

Willing What Cannot Be Willed

An excerpt from The Fate of Ideas: Seductions, Betrayals, Appraisals

Robert Boyers

In The Fate of Ideas: Seductions, Betrayals, Appraisals, Robert Boyers reflects on his allegiances and disputes with some of the twentieth century's most transformative writers, artists, and thinkers. Centering his chapters around specific ideas, Boyers explores the process by which they fall in and out of fashion. Through encounters with authority, fidelity, "the other," pleasure, and a wide range of other topics, Boyers gives us a glimpse of his own life and, in the process, studies the fate of ideas in a society committed to change yet ill equipped to assess the losses entailed in modernity. Among the writers who appear in these pages are Susan Sontag and V. S. Naipaul, Jamaica Kincaid and J. M. Coetzee, as well as figures drawn from all walks of life, including unfaithful husbands, psychoanalysts, terrorists, and besotted beauty lovers. Read his tenth chapter, "Psychoanalysis", in The Fate of Ideas: Seductions, Betrayals, Appraisals, below.

Psychoanalysis

For us, science is a refuge from uncertainties, promising—and in some measure delivering—the miracle of freedom from thought.

—John Gray

Psychoanalysis is that illness for which it regards

itself as the cure.

— Karl Kraus

The sociologist Philip Rieff, perhaps the most brilliant critic of the psychoanalytic tradition, often derided what he called mediums “fit only for messages.” Is psychoanalysis one such medium? Surely it can seem so. In attempting to explain a multitude of complex, often unfathomable sentiments, contradictions, and impulses by resorting to keywords and categories, psychoanalysts have often presumed to banish mystery and to reduce experience to formula. The mind, said Rieff, “begs to be violated by ideas,” and surely he was thinking not only of minds in general, but of therapists who have made that species of violation especially tempting for their patients. In offering up a standard assortment of apparently decisive and unimpeachable ideas, many analysts have, for generations, provided messages that seem to numerous human beings consoling precisely in their apparent ability to make everything seem comprehensible, or nearly so.

Consider, for example, the notion that sexuality is central to human development. Has this notion not become a commonplace in Western culture? Does it not presume to account for a great many things, some of which have little to do with sexuality? And is this notion not at the root of what Leslie H. Farber once called “the aha phenomenon,” which routinely occurs whenever a therapist encourages a patient to accept a definitive-sounding “explanation” that is presumed to settle questions about the ostensibly “true” origins of an impulse? When Freud offered his patient Dora an explanation of her condition that made sexuality central to her problems, was the message thereby conveyed not intended to consign to virtual irrelevance other compelling features of her experience, especially those about which she herself felt some

conviction? And was not Dora's potential understanding of her own condition not thereby somewhat diminished in spite of the apparent expansion of her understanding achieved by Freud's unanswerable interpretation of her condition?

The mind that begs to be violated by ideas is a vulnerable mind, a mind eager for resolution, exhausted or confounded by the doubt or misgiving it has had to entertain. Of course there are analysts who are not as inclined as others in their profession to explain away or otherwise banish confusion, and many contemporary analysts assert that "truth" is constructed and is never incontrovertible. Just so, many analysts scoff at the idea that sexuality is inevitably at the core of human motivation. And yet it is fair to say that in the main, therapists are in the business of dispensing apparently reliable ideas, or insights, that can assist people to get on with their lives. That is the necessary burden of therapy, its benevolent promise, and, in an odd way, its fatal misfortune. When Rieff wrote that "therapy is that form which degrades all contents," he was contending that the actual "contents" of a patient's experience were reduced in the therapeutic encounter to the status of manipulable material, interpreted and trans- formed into a symbolically significant symptomatic content compatible with an established therapeutic view of conflict and resolution. Though analysts may well contend that Rieff's sense of things is outdated and "Freudian," and much has changed in the domain of therapy in the past quarter century, my own recent conversations with therapists and their patients persuade me that Rieff's observations remain compelling.

