The Transformation of Literary Figures into Psychoanalytical Terms

The strictly separation between science and art begins to fade in the 19th century, when the romantic world view on coupling contrasts bring their common elements together: in the era of an actual “application” of intellectuality, we consider that scientific activity and authoring creativity are intersected and mutually affected. This mentality is not only reflected on the work of S. Freud, but it constitutes the main element of his authoring activity. Freud’s multi-dimensional occupation with literature was not coincidental, since he pondered on artistic creativity, imagination and perception of a text.¹ Freud borrowed mythological and literary figures to create symbols for complex psychological procedures in critical points of his work.

Moreover, he built complete complex theories onto these figures, aiming at enlightening the unexplored aspects of human behavior. Sophocles’ Oedipus and Shakespeare’s Hamlet are the most well-known examples,² as well as E.T.A. Hoffmann’s Nathanael (Der Sandmann),³ the mythical Narcissus,⁴ and Moses of the Old Testament,⁵ contributed to supporting the psychoanalytical findings.⁶ However, in the case of Freud, taking into account his authoring talent⁷ and scientific production, the boundaries between artistic and scientific imagination on the one hand, and scientific and artistic discourse on the other, were in a perpetual interaction.

This presentation is not focused on the tragedy of Sophocles or the reasons for which Freud borrowed literary figures. It mostly aims at showing that he used his
imagination, manipulated the medium of language and moved freely in the field of symbolism creating new psychoanalytical terms. Although Freud’s scientific production and creativity have been examined in the past, there has been no elaborative description of transforming a literary figure into a psychoanalytical term. We are going to watch how a piece of literature became an inaugural kick for the activation of scientific creativity. Consequently, there will be focused on the example of Oedipus in order to demonstrate this procedure in Freud and suggest a model for producing scientific discourse.

Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus the King* is part of the European cultural inheritance and secondly, a significant term of everyday use. Nevertheless, a few words on the plot: Oedipus receives the prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother and, by attempting to prevent the fulfillment of the prophecy, he fulfills it.

The studies being made until recently have been focused on the content,\(^8\) the perception\(^9\) and the psychoanalytical analysis of the Sophocles’ tragedy *Oedipus the King*. The psychoanalytical prism detected in Oedipus’ figure a personal responsibility, an effort of self-determination and the initiative to control his destiny. At the same time, there was hidden guilt and narcissistic hubris with the additional presence of the fear of castration. Konstantopoulos (1990) investigated the reason for which Freud selected Oedipus as symbol but he limited his study in outlining the psychic structure based on the ancient Greek tragedy. Starobinski (1990: 110-142) made a significant study on Oedipus and Hamlet by mainly focusing on the latter without omitting to point out the mythical substance of Oedipus.
There are quite a few critics who relate Freud’s personal background with the creation of the term “oedipal complex”. At the time when Freud writes the “Interpretation of Dreams” (1900), there has been one year since his father died: he was probably in a period of assessment and re-evaluation of his relationship with his late father, a fact which is possible to have affected the processing of the material for the “interpretation of dreams”.

Chartokolis points out that Freud did not see the myth as a “fight between generations”, but he was affected by the spirit of the puritan Victorian society of his time and he did not dare to criticize his relationship with his parents.

Freud connected for the first time the children’s sentiments of love for the mother and adversity/jealousy for the father with King Oedipus, in the way he remembered the tragedy of Sophocles from his high-school years, in a letter to the friend of W. Fliess (on October 15th 1897), where he mentions that he discovered in his childhood recollections “feelings of love to his mother” and “jealousy to his father”. This fact caused a deep-rooted resistance and revealed “the ambivalent sentiments that he nourished for his father and mother”, while it made him “ignore the accomplice of his parents, the aggressiveness of his father and the seductive disposals of his mother”.

Reading the tragedy of Sophocles, Freud recognizes what he discovered in the depths of his own childhood and in such a way, that he sees the aroused scene acquiring substance, lucidity, structure and following the necessary result that dictates the dramatic work. When Oedipus fulfills the prophecy, there is a simultaneous completion of the necessity and the causality of his action. In this manner, “the tragedy acquires the form of a dream, and appears as if the fulfilled desire of a subject
were identified with the desire of humanity”.\textsuperscript{15} This is something that was also supported by Lacan, who said that the oedipal complex portrays a dream of Freud.\textsuperscript{16} The parallelism does not seem to be pointless: on the occasion of Oedipus, Freud’s childhood recollections are pulled out, not of course in the duration of a spontaneous dreaming process, but rather as a day dream. Followingly, he filters them and processes them mentally in order to reduce the protagonist of the tragedy to a term-symbol.

