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Maud Ellmann

Review of John Forrester and Laura Cameron. *Freud in Cambridge*. Cambridge University Press, 2017.

Sometime around 1914-15, Lytton Strachey jotted down a spoof examination paper on psychoanalysis. Beginning with “elementary” questions on the reproductive system of the periwinkle and the biography of Oedipus, and proceeding through the history of French Letters to the psycho-pathography of Shakespeare’s sonnets, the advanced student is instructed to

Elucidate, on the basis of Dr. Freud’s teaching,

The Conversion of St. Paul.

The Channel Tunnel project.

The European War.

The growing popularity of tooth-picks in the United States.

Other exam questions include

Bestiality: should it be encouraged? And if not, why not?

What evidence of inversion can you point to in the works of

Either (a) Sophocles

Or (b) Rupert Brooke?

Finally candidates are invited to compose an essay (“Only one to be chosen”) on such titles as “The Influence of the Stool upon Social Institutions.”

In *Freud in Cambridge*, co-authors John Forrester and Laura Cameron [view](#) this

camp exam [as a clue to](#) “what a very well informed undergraduate . . . might have been expected knowingly to laugh at, if not actually to know about.” In point of fact, psychoanalysis never became an examina**ble** subject at Cambridge (although a 1921 [exam](#) in Moral Sciences included questions on dreams and wish-fulfilment); nor did Freud ever step foot in its chilly halls. Nonetheless, Freudian theory took this outpost in the fens by storm in the early decades of the twentieth century—an episode subsequently erased from institutional memory. *Freud in Cambridge* tracks the impact of Freud’s ideas on scholars in a wide variety of disciplines before the forces of forgetfulness set in.

Cambridge Freudians included Arthur Tansley, the distinguished ecologist who launched his publishing career with a bestseller on psychoanalysis in 1920; [an](#) early enthusiasm [that](#) receives scant attention from commentators on his work. Other Cambridge luminaries such as Joseph Needham—the famous biochemist, sinologist, nudist, high-church Anglican and “honorary Taoist,” regarded in China as the most important Briton of the twentieth century—also caught the Freudian bug, having been introduced to his ideas by Arthur Tansley’s lectures. [At](#) Gonville and Caius College, [where Needham was an undergraduate, he](#) later recalled that dinner table chat [in 1918](#) revolved exclusively around “Oedipus complexes, anxiety neuroses, penis envy, and Jungian archetypes.” [Needham](#) remained convinced that “Freud, Adler, and Jung were men of the deepest insight, as revolutionary and liberating in their way as Darwin, Marx, and Huxley had been before them.”

Meanwhile J.D. Bernal, the molecular biologist appointed as the first Lecturer in Structural Crystallography at Cambridge, who became a Marxist in 1921 and a Freudian shortly afterwards, predicted in an unpublished paper of 1922-3 that the place of economics in Marxism was destined to be superseded by psychology: “Freud will give us enough to start on. Money = excrement.” Still under the spell of Freudian thought, Bernal published his bizarre screed *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* in 1923, where he envisages the ultimate conquest by pure mind of its three titular impediments: the material world, the body, and the devilish elements of the soul, which correspond to the Freudian unconscious. This conquest culminates in Bernal's sci-fi fantasy of disembodied brains preserved in vats, sloughing off their redundant individuality by uniting into one immortal network of intelligence: “the first properly immortal envatted human brain in literature,” as Cathy Gere describes it. On the face of it, this fantasy owes little to the psychoanalytic conception of the mind, hopelessly entrapped in the flesh and its devilish desires. Indeed, in a 1968 forward to the second edition of the essay, Bernal disowned the Freudian component of the original version. His defection from psychoanalysis typifies the intellectual trajectory of postwar Freudians at Cambridge. Of those who succumbed to the Freudian “plague,” which peaked in Cambridge in the 1920s, most had recovered by the 1930s with few after-effects apart from a tendency to scoff at psychoanalysis, thereby confirming Goethe’s axiom that “there is nothing to which one is more severe than the errors one has just abandoned.”