Of course the therapists themselves will point to theoretical advances that give the lie to my impression. Adam Phillips contends that psycho-analysis is not so much a "self-justifying" system but "rather more of a grab-bag of [our] culture and history." Analysts, he says, have looked to creative writers and artists for "the possibility of an eccentric life, a life

untrammeled by system or convention,” and increasingly, he believes, his colleagues in the profession will come to regard what they say and write not as expressions of the “truth” but as a way of finding out whether or not they can believe it. Phillips concedes, parenthetically, that “it has always been difficult for psychotherapists to avoid putting the answer before the question,” but he remains optimistic that they can do better. Yes, to be sure, typically psychoanalytic writing reads like “incantation . . . characterized by the hypnotic repeated use of favorite words such as play, dependence, development, mourning, projective identification, the imaginary, the self, etc.,” but there have long been signs of impatience with this state of affairs.

Central to the developments Phillips would wish us to consider is the emphasis placed—by numerous analysts—on “something called ‘not-knowing.’” Indeed, Phillips contends, “it has become a virtue in psychoanalysis” for the clinician not to jump “to authoritative conclusions.” And what has been the source of this development? The poets, chiefly John Keats in his recommendation of “negative capability,” had offered an implicit critique of the will to interpretation and of “the analysts’ will-to-intelligibility.” Keats, of course, had famously defined negative capability as a condition in which “a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” For the analyst, Phillips believes, this was an injunction against “the failure to observe,” the failure to wait and be patient before committing to interpretation. The analyst is warned against “premature or pre-emptive knowing” or “propagandizing.”

At the same time, Phillips concedes, the analyst, “like the so-called patient, is not supposed to not-know forever.” Therapy is “indisputably a method for self-knowledge.” However diverse the schools of psychoanalysis, each having its own “distinctive version of the self-

knowledge story,” there will be in each of them a controlled rage to interpret, to unearth a set of meanings that can inform the business of self-discovery.

Thinking about the therapeutic enterprise in this way is encouraging, and no one will doubt that practitioners inclined to operate as Phillips describes will often accomplish wonders for patients in need. The suspension of certainty will be essential if therapists are to benefit their patients. And yet it is not easy to banish the thought that few analysts will find it possible to operate as Phillips believes they should. To read the testimony of contemporary Lacanian analysts—to take but a single notable example—is to note how the insistent privileging of “desire,” as an ostensibly constitutive feature of virtually every human transaction, largely incapacitates these analysts from paying plausible attention to other competing factors in the experience of their patients. The degradation of content Rieff noted in earlier psychoanalytic writing remains very much a primary feature of the ongoing therapeutic practice.

It is tempting—certainly for a literary person—to think of literature as a practice radically opposed to the degradation of content. Freud regarded writers like Dostoyevsky and Shakespeare as having understood—with the benefit of Freudian theory—the roots of human behavior, and he celebrated their resistance to simplifying formulas. He made substantial use of the insights he took from such writers, and he was, at his best, a subtle interpreter of conflict and delusion. More, he was not invariably constrained in his thinking by the positivist conception of truth that he championed. Though he inclined to think of religious faith, for example, mainly in terms of the discernible function it served in the lives of believers, and typically reached for terms like “primitive,” “fantasy,” and “illusion” to describe religious states, he did not repudiate William

James's assertion that "no account of the universe in its totality can be final which leaves these other forms of consciousness [such as mysticism] quite disregarded. . . . They forbid a premature [exclusively rationalistic] closing of our accounts with reality." If analysts have often reduced experience to system, Freud and many other analysts were at least alert to the richness of the interior life —James invoked the "many interpenetrating spheres of reality"—and acknowledged the superior ability of the greatest artists to get at the essential features of our experience.

