

## ***Dialogue Between Literature and Psychoanalysis***

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### **Abstract**

The lasting influence of Sigmund Freud's work on many fields of science and social thought has also left its mark on literature. Psychoanalysis has become a rich source of motifs, including the metaphysics of the will, unconscious spiritual life, pathological manifestations of love, and the semantics of dreams. The archetypal contexts of meaning and the original associative method of psychoanalytic treatment led to the crystallisation of new literary strategies and forms of writing (internal monologue, stream of consciousness, the equivalencing of emotional states).

The enduring impact of Sigmund Freud on the literary world is indisputable. Freud's literary works are *expressis verbis* stylistic masterpieces<sup>1</sup>, to such an extent that a literary prize for scientific prose bears his name. The challenges posed by the sheer volume of material to be compared will initially be addressed by methodically concentrating on a limited area of subject matter. The ancient Oedipus material, which occupies a central position in Freud's psychoanalytic theories, presents itself as a field of investigation. As demonstrated by the model case, it is possible to draw conclusions about other areas

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud's most important works, which have had a lasting influence on literature to this day, are: *Traumdeutung* (1900), *Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens* (1901), *Der Witz und seine Beziehung zum Unbewussten* (1905), *Drei Abhandlungen zur Sexualtheorie* (1905), *Totem und Tabu* (1913), *Vorlesung zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse* (1917 und 1933), *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (1920), *Das Ich und das Es* (1923), *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (1930).

of literature by examining Freud's influence on the representation of the Oedipus material in German literature.

The characteristic motifs of the Oedipus material – patricide and mother-son incest – originate from widely disseminated leitmotifs of world creation myths, from the mythologems of the displacement of the primal father by the son and the sacred marriage of the son with Mother Earth. This sacred act of the gods is symbolically reiterated by humans on an annual basis in fertility rites. It is this act that Oedipus performs, as one worshipped in the sanctuary of Demeter in Eteonos.

Upon entering the domain of poetry from that of myth and cult, the divine deeds of Oedipus are transformed into the misdeeds of a human being. It is imperative to recognise that humans should not intentionally engage in the sacred and essential actions attributed to the gods. The thematic elements of the oedipal conflict, encompassing the repression of the father and the hierogamy of mother and son, are metamorphosed into the poetic motifs of unconscious patricide and unconscious incest. The concept of the unconscious emerges as a significant factor in the narrative, particularly in the context of Oedipus's divine deeds. Oedipus' deeds, accomplished unconsciously, place him outside the sphere of morality.

The significance of Freud's discovery lies in its capacity to demonstrate a method for arriving at the truth that transcends individual perceptions of truth. [...] The application of the principle that truth liberates and heals is Freud's great and perhaps even greatest achievement. However, it should be noted that this principle has often been distorted in its practical application, creating new illusions<sup>2</sup>.

Nevertheless, Freud's discoveries were not the only significant forces shaping the modern worldview. Other major developments, including the First World War, social revolutions, technological advances, Einstein's theory of relativity, the decline of the Christian West, radio, and film, also played a crucial role in shaping the modern world. The confluence of significant advancements across diverse disciplines, each exerting an influence on literary expression and intellectual discourse, complicates the identification of a singular influence, specifically that of psychoanalysis, within the broader context of modern literature. The conventional notion of sexism is insufficient in itself to explain the phenomenon under discussion. The frequently bemoaned destruction of the harmonious image of humanity cannot be ascribed exclusively to the disillusioning effect of psychoanalysis. “The truly compelling question, therefore, is not whether there was or was not an Oedi-

<sup>2</sup> E. Fromm, *Sigmund Freud's Psychoanalysis: Greatness and Limits*, [in:] <https://books.google.pl/books?isbn=3959120486> (accessed: 9 September 2025).

pus complex in certain cultures or eras, but rather, what elements are historically and culturally malleable and what elements are immutable within the universal triad of father, mother, and child”<sup>3</sup>.

The broader tradition of the Oedipus story originates from ancient mythographers and paradoxographers, and evolves to a state of transformation within popular folklore. Mythographic traditions have been shown to eliminate the sphinx motif, weaken the fate motif of the oracle received by Oedipus’ parents and Oedipus himself, and transform the original abandonment on Mount Cithaeron into abandonment at sea. The motifs of such mythography subsequently served as a template for the incest legend of Judas that emerged in the Middle Ages. The parallels drawn between Judas and Oedipus emerge from profound despondency over culpability. As in the Latin lamentation of Oedipus, the moral concepts of guilt and despair are also central to the transformation of the Oedipus story into a Christian legend. In medieval theology, these concepts are linked to the problem of sin against the Holy Spirit, which is regarded as the only sin that cannot be forgiven. This sin can be defined as a state of desperation and despair (lat. *desperatio*), precipitated by an overwhelming sense of guilt.