Freud in Cambridge centres on two questions: why Cambridge? And why did Freud,

who never visited Cambridge in the flesh, cease to bedevil it after the 1920s?

Psychoanalysis came to public attention in Britain during the Great War, when W.H.R. Rivers, who came to be known as “the English Freud,” treated shell shocked soldiers at Craiglockhart’s military hospital with methods derived from a desexualized version of Freudian theory. What Forrester and Cameron show, however, is that Freudian ideas hit Cambridge several years before the shell shock episode. As early as 1912 Charles Tansley regaled his botany class in Cambridge with proofs of Bernard Hart’s *The Psychology of Insanity*, a pioneering study of Freud, which also (incidentally) influenced Ezra Pound’s conception of the image as “an intellectual and emotional complex.” In 1914 Leonard Woolf, a member of the Cambridge Apostles, wrote a sympathetic review of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, which praised Freud’s literary powers, his “broad and sweeping imagination more characteristic of the poet than the scientist or medical practitioner,” thereby setting the tone for Freud’s subsequent reception in Britain, where his work has fared better with literary scholars than with scientists.

The reverse, however, occurred in Freud’s pre-war reception in Cambridge, when scientists like Tansley, Bernal, and E. D. Adrian—the electrophysiologist who won the Nobel Prize in 1932 for his collaborative work on the function of neurons—pre-empted the humanities in embracing Freudian thought. Unlike Bernal, Adrian felt no need to renounce this youthful enthusiasm; in a 1953 review of Ernest Jones’s biography of Freud, Adrian affirmed that “we must accept Freud as one of the most important scientists of our time,” whatever the prognosis for “the present elaborate

doctrine of psycho-analysis.” Looking back on his years as a medical student in Cambridge shortly before the Great War, Adrian conveys a vivid sense of the excitement generated by Freud’s theories among the young; these “incredible” ideas “had all the attraction of a new and mysterious field out of relation with anything which we were taught in our laboratories. The older generation showed little interest in the subject. . . .”

Freud in Cambridge suggests that the question “Why Cambridge?” must be answered *ad hominen*, by reference to the extraordinary generation of thinkers that happened to converge on the ancient university in the 1910s and 1920s. In the other ancient English university, however, this catalysis never occurred, nor did a comparable cohort of scientists emerge in London, Manchester, or Edinburgh. By the early twentieth century Cambridge and Oxford had begun to bifurcate between the “Two Cultures” of the sciences and the humanities respectively. In Cambridge, several pressures contributed to disciplinary renovation, especially in the sciences. One was increasing dependence on government funding, the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century having depleted a major source of revenue for the colleges, which had formerly obtained much of their wealth from land. As a condition of government support, colleges were obliged to pool resources, the richest paying to support the poorest as well as to sustain a growing centralized administration.

Now that the autonomy of colleges was compromised, the university gained more

control over the educational curriculum, speeding up the previously glacial pace of change. A Royal Commission on the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge, established by Lord John Russell, two-time Prime Minister and Bertrand Russell's grandfather, drew up a series of recommendations intended to prevent sclerotic college statutes and archaic forms of University governance from derailing efforts to transform these institutions into modern research universities on the German model. Religious tests were abolished, thus loosening the Church's stranglehold; Special Boards of Study, the antecedents of the Faculties, were set in place. The nineteenth-century institution of the "Tripos" (a term deriving not from the typical three-year course of study, but from a bizarre tradition whereby an appointed wag, perched on a three-legged stool, would mock the graduating candidates) expanded to include new degree subjects such as languages, law, engineering, and theology. Meanwhile the teaching staff expanded with the introduction of new professorships and university lectureships. These innovations, accomplished piecemeal against dogged resistance from the colleges, spelt the demise of the medieval university, devoted primarily to the training of priests, and opened the floodgates to secular ization and the sciences.