My own limited experience of psychotherapy offers what may be a suggestive opening onto our subject. In 1974 I had separated from my first wife and was preparing to marry a student almost ten years my junior, to whom I have now been married for forty years. My closest friend at the time was Farber, author of *The Ways of the Will* and a leading practitioner of existential psychology. Les was by no means enthusiastic about psychotherapy in general, and his own writing—brisk, anecdotal, searching, rigorously unsystematic—had little in common with standard psychoanalytic writing. Yet he was insistent that, before going further with my plans to divorce and remarry, I go into therapy and attempt to get to the bottom of the feelings that had brought me to this fateful juncture. My cheerful, unambivalent resistance to this prospect intensified Les's insistence, and when he told me that he would see to it that I paid only what I could afford for the therapy, I capitulated, shaking my head at what I took to be my friend's misguided solicitude.

Though it was not possible for me to enter therapy with the distinguished analyst Les had selected—a man with the improbable name of Otto Will—I soon settled on a highly recommended, middle-aged clinician well-known to one of Les's colleagues. He was a mild and

gracious man, without manner or eloquence, the sort of man I might well have invited to play softball or tennis with me on warm weekend mornings in Saratoga Springs. I could see at once that he was delighted with me, and I wondered whether I had managed to betray, in our first half-hour together, some symptom or revealing habit that seemed to him to promise a decisive key to “tendencies” and “problems” of which I was as yet thoroughly unaware.

In fact, my therapist had known, even before I came through his door, what he wanted most from me, which was not—or not at first—a key to my “problems,” but a glimpse into the life of my friend Les Farber, about whom he began to ask me one question after another. Did I think it odd that my friend would take it upon himself to select a therapist for me? How had we come to be the closest of friends? Was it true that Les was married to a former patient? Was he as aloof a father as he was reputed to be? Had I met, at the Farber apartment, former patients, long-term inmates at one or another mental institution, and was it true that many such people were included in the good doctor’s intimate circle? How would I describe Les’s interpersonal affect?

As I quickly understood, my new therapist was, had been, a devoted reader of Les Farber’s writings on envy, despair, suicide, anxiety, and will, and he was eager to learn what he could about the personal life of someone he deeply admired. The fact that Les was not a man much given to sharing, or discussing, or publishing details of his private life made him seem—certainly to my therapist—fascinating, and no doubt he took my own reluctance to betray anything of Les’s private affairs as a mark of the larger pattern of resistance he hoped to break through.

Even when I had made it clear to my inquisitive therapist that he would get

very little from me of what he most wanted, he found ways of introducing Les Farber into our sessions. Had I ever discussed “that” memory or episode with Les? When did I first reveal to Les that I was “interested” in a student in one of my classes? Had Les ever told me that my own habits of secrecy and discretion were excessive or at least unusual for a young man just past thirty? Was Les’s wife more or less judgmental about what I was doing? I handled these questions and prompts as candidly as I felt I should, and I allowed myself to be amused at my therapist’s apparent obsession with Les Farber. Perhaps I had fallen for a carefully orchestrated strategy, and my therapist had brilliantly determined to open me up by overcoming my particular resistance to talking about Les, but that seemed to me no reason to be less than amused each time Les’s name came up. And on weekends in New York City, when my wife-to-be and I spent most of our time in the Farber apartment, I made the most of my therapeutic encounters by narrating for Les the latest efforts by my therapist to break through my “resistance” by casually asking me about my friend at the least expected moments. “Have you told him yet that it’s getting old?” Les enquired. “I will when it’s getting old,” I replied. “For the moment it’s about the only thing I look forward to in those sessions.” “But who’s studying whom?” Les wondered. “I mean, do you have the impression that he’s actually trying to get somewhere with you, apart from your relationship with me?” “Not sure at all about that,” I countered.

In fact my therapist did hope to get somewhere with me. Though he was clearly frustrated by my repeated assurances that I had no misgivings about the course I had adopted and no fear that the young woman I intended to marry would soon decide that she had made a dreadful mistake, he allowed me my assurances and soon turned to dream analysis to get us past what was clearly an impasse. The problem here was that I was not

much of a dreamer. I rarely had memorable dreams, and I rapidly ran through the few I was able to reconstruct, none of them especially recent. “Are you sure that’s all there is?” my therapist asked me, clearly disappointed, a little skeptical. “I told you,” I said, “and don’t tell me you think I’m holding out on you.”