Freud recognized the instinctive substance in Oedipus and this was not owed only to the quality of stirred sentiments, but mainly to the fact that the outline of the hero is complete as for the cause and the result. The following assumption by Starobinksi (1990: 121) includes some chips of truth: “Oedipus is the mythical play-writing in pure form - it is the clear instinct with quite few touch-ups. Oedipus lacks the unconscious; he is our own unconscious, he wants to expresses one of the main roles that is taken by our desire. There is no reason to interpret Oedipus. He is a psychological entity himself. “\textsuperscript{17} Thus, we begin from the consideration that Oedipus represents the instinctive elements or at least their comprehension.\textsuperscript{18} In this way, the status of dramatic figures acquires a mythical aspect: they symbolize Depth themselves, and therefore there is no need of searching for motives or explaining behaviors.\textsuperscript{19} This is particularly obvious in the case of Oedipus, where there is no query or void as for the reasons or the result. By the time the 'oedipal complex' was shaped as a term, the symbol of Oedipus had been functioning as an aroused fantasy that was to shape the latent content of the term. If tragedy is seen as dream, Oedipus functions as symbol, and with his use by Freud, the subjectivity (of Freud) becomes objective, while the ancient myth (as the expression of a universal law) acquires a
subjective dimension. P. von Matt masterfully described the sequence of Freud’s thoughts: “Many of his most important discoveries are initially presented in a condensed, almost pre-systematic form, as a condensed substance of cohesive insight, which is later processed and extended during his research.” The reference to Oedipus becomes extensive in *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900); however, the term ‘oedipal complex’ is used for the first time in *Über einen besonderen Typus der Objektwahl beim Manne* (1910), and since then in lots of later texts.

The father of psychoanalysis, in his letter to Fließ, does not make a further analysis of the myth, but focuses on the cause of the successful perception of tragedy. He believes that the particular drama had made such a big influence, just because each spectator sees themselves in the hero. He bases the assumption of the universal force of the myth on the argument that the myth arouses the readers’ unconscious wishes, fears and guilt. The reader/spectator is not in a position to handle these sentiments, therefore they expect the moment of catharsis in the tragedy that will appear through Oedipus’ self-punishment and escape from the city. Freud’s view identifies with the one by Claude Levi-Strauss, who supported that every myth refers to the unconscious nature of mass phenomena, determining conflicts or conflicting opinions on some basic social-psychological problem that the person recognizes unconsciously and experiences stress because of it. The myth deals with them in a way that seems to reconcile them, easing from stress. Using the terminology of C. G. Jung, the mythological material (archetypes) constitutes a cultural bequest; it is recorded in the people’s collective unconscious, while it structures and shapes the way of thinking and behaving. In other words, the myth can be considered as a collective equivalent of
Phrasing Lacan, we can say that resorting to myth is theoretically necessary because truth cannot be told by half.

The myth of Oedipus, with its perpetual elements (picture and reflections, relation between subject and object), functions as symbol. This is the reason why the tragedy of Oedipus shakes us via its symbolic effect. Chartokolis adds that “objective guilt and subjective innocence clash with one another, as much in the tragedy as in the psychoanalysis, in two levels of conscience: the repressed and the conscious”. The myth moves in the level of lacanic symbolism, where the signifier brings up a chain of signifiers. In the level of the symbolic identification with the signifier, Oedipus functioned for Freud as the inaugural kick of evoking childhood recollections. Using the theory of Freud, we realize that in his case the following process was also followed: beginning with a verbal form (Oedipus), “the repressed recollection exceeded the resistance that prevented it from being portrayed in the conscience with its real characteristics. It finally came to a conscious level, after being submitted to alterations and deformations that were imprinted on it by the resistance of censorship”. Within the frames of the peculiar language of psychoanalysis, Freud applied the symbolic method for manipulating the unconscious material which uses existing codes of reading.” Considering Oedipus as the incorporation of specific instinctive procedures and reducing him into a psychoanalytical term, he attempted to remove the gap between the signifier and the signified. While reviewing the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud granted a larger space to the symbolic constant that led to the symbolic interpretation. Each symbolic constant creates a specific fixity between the symbol and the symbolized, which inevitably limits the possible interpretations of unconscious elements.
“projections to the exterior world” in the form of assumptions, symbolisms, with precise translation rules, post-psychological concepts and abstract theoretical constructions, namely general descriptions of the mental mechanism “according to the dynamic, local and economic correlations”.  