Psychoanalysis never found its way into the Cambridge examination mill, excluded from both the Natural and "Moral" Sciences. The reasons for this exclusion, to borrow a Freudian coinage, were overdetermined. For one thing, the vogue for psychoanalysis seems to have waned before it could be institutionalized. Some Freudian enthusiasts, like Tansley, Myers, and Russell, abandoned Cambridge in

disgust at its conservatism. Others recanted, repudiating the Freudian mirages of their youth; still others found new outlets for their passionate intensity, such as Bernal's Marxist and anti-fascist activism of the 1930s. Significantly the clinical dimension of psychoanalysis never took root in Cambridge; instead practicing analysts, then as now, confined themselves to London, and largely to Bloomsbury and Hampstead, where Freud died in exile in 1939. In World War II, the influx of analysts from Eastern Europe failed to trigger a diaspora from London, despite intense competition for patients; even today it is hard to find an analyst outside a five-mile radius of the Freud Museum at 20 Maresfield Gardens. Peculiar to Britain, this centralization did not occur in the United States in the same period, when independent psychoanalytic societies sprang up across the East Coast and the Midwest.

In their introduction, Forrester and Cameron describe their book as a "prosopography" of Cambridge in the early decades of the last century. The term prosopography, adopted from the Annales School in France, generally refers to an investigation of a group of persons belonging a particular time and place, such as a medieval guild of butchers. The aim of this method is to restore a face [*prosôpon*] to the actors of history, to give "the very age and body of the time his form and pressure" (in Hamlet's words). Forrester, in collaboration with his wife the novelist, historian, and journalist Lisa Appignanesi, already produced a masterpiece of prosopography in *Freud's Women* (1992), their wonderfully absorbing study of the women in Freud's entourage, many of them major psychoanalysts in their own right.

Freud in Cambridge takes a similar approach to intellectual history, opening with biographical chapters on Tansley and the polymath W.H.R. Rivers. In these case studies, Forrester and Cameron apply the lessons of psychoanalysis to intellectual history, showing how Tansley and Rivers developed their theories in response to both external and unconscious pressures. That Rivers recorded and analysed his dreams is to be expected, given his professional interest in such phenomena, but it is more surprising that Tansley was interpreting his dreams before he even knew about Freud's theories. One life-changing dream in particular, which Tansley attributes to his amorous conflict between his fiancée and his new-found beloved, is ingeniously reinterpreted by Forrester and Cameron as a conflict between his allegiance to botany and his new-found attraction to Freud. Such speculations may raise eyebrows among the more empiricist, but this psychoanalytic slant offers a fresh perspective on thinkers whose dreams are rarely considered worthy of attention.

After the close-ups of Tansley and Rivers, subsequent chapters offer panning shots of groups, movements, and institutions, or focus on flashpoints in the reception of psychoanalysis, such as a heated debate set off by Tansley's favourable review of Freud in 1925. The third chapter surveys early undergraduate converts to Freud, including such rising stars as J.D. Bernal; the seventh is devoted to the Malting School, a short-lived educational experiment headed by psychoanalyst Susan Isaacs. The central chapters of the book address discipline formation in the University, where psychoanalysis never found a foothold, despite the enthusiasm of individual

philosophers, anthropologists, and literary critics. “Psychoanalysis left no institutional trace in Cambridge, no legacy, no research project inspired by psychoanalysis, no clinical grouping of significant analysts, nor even a consulting room to be visited by town or gown.” Like Freud’s mystic writing-pad, however, this erasure conceals a palimpsest of traces, which Forrester and Cameron decipher in the intellectual trajectories of multiple protagonists, ranging from the most illustrious (e.g. Russell and Wittgenstein) to the near-forgotten (e.g. the fetching Sebastian Sprott, whose taste for rough trade ultimately steered him into the study of delinquency; his attempt to invite Freud to Cambridge in the 1920s was scuppered by a jealous Ernest Jones, who wanted to keep the master to himself).