At this point, eight weeks or so into our time together, it occurred to me that this very nice man would dismiss me. We had covered —so it seemed to me—grounds sufficient to establish that I was not in conflict about my choices and that I was aware of the difficulties I would likely have to confront in the years ahead. If my therapist conceded that we had gone on with the so-called therapy long enough, my friend Les would surely accept his verdict, and that would be that.

But before I could bring myself to ask whether we were through, my therapist began to ask me whether I could think of some dreams told to me by others. Perhaps even Les had confided one or two to me in the course of the many hours we had spent together? No, I assured him, so far as I could recall, no one had confided any dreams to me, and I was certain that Les would never be moved to such a confidence, not with me, not with anyone. “Sorry,” I said. “For what?” he asked. “For not being more helpful.”

“Oh. That’s not a problem,” he said, smiling. “I mean, you’re a literary man, and you know, I’ve looked up some of your essays, and I know you’ve thought a lot about dreams. So why don’t we just start taking apart some really juicy ones. You know what I mean, like one of Raskolnikov’s dreams from *Crime and Punishment*. Did you ever read Moravia’s novel *The Conformist*? And then, no reason why not, we can go into film. I read your essay on Bergman’s *Persona*, and as you know, there are lots of dreams in *Wild Strawberries* and other Bergman films. That’ll

keep us going for a long time, don't you think?"

In truth, we did not go on very long with this charming procedure. After helping my therapist to unpack a number of richly loaded dream sequences in Bergman and more than once reminding him that the more obvious among them were the least compelling, I asked, simply, what he hoped to accomplish. Was I bored with this activity? he wanted to know. Yes, frankly, I was bored, and working hard not to feel irritated by what I took to be a waste of time. "You never know," my therapist declared, "what will come of something like this until you've tried it."

"Well," I replied, "I've tried it, and I've concluded that I understand the dreams in Bergman's films all too well. I guess I'm really only interested in dreams that resist me more than some of Bergman's do. I like dreams to be recalcitrant. And that's what I want from art as well, that it not yield entirely to my purposes."

That was the last of my clinical sessions with my therapist. We parted with a handshake and an exchange of jokes, my best and his. In leaving this, my only "extended" therapeutic encounter, which had lasted all of eleven sessions, I found that my misgivings about therapy in general had been confirmed. Theoretically it seemed, to me at least, there was nothing whatever to object to in the prospect of a talking cure. My friend Les had himself modestly recommended good talk, honest talk—what he called "real talk"—as a distinctively human way to work through persistent dilemmas, though he was less than committed to the artificially controlled conditions often devised to govern talk between clinicians and their patients. At the same time, I knew that Les kept much of what he was going through—doubts, fears, depressions, rages—largely to himself and believed in the silent treatment, the conversation the sufferer

carries on only with himself, as often the only plausible way to think against stone's own will and to avoid "willing what cannot be willed," as he put it. Oddly, for a man who had written an entire book on will and was ever watchful for signs of the disordered will in himself and others, Les had been more than a little willful in his efforts to get me into therapy. After all, he had willed not only that I submit to therapy, but that I think it a good idea, and when, in the wake of my final "clinical" session, I told Les that I had never quite been able to accept that the entire business was anything but hopeless, certainly in my case, he smiled and said, "I know." Just that. "I know." A flash of the apparently imperturbable amenity Les reserved for special occasions, and for the closest of friends, who could be counted on to understand that, when Les said those words, "I know," he knew in fact everything and had, in this instance, indicted himself for willing what could not be willed as surely as I might have indicted him.

