the other. This is the only way we can become who we are, by patching together images of others in that fundamental process analysts call ‘identification’. The ego closes in on itself as a mirror within mirrors, all the better to shut out the unconscious; for Lacan, the ego was that strange thing that is ‘the seat of illusions’, itself one of the symptoms of the pathology that makes us human and that psychoanalysis unravels as we learn to speak about ourselves outside its grip.

One English translation of the formula Freud came up with, in 1933, was that the aim of psychoanalysis should be to strengthen the ego; in this formula, ‘Where id was, there ego shall be’; and so the ‘id’ that runs riot in the unconscious should be displaced and a rational civilised ‘I’ would have dominion. The famous quotation from Freud continues, ‘It is the work of culture – not unlike the draining of the Zuider Zee’; and then it seems all the more crystal clear that this ‘I’ must progressively expand across the whole domain of the speaking subject. This surely would lead to the rule of the ego in each separate individual and the triumph of the worldview of the ego in the wider culture. Diagnoses of our times in the West as a ‘culture of narcissism’ in which we pander to our ego and try to fill it up when it feels empty, lead us more than ever to ask something different from psychoanalysis.

The German phrase – ‘Wo Es war soll Ich Werden’ (rendered in the standard translation as ‘Where id was, there ego shall be’) – admits of a different reading when we bear in mind that we are speaking of the ‘I’ and an ‘it’ that is also just as much a part of ourselves; now the aim of psychoanalysis is to locate ourselves as