In this way *Freud in Cambridge*, beginning with the unlikely preposition of its title, reconstructs a history of the roads *not* taken despite the trailblazing efforts of distinguished pioneers; a history that dovetails with recent work in postcolonial and oceanic studies in challenging the presumption of continuous developmental time. This historicist presumption disregards the persistence of residual tendencies in culture, dismissing such counter-currents as irrelevancies. Or—to put it in psychoanalytic terms—Forrester and Cameron seek out the latent thoughts underlying the manifest content of the Cambridge dream, a dream that fulfils the wish to keep Freud out of Cambridge. But Freud, like sex, is everywhere, especially where his influence is most emphatically denied.

The prosopographical method dictates the structure of the book, in which each

chapter offers a constellation of biographies: the history of discipline formation, for example, is recounted through the backstories of its cast of characters. Key figures in the discipline-formation of psychology were Rivers and C.S. Myers, both of whom took part in the 1898 Cambridge anthropological expedition to the Torres Straits organised by Alfred Cort Haddon. Both also served as consultant psychologists for the British Army in World War I, with Myers publishing the first article on shell shock in the *Lancet* in 1915. Both deplored experimental psychology, regarding it as a dead-end that would “bring this University to ridicule,” in Rivers’s words. Despite this warning, the experimental branch prevailed in establishing the Psychology Tripos, which banished psychoanalysis to the unexaminable.

In philosophy the key protagonists in discipline-formation were G.E. Moore in ethics and Bertrand Russell in logic. Although Russell was excited by Freud’s work, his encounter with psychoanalysis coincided with his detachment from Cambridge during World War I, when he was convicted under the Defence of the Realm Act for his anti-war activities and dismissed from Trinity College. Writing in 1919, Russell praises the psychoanalyst as the ally of the “sceptical philosopher” in “showing how feeble is the rational evidence for even our most cherished beliefs.” But two years later in *The Analysis of Mind* (1921), Russell raises doubts about the credibility of Freud, claiming that psychoanalytic theory flatters the prim and proper by affirming their unconscious wickedness. In Freud, Russell banters:

‘the unconscious’ becomes a sort of underground prisoner, living in a dungeon, breaking in at long intervals upon our daylight respectability with

dark groans and maledictions and strange atavistic lusts. The ordinary reader almost inevitably thinks of this underground person as another consciousness, prevented by what Freud calls the ‘Censor’ from making his voice heard in company, except on rare and dreadful occasions when he shouts so loud that everyone hears him and there is a scandal. Most of us like the idea that we could be desperately wicked if only we let ourselves go. For this reason, the Freudian ‘Unconscious’ has been a consolation to many quiet and well-behaved persons.

This riff recalls Wilde’s aphorism that “wickedness is a myth invented by good people to account for the curious attractiveness of others.” As Forrester and Cameron show, Russell was “dogmatically certain of his own views, always liberally sprinkled with his glee in uncovering paradox, especially when it came to a judgement on self-deception, most especially that of others. . . .” Russell’s friend Maynard Keynes, himself an early advocate of Freud, detected a fundamental contradiction in Russell’s attitude to the irrational: “Bertie sustained simultaneously a pair of opinions ludicrously incompatible. He held that in fact human affairs were carried on after a most irrational fashion, but that the remedy was quite simple and easy, since all we had to do was to carry them on rationally.”

Evidently Freud never got under Russell’s skin: the philosopher was too convinced of his own rational powers, “despite the overwhelming evidence to the contrary supplied by his own very messy life and passions,” to face up to his darker impulses.