Among the many things that Les understood as well as anyone I have ever met is that art and literature, properly regarded, cannot be a forcing ground for ideas. Literature, as he often agreed, is never a medium fit for messages. When my therapist conducted me on a tour of Bergman films with the intention of having me raid them for "insights" or revealing "truths" about myself or "the human condition," he was, in effect, asking me to violate those works by using them to arrive at "conclusions." Of course a very large portion of what passes for narrative fiction and film begs to be violated and exists, in fact, for no reason other than to satisfy our common desire to be comforted by accessible "truths" and appealing "conclusions." But that is not what we want—ought to want—from serious works of art, works created by grown-ups, for grown-ups. And that sense, that there is a difference between one sort of work and another, and that there are radically different ways of approaching a work, is often not at all understood, not by psychoanalysts, and not, increasingly, even by

contemporary literary academics. One of the ways of willing what cannot be willed is observed in the effort to read a great film like Bergman's *Persona* or a great novel like *Crime and Punishment* as if there were keys to grasping the singular, not to be controverted, perfectly unanswerable meanings of such works—as if one could come away from them without misgiving, a confirmed message gripped and easily carried in the fist of one's little hand.

Do writers, filmmakers, artists, find anything useful in the domain of psychoanalysis? In a way, of course, the question is answered simply by invoking those famous words of Auden, who spoke of the way that Freud had become “a whole climate of opinion.” It is not possible for artists not to be influenced by psychoanalytic concepts, and the influence extends also to those artists and writers who loathe those very concepts and would hope never to be caught making use of them. What writer would not be influenced to some degree by the now very widely assimilated idea of unconscious motivation? Is there an intelligent writer who doesn't accept, with whatever reservations, that the word “transference” does actually refer to something that frequently occurs not only in controlled therapeutic encounters but in other interactions as well?

But though this is not the place for a detailed, wide-ranging analysis of the ways in which psychoanalytic concepts influence the creative process, I can offer a few tentative, further suggestions about this issue. As an occasional writer of fiction, I have the temptation to order my narratives in accordance with one or another premise drawn from the literature of ego psychology. Thus a character who exhibits a variety of more or less coherently interpretable behaviors threatens to become a plausible instance of secondary narcissism. Another makes choices that, while believable for such a character, never really address what he is after and

so puts me in mind of those substitute gratifications that point to a standard clinical disorder. A third figure, in yet another short story, enacts procedures that consistently require of him one or another kind of renunciation, so that he comes to seem guilty, repressed, a fellow in need of the proverbial ax to break the frozen sea within him, and thus resembles more than a little a clinical type I have encountered in case studies.

In each of these instances, as in many other narrative instances I might mention, I am confronted with a choice. I do not, in composing my stories, think deliberately, programmatically, about this choice. As I feel my way forward into each story, there are no principles I invoke to guide me. I move, however tentatively, with the sense that there are certain kinds of moves I do not wish to make. I do not wish to make my repressed character into a palpable symbol of the life not lived and to underscore, by contrast, the merits of a liberated existence as an appealing “message” that some reader, thirsty for inebriation, might deliriously carry off. Neither will my plausible “narcissist” be permitted to become a clinical object reducible to a set of symptoms and a suitable diagnosis that will, at the same time, confirm someone’s view of contemporary culture and the peculiar character disorders it tends to produce.

I do not know precisely what to call the species of discretion entailed in my inveterate resistance to letting my own creations become objects of use. I am as tempted to interesting ideas as are most other contemporary writers, and like most literary intellectuals, I can speak fluently about internalization and the superego, about displacement and dissociation. But when I am attempting to write a story, I say no, again and again, to anything that might enable confident psychoanalytic interpretation.

Does this—I ask myself—look like a classic case of displacement?

Then it must be adjusted so that it looks less so. Is this young woman a plausible instance of the victimization to which women are consigned by “patriarchy”? Then she must be made to seem a less securely plausible instance, less, perhaps, a victim of unseen forces than someone whose victimization has much to do with her own poor choices and her inability to recognize the advantages afforded to her by her native endowments.