Until now, we have seen that Freud recognized in the figure of Oedipus an instinct that was transformed by him into a symbol in order to be integrated in the frames of the myth and be attributed with universal elements. The next step will be characterized by the transformation of a symbolic term into an element of the imaginary, a fact that will emerge by the reference to the language as the onset of intellectual and mental activity.

If the unconscious is the prominent agency and it is structured as language, then for the unconscious applies the same as for a piece of literature: the qualitative determination of its contents is reduced to the quantity of mental systems involved. In other words, the more interpretations it is subject to, the more possibilities of projection it may contain. Lacan considers that the relation between psychoanalysis and tragedy lies in the ambiguity of speech: this is due to the latent meaning of language, defined by the dynamic unconscious, the signifier and the signified that is related to the mother’s unconscious primary wish (for and from the mother). However, “the unconscious is not just language: it is dramaturgy, a staged word, spoken/described action.” It contains much more symbolisms, emotions and ‘archetypical’ material.
For the clinical cases, Freud used a “language permitting the creation of images, descriptions and [open] questions,” thus rendering possible some specific forms of cases. This special language was developed both with expressive means favoring the metaphoric conception, and with rationalistic definitions. Both language forms (metaphorical and rationalistic) acquire -in the “tension field” of the imaginative and rational– inborn, derivational roots in the dimension of the imaginative. A metaphor that appears impulsively and causes surprise –in contrast with the rational interpretation– may be transformed into a rational term during the creative process. However, it can retain its metaphorical form and be used in such way - as a guiding metaphor. When transferring this procedure to the issue of Oedipus, we observe that the - lingual - symbolism of Oedipus’ figure moves away from the signifier’s level, condenses the myth and fills the signified with feelings of rivalry, guilt, passion and a latent emasculation. Oedipus initially moves on the level of the imaginative, as his appearance as metaphor surprises Freud. Shortly after he remains in the “tension field” between the imaginative and the rational, Freud transforms him from a guiding metaphor into a rational term of the oedipal complex. Hanenberg (2008: 183) supports this assumption by explaining that “Freud’s terms and definition systems (such as the unconscious, the principle of reality etc) are guiding metaphors for a progressive investigation of the psychoanalytical knowledge. According to these, there have been created our psychoanalytical models, methods and abstract thoughts. Our concepts are consequently a result of metaphors taking place in the “tension field” of the imaginative and rational; hence they are of a metaphorical origin but they are no metaphors”.

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The verification of the described procedure comes from Freud himself: in his letter to Ferenczi (12.7.1915), he mentions: “I insist that there is no need for someone to create the theories –they should be coming as uninvited guests while someone deals with detailed research.” In this case, Freud expresses himself “absolutely and consciously 'in favor' of the imaginative permitting the appearance of the possible.” The “uninvited guests” are nothing more than a mixture of unconscious thoughts and pre-conscious modalities that “come to surface unexpectedly and in the form of an inspiration during the conscious treatment as pre-theoretical models and can be used in the creation of clinical and post-psychological concepts”. Here can be also noticed the “necessity of imagination in the scientific creative procedure”, while creativity moves in the level of the imaginary in order to produce original material.

Setting the transformation of Oedipus into a psychoanalytical term within a more general framework and, more precisely, if the procedure is seen from the aspect of an intellectual occupation, we will observe that it follows the creative cause of sublimation. This fundamental mechanism describes the partial impulse that has not been repelled to the unconscious and is transformed into appetite for learning and impetus of research. Consequently we can suppose that Freud’s great ability of shaping the original psychoanalytical material and its evolution were due to sublimation. Only in this way could memories be transformed into “high intellectual constructions” of great importance. The potential of the used energy enabled the projection or appearance of the “uninvited guests” and their treatment as psychoanalytical terms. Simultaneously, the sublimated energy enforced both the appetite for learning and research. Upon the mental processing of the interior and exterior world, Freud was in the position to develop recognizing, critic and also
reproductive thoughts, a fact that contributed to the development of creativity. To conclude, Freud himself described his work method as a “sequence of bold imagination and indifferent criticism of the reality”, and he adds: “I’ve learnt to subdue speculative trends and […] to re-observe the same things until they begin to be expressed by themselves” and be shaped into psychoanalytical terms.