The same could scarcely be said of Wittgenstein, Russell’s one-time student whose

critique of philosophy was to dismantle the foundations of his mentor's work. "It will take a long time before we lose our subservience to psychoanalysis," Wittgenstein told Rush Rhees in the early 1940s, the "we" referring first and foremost to himself. By his own account, Wittgenstein woke up to Freud shortly after the Great War, in the "darkest and most turbulent period" of his life that followed his military service as a much-decorated volunteer in the Austrian Army from 1914-1918 and his subsequent internment as a prisoner-of-war in Italy. "I happened to read something by Freud, and I sat up in surprise. Here was someone who had something to say." On the down side, Wittgenstein objected to Freud's "fishy thinking" and distrusted his "enormous charm." Like Russell he suspected "there may be strong prejudices against uncovering something nasty, but sometimes it is infinitely more attractive than it is repulsive." Both attraction and repulsion characterize Wittgenstein's attitude to Freud, judging by this entry in his diary:

Freud certainly is mistaken very often and in what pertains to his character so he is really a pig or something similar but in what he says there is an awful lot. And that is true of me. There is a LOT in what I say.

If Freud is a pig, he also has an "awful lot" to say, like Wittgenstein himself. Indeed what Wittgenstein had to say, according to A.J. Ayer, amounted to a psychoanalysis of philosophy—an insight rejected by Wittgenstein with fury.

Wittgenstein, like Russell, was too detached from Cambridge to exercise much influence over the Philosophy Tripos, despite his resounding impact on the discipline. As Raymond Williams has observed, "People talk of the Cambridge of

Moore or Russell, or of Wittgenstein and Richards, and so on. Yet at any time such figures are a tiny minority in the whole intellectual life of the university.” Besides, such figures rarely take a hands-on role in constructing the undergraduate programme. Out of Williams’s list, only I.A. Richards had a lasting influence on the educational curriculum in Cambridge, specifically on the English Tripos, which was founded in 1919. This new Tripos took advantage of the anti-German sentiment fomented by the War to assert its independence from “the alien yoke of Teutonic philology.” The leading figure in this academic revolution was Richards, who had discovered Freud in the middle of the War and embarked on medical studies in order to become a psychoanalyst, only to abandon this ambition shortly afterwards. In his acclaimed book *Practical Criticism*, published in 1929, Richards invented the titular exercise which has become the trademark of “Eng Lit” at Cambridge, where students in small classes, or singly in examinations, are confronted with poems or passages of prose, stripped of all contextual information—dates, authors’ names, even titles—and instructed to subject these fragments to “close reading.”

Ironically Richards devised the exercise of practical criticism not to elicit students’ insights but to expose their “stock responses.” The purpose was to diagnose pathologies of reading, roughly equivalent to the repressions and evasions of the psychoanalytic patient. While Richards’s project seemed designed to isolate the text as an object of investigation—“the text and nothing but the text”—its true aim was to demonstrate “the disturbing and impressive fact . . . that a large proportion of average-to-good (and in some cases, certainly, devoted) readers of poetry

frequently and repeatedly fail to understand it.” By the time “Practical Criticism” became the staple of the English Tripos, enshrined in the title of an examination paper, Richards’s aim of inducing critical vices in his students had receded from view, giving way to a fetishization of close reading as the gold standard of literary “sensibility.” This development was inevitable, given the examiner’s impossible remit of judging the success of the exercise by the number of errors and prejudices it revealed. Paradoxically an exercise designed to smoke out bad reading habits came to be exalted as a foolproof test of critical acuity.

Freud in Cambridge contains many such amusing episodes. For all its weight of learning, including extensive archival research, the book retains its wit and playfulness throughout its prodigious length, rarely losing its narrative momentum. Not least among its charms is its extensive collection of photographs of the leading players in its intertwined plots. The book’s length, however, means that few will read it cover to cover, apart from the retired or the under-employed. Some of the lengthier quotations could have been paraphrased; but in a study covering so many academic fields, peopled by so many lively characters, cutting would be difficult. A detailed index, together with a table of contents listing subheadings as well as chapter titles, would provide a valuable roadmap for those who wish to dip into the book, especially because such dips are both enlightening and fun. Readers would scarcely guess, for instance, that the chapter drearly entitled “Discipline Formation—Psychology, English, Philosophy,” which stretches to 170 pages in manuscript, offers some of the most enthralling character-sketches in the book,

including those of Russell and Wittgenstein.