Does this man’s commitment to duty and sacrifice express a compensatory pattern of behavior inspired by some overmastering sense of guilt? Then the guilt must be made to seem less persistent, the motivation for his behavior more various, less definite. There is, to be sure, an inevitable relationship between the general and the particular, the eccentric and the symptomatic, in works of literature. A character in a successful novel is always more than one particular person, and a situation is always in some degree a certain kind of situation likely to generate certain kinds of attitudes or behaviors. An unfaithful husband in a novel is not someone who just happens to fall into something. He is substantially if not entirely defined by what he does, and what he does must be made to seem necessary, even in some degree inevitable for someone of his disposition and circumstances. To think about him is to identify a logic that makes him important to us, not as a peculiar person involved in something dangerous or colorful or surprising merely, but as someone who shares with others more or less like him certain tendencies and a suitable fate that must not seem arbitrary.

The line between what is peculiar and yet also, in some degree, representative is not always easy to distinguish, and yet as readers we are alert to that line and to the several ways in which it is drawn and redrawn over the course of a narrative. What is the point at which Gustav von Aschenbach, in Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice*, ceases simply to be an

exhausted middle-aged writer seeking temporary refreshment and becomes an emblematic figure of civilization and its discontents, a man whose life has been lived like a closed fist, and who thus invites us to think of him as a man not sufficiently in touch with his own feelings and desires and consequently, as an analyst might well suppose, as a “symptomatic” being ripe for analysis? If Mann was too ready, too eager to invest in his character’s unmistakably representative and even emblematic features, I may be unduly resistant to seeing in my own characters such features for fear of compromising the full complexity, variousness, and unknowability of those characters.

It is not possible to declare in general for one or the other emphasis, for each work has its own design and its own peculiar balance of features. That is why writers often worry over such matters, and why contemporary writers often let us in on their travails. Was it a good idea for Vargas Llosa, in his novel *The Real Life of Alejandro Mayta*, to make his Mayta a homosexual? By doing so, he hoped to suggest one motive for the character’s having early become a revolutionary in his native Peru and having felt very much an outsider in a society to which he never really wanted to belong. When, late in the novel, the narrator tells his character about having made him, for purposes of the novel, a homosexual, the character protests, doesn’t quite see why it was necessary to portray him and his politics as in any way a reaction-formation stemming from “tendencies.” For Vargas Llosa, as for other serious writers, fiction is of course a fabric of lies that aims to tell, or to get at, some aspect of the truth, but it is not clear that the essential truth need have anything to do with a truth conceived as clearly reflecting a psychological condition.

When I wrote a story called “An Excitable Woman,” and my sister—a psychotherapist—read it, she recognized at once that the title character was,

unmistakably, a portrait of our late mother. Yet my sister protested that the portrait wasn't "fair," and in truth, she was right. It wasn't at all a fair or balanced portrait, leaving out, as it did, a great many features of the person both of us had known, and emphasizing without apology mainly the most unpleasant features of an unusually strident, unhappy, and often belligerent person. But the portrait was also, perhaps, unfair in not allowing the unattractive features of the character to seem the inevitable consequence of a nameable condition that might have exempted her from any imputation of blame. No, my character Rose was built to inspire distaste, and would not be reducible to anything as simple as "paranoia" or "narcissism." She was, she could be made to seem, one of a kind and yet—so I determined—she might also be made to seem familiar, almost a type, a recognizable species of a woman seething bitterly with ressentiment and owing a part of her condition to the fact, yes, that she was a woman and wanted desperately not to be vulnerable in the ways of such a woman. She would be—I would allow her to be—a suitable but by no means easy target for analysis.