By treating the signifier (Oedipus) as a psychoanalytical term (oedipal complex), Freud succeeded in settling it in the collective vocabulary; the common use and acceptance of this term absolved people from guilt. Besides, historical conditions imposed and established the parallelism of psychoanalysis with philology: the need that his innovative perspective would be recognized, led Freud to resort to philology, the science with the longest history. Beginning with the art of language, he tried to ensure the validity of analysis and its results through literature. So he aimed at confirming his views on the unconscious from the conclusions imposed by studying literary texts. Baudry (1990: 57) considers that “the relation between the author’s knowledge and the “science” of psychoanalysis is due to the fact that the piece of literature presents the same composition as the object of psychoanalysis. So if the way of creating a figure is enlightened, the purpose of the treatment will also emerge.”

We observed here that a literary figure functioned as an “uninvited guest” and constituted for Freud a reason to realize and analyze his incestuous dispositions towards his mother and the resulting emotions of jealousy, fear of emasculation and competition. Automatically, Oedipus became an object of treatment at the level of symbolism, abiding by the laws of the myth that govern language: by selecting an archetype from the collective unconscious, Freud imposes the congruence of the
signifier with the signified, since Oedipus incarnates a primal system of impulse. The symbol, moving at the level of fantasy turns into a guiding metaphor in order to be transformed with the aid of sublimation into the rationalistic term of the oedipal complex. So, with the aid of science fiction, there was the creation of a language form which was a point of reference for the psychoanalytic thought. This elaborate description of creating a psychoanalytical term is not specifically limited to the oedipal complex or Freud’s scientific work method. It was attributed to the specific scientist, on one hand since there is a rich original bibliographic material and, on the other hand, since he was one of the rare cases of a scholar combining the artistic ability with scientific activity. It would be possibly hard to observe this procedure in other scientists, but it is quite possible that this model would be in the foundation of the abstract thought. With the help of this tool, we could be able to invent, expound and shape additional psychoanalytical or philological terms.

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2 S. Freud. „Die Traumdeutung“. Gesammelte Werke, vol. II & III.


5 S. Freud. „Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion“. Gesammelte Werke, vol. XVII,

6 This is the common argument of the enemies of Freud, who claim that psychoanalysis is just a well written novel, based on very few clinical proofs.

7 His writing capability was honoured with the Goethe price. D. Chartokollis. "Μυθιστόρηµα και Ψυχανάλυση". In: Λογοτεχνία και Ψυχανάλυση. Λέκα ομόκεντρα κείµενα (Athens: Themelio, 1999), 129.


10 J. Starobinski, "Hamlet und Ōdipus". In: Psychoanalyse und Literatur (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 111.

11 Chartokollis, 116.

12 Ibid.


14 Cf. Starobinski, 127.

15 Starobinski, 136.

16 M. Ch. Konstantopoulos, Η δοµή του ψυχίσµοι με πρότυπο μελέτης την αρχαία ελληνική τραγωδία. (Athens: [w.e.] 1990), 11.

17 Starobinski, 121.

18 Starobinski, 127.

19 Starobinski, 129.

20 Cf. Starobinski, 136.


25 Chartokollis, 121.

26 Starobinski, 121.


28 Starobinski, 125.

29 Chartokollis, 120.


32 Ibid.

33 Cf. Hanenberg, 192-3.

34 Cf. Hanenberg, 211.

35 Like J. Lacan claims

36 Chartokollis, 121.

37 Starobinski, 121.

38 Hanenberg, 182.

39 Cf. Hanenberg, 182.
By ‘tension field’ is meant the area of existence of controversial powers, which effect and affect each other. This way is caused a situation loaded by tension.

In demonstrative-semantic form

Cf. Hanenberg, 182.


P. Ricoeur, Die Interpretation (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 1969), 49.

With this term is meant the whole spectrum of the used fantasy manifestations in the Freudian œuvre. Hanenberg, 195.

Hanenberg, 216.


Cf. Hanenberg, 208.


Baudry, 60.