Like *Freud's Women*, *Freud in Cambridge* will appeal to novel-readers as much as to historians and psychoanalysts, providing a treasure-trove of anecdotes and gossip, along with rich analysis of intellectual trends. But *Freud in Cambridge* lacks a key ingredient of *Freud's Women*, an ingredient largely missing from Cambridge itself for much of the last century; namely women. "When things get dull," James Joyce once advised a dramatist, "bring a woman on the stage." It's a good rule for books and colleges as well. Given the exclusion of women from colleges like King's, home to the Apostles where psychoanalysis was energetically debated, it is not surprising that women feature mainly as wives and sweethearts, rather than sparring partners, in *Freud in Cambridge*. An exception is the chapter on the Malting House School, where Susan Isaacs plays a leading part, but only in the traditional role of childrearing rather than the cut-and-thrust of philosophical debate.

A more encouraging exception may be found in the fine penultimate chapter on the Bloomsbury analysts, whose connection to Cambridge is relatively tenuous. The success of women in British psychoanalysis was rarely matched in other professions, including academia; for women like Alix Strachey, graduate of Newnham College in Modern Languages, or Karin Stephen, onetime fellow of Newnham in Moral Sciences, getting out of Cambridge was the first step to pioneering intellectual careers. Symptomatic of the University's disdain for psychoanalysis, as well as its disdain for women, the Department of Experimental

Psychology declined to purchase [Karin Stephen's](#) monograph, based on [her](#) lecture course on "Psychoanalysis and Medicine" [delivered](#) in Cambridge in the 1930s. Due to the gender imbalance of the institution, *Freud in Cambridge* inevitably focuses on Freud's men to the exclusion of Freud's women. Even so, it's worth considering whether the absence of women from Cambridge has [something](#) to do with the [erasure](#) of Freud.

[No one did more to make up for this erasure than John Forrester. During his stellar career at Cambridge, which proceeded from a research fellowship at King's to a professorship in the History and Philosophy of Science, John tirelessly promoted a "return to Freud." But he did so without hero-worship, acknowledging the prejudices and inconsistencies that make Freud so disturbing, even to his admirers. A historian more than a disciple, John sought to understand Freud's work in its social and intellectual contexts, just as his book situates the early Cambridge Freudians in their institutional milieu, as well as in their families, amours, and social networks. Like Yeats, who was also influenced by Freud, John believed that big ideas, Freudian or otherwise, emerge out of "the foul rag-and-bone shop of the heart." To trace this emergence the historian must also be a prosopographer, alert to both the personal and the collective roots of thought.](#)

[While devoted to Freud, John also found him funny. He took much the same attitude to Cambridge, where his dedication to the institution never blinded him to its absurdities. At times his allegiance struck me as excessive; once when a graduate](#)

student asked his advice about applying for a job elsewhere, John replied, “It’s cold out there.” As a member of the Cambridge English Faculty, I often found it pretty cold *in here*; but John shrugged off the Cambridge chill, responding with affectionate amusement to the university’s pomposities, as well as to its arcane rules and regulations. During his long service as Chair of the History and Philosophy of Science he fostered a spirit of open inquiry shunned by more traditional disciplines, whose formation and deformation is tracked down in loving if damning detail in *Freud in Cambridge*. As an institutional historian John knew things had gone wrong in Cambridge—he particularly deplored the narrowing effects of the Tripos system, where students are largely restricted to a single subject—but he never lost his optimism for the future. His zest and humour, so irresistible in person, also grace this monumental study, which brings together his two great passions for Freud and Cambridge. It is tragic that his untimely death prevented him from enjoying the fruits of this lifelong project.