The most subversive handling of the relation between literature and psychoanalysis is deliciously embodied in Italo Svevo's novel *Zeno's Conscience*, long known in the United States as *The Confessions of Zeno*. The confessions are written on assignment from a psychoanalyst, whose ostensible goal is to restore the character Zeno to health. Patient and analyst proceed on the assumption that psychoanalysis can provide coherence, pattern, what the critic Michael Hollington calls "a logical model of personal development from birth, or even before it, a psychopathology of everyday life that outrightly rejects the notion that any aspect of behavior is accidental or sheerly phenomenal. But the cure goes wrong," Hollington goes on; "the psychoanalyst, assuming that all behavior is significant, allows Zeno to write anything about himself, in any order; and Zeno produces a document, the book itself, which is... a text containing discoveries and

interpretations of experience which can exist independently of psychoanalysis.”

In its way, Svevo’s novel is a deeply ironic meditation on the will to understand and thereby to master the conditions of life. One of its targets is psychoanalysis, a fact signaled from the beginning, when we are “invited,” as Hollington has it, “to see the book [that follows] from a psychoanalytic perspective” in the “witty preface, written by the doctor, asking us to see Zeno’s rejection of a cure [which is played out through the course of the confessions] as a classic case of resistance.” As the doctor writes, anyone “familiar with psychoanalysis will know to what he should attribute my patient’s hostility.” But Zeno by no means presents a classic case of anything. He is in every way a peculiar specimen. Obsessed with discovering patterns that will steel his resolve to achieve this goal or to thwart that tendency, he discovers only that “any pattern fits, if you work hard enough at applying it.” He experiments with systems of all sorts, from patterns involving dates to the initials of names, even the sounds of words, believing that with their assistance “discords will resolve themselves into harmonies.”

Zeno’s laughable quest for resolving harmonies is informed by a standard psychoanalytic commitment to solutions. It rests on a belief in the importance of a fixed perspective, such as that provided by a so-called science that has its way of assigning particular causes to particular effects and thereby accounting for what seems confusing. But Svevo’s novel would seem to suggest, as Hollington has it, that such a perspective can provide at best only a “momentary point of balance.” Zeno himself draws the conclusion, after a great deal of turmoil and self-deception, that “Life is neither good nor bad; it is original,” and Hollington rightly declares the book “a relativistic novel” that “has no end perspective; it has the

perspective from the middle that informs much Modernist writing.”

Psychoanalysis can at best provide what Joyce, in *Ulysses*, calls “a retrospective arrangement” that may actually tell us almost nothing about the internal conflicts and outlying factors that inform the lived reality of any singular individual. Novels like *Zeno*—ironic, comic, inclined to laugh away theories of any kind—would seem to ratify the view of a modernist writer like Thomas Mann, who was drawn to the formal coherence of psychoanalysis but preferred to it what he called “the really fruitful, the productive, and hence the artistic principle . . . which we call reserve. . . . In the intellectual sphere we love it as irony . . . guided as it is by the surmise that in great matters, matters of humanity, every decision may prove premature.”

In this spirit we note that works of art are frequently designed to mock interpretation. Often a reader, or the viewer of a painting, is deliberately tempted—by the apparent signs embedded in a work—to set off in pursuit of meaning. The outrageous juxtapositions, visual puns, and naughty jokes depicted in a surrealist painting, for example, can seem to portend revelation only to underline the discovery that no resounding truth or meaning is on offer. A 2003 painting entitled *Villa* by the Montenegrin surrealist Voislav Stanic presents, as its literal center, a house, more or less like any house, beneath a starry night-sky more or less like any other, and a path in the foreground leading up to the house. There is an unmistakable order, a comeliness in the image, in spite of the figures neatly lined up along the margins of the path, which seem playful, not especially menacing, though decidedly odd, very deliberately placed as if with an obvious design on us. Does the bird’s torso stand for anything, we wonder? Or the broken torso of a dog? The nearest thing to an ominous detail is a stray belt curled at the front edge of the sidewalk so that it might well be taken for a snake. Elsewhere, on the lawn, the human legs beneath a bush seem not much more

than a joke, though with that snake figure, one has to wonder. The image as a whole is vaguely pregnant without yielding any aspect of a mystery.

And yet we incline to insist on meaning and revelation even where there is little to shape our speculation. Stanic's painting thus seems to us to conceal a "problem" and invites us to unearth the available implications. Are not one or more figures lined up along the path potentially phallic objects? Is not the partially lit doorway of the house itself an emblem of erotic promise and inarticulate menace? Such questions impose themselves on us, orchestrated as they are by an artistic intelligence that understands our susceptibility. Yet here all our speculation may well come to seem—like so much psychoanalytic interpretation—a game that everyone can play, and a not especially fruitful game at that. Though Stanic, like other artists of the past century, obviously knows a good deal about symbols and symbolizing, about the unconscious and the vocabularies of meaning derived from psychoanalytic investigation, he is reluctant to invest seriously in those vocabularies. His characteristic manner, in *Villa* as in other paintings, is ironic and teasing. The potential menace inscribed in his works is allowed to remain impenetrable, a fact of life like other facts of life that can point and point without explaining a thing. The dominant sentiment in much of the art produced within the cultures shaped by psychoanalysis is a self-canceling irony. In such work the artist must be willing to commit to something that he himself does not fully understand, however tempted he may be to explanatory principles that promise revelation and the end of uncertainty.

Of course each of the arts must have its own characteristic ways of negotiating the will to interpretation. In literature, especially in narrative fiction, we often find discrete moments in which a narrator or author purports to account for what is unfolding and appeals to our interest in

the significance of what would otherwise seem merely an indifferent plot. Often the process of interpretation is staged, so to speak, within the narrative itself, as in novels by Henry James or Proust, where we may find a fictional reader who will seem to operate much as we do when we attempt to decipher material that is or can be opaque. No doubt, when we think of such staged readings, many of us will think first of instances drawn from favorite film narratives, such as Coppola's *The Conversation*, or Antonioni's *Blow-Up*. In *The Conversation*, Coppola's Harry Caul attempts to understand "what really happened" by studying sound tapes that can perhaps take him where he wishes to go. In *Blow-Up*, the photographer-protagonist relies on photographic enlargements to help him reconstruct the stages of a crime he has happened upon. In taking us inside the process of analysis and displaying the gradual precipitation of shape and meaning, such works suggest that interpretation is as much at the heart of literary and cinematic narrative as of rigorous psychoanalytic practice. But what has been called our "compulsion to read" may take us in several very different directions, as we have observed. The correspondence between literary and psychoanalytic procedures may itself be somewhat misleading if we suppose that those procedures are essentially informed by the very same objectives and assumptions.

And with that, I conclude by saying simply that, like other disciplines, psychoanalysis has seemed to me promising and fearful, a temptation and a provocation. To those who have found in therapy some relief from painful emotional conflicts, my own misgivings will seem—should seem—beside the point. But then I have wished merely to offer here an "impression." Is it my impression—I invoke here the language of a prompt I received from the editor of a psychoanalytic journal—that "people are understood more meaningfully and vividly in fiction, poetry, drama, film, and other arts, than when portrayed in psychoanalytic

texts?” I have never read a psychoanalytic text that has understood people as “meaningfully and vividly” as *Anna Karenina*, *A House for Mr. Biswas*, *All Our Yesterdays*, *Clear Light of Day*, *The Charterhouse of Parma*, or *Burger’s Daughter*. But that assertion is but the beginning of another, much longer conversation.

“Psychoanalysis” is Excerpted from *The Fate of Ideas: Seductions, Betrayals, Appraisals* by Robert Boyers (Columbia University Press), which is available for purchase on the Columbia University Press website [here](#), and on Amazon [here](#).

Robert Boyers is professor of English at Skidmore College and founder and editor of the quarterly *Salmagundi*. He is also director of The New York State Summer Writers Institute. His many books include *The Dictator's Dictation: The Politics of Novels and Novelists* and a volume of short stories entitled *Excitable Women, Damaged Men*. His essays have appeared in Harper's, the New Republic, the Nation, Granta, the Yale Review, and many other magazines.