In the 16th century, German literature established a third conduit for the dissemination of the Oedipus narrative: poetry forged a connection with ancient tragedy. Following the publication of Seneca’s works, it was the editions of the Greek tragedians, and particularly the Latin translations of Greek tragedies, that brought the classical Greek Oedipus poems to wider attention. In the cities of Wittenberg, Strasbourg and Altdorf, ancient tragedies **were** both read and performed. In addition to the primary objective of language training, the pursuit of moral goals is of paramount importance. Evidence of this phenomenon can be found in a Latin Oedipus drama by Wolfgang Waldung<sup>4</sup>, a dramaturgical adaptation and composition of the Oedipus tragedies by Sophocles, Euripides and Seneca, which was performed in Altdorf in 1596. As with the Middle Ages, humanism also exhibited a predominantly material and moral interest in the ancient Oedipus poems.

Following the establishment of *Antigone* as the prototype of ancient tragedy by Martin Opitz’s German translation of Sophocles’ *Antigone* in the 17th

<sup>3</sup> W. Schönau, *Zum Problem der Unterscheidung variabler und konstanter Elemente in der psychoanalytischen Interpretation*, [in:] *Psychoanalyse und die Geschichtlichkeit von Texten*, ed. by J. Cremerius [et al.] = *Freiburger Literaturpsychologische Gespräche*, vol. 14), Würzburg 1995, pp. 15f.

<sup>4</sup> W. Waldung, *Oedipus*, Altdorf 1596. See also: Johannes Bolte, „Waldung, Wolfgang“, [in:] *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie*, 40 (1896), pp. 724f. Online version: <https://www.deutsche-biographie.de/pnd117120855.html#adbcontent> (accessed: 7 March 2025).

century, the 18th century witnessed the onset of a veritable Oedipus renaissance. Subsequent to the translations and performances of Voltaire's Oedipus drama, German translations of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* followed. The Oedipus fable, for instance, continues to be a valuable source for moral discourse. The concept of guilt is mobilised in opposition to the predetermined course of events depicted in ancient tragedy. Johann Christoph Gottsched derives Oedipus' fate from the crime of patricide, an act that is only deemed criminal in the Christian sense; for in ancient times, the killing of an unknown man outside the borders of the state was not a punishable offence.

In light of this, Johann Heinrich Steffens authored the inaugural German Oedipus drama *Ödipus, ein Trauerspiel in Versen* (*Oedipus, a tragedy in verse*), which draws upon the fundamental narrative of Sophocles' *King Oedipus*. In this work, patricide serves as the conduit for the tragic events. In his Oedipus drama, Johann Jakob Bodmer also seeks to ascribe a moral meaning to the fate of the heroes. Nevertheless, he diverges from Gottsched's conception of guilt in 'Oedipus' and perceives the protagonist's life as a trial<sup>5</sup>. Oedipus, who does not despair in his misfortune, can hope for redemption in the afterlife; he will be transported to Kolonus. The Colonos motif of Sophocles' second Oedipus tragedy, *Ödipus auf Kolonos* (*Oedipus at Colonus*), is employed to resolve the tragedy of Oedipus' fate. Bodmer's idealistic composition bears a striking resemblance to the concerns of medieval incest legends.

The interpretation of the ancient Oedipus material as an expression of a pagan belief in fate, and the Biedermeier view of Ernst Feuchtersleben<sup>6</sup>, who in his Oedipus poems portrays the ancient hero as a sufferer who finally finds redemption in Kolonus, are the consequence of an idealistic image of Greece. This idealistic image, in the wake of Johann Joachim Winckelmann, saw the mythical hero as the archetype of noble humanity, admired ancient tragedy as an aesthetic work of art, and perhaps found access to *Antigone*, but not to the Oedipus tragedy, through this purely Apollonian view of Greek antiquity. The Oedipus material attracted external interest and was interpreted in a Christian, moral and fatalistic sense. The external imitation of the form of the Oedipus tragedy has been identified. However, the figure of the ancient Oedipus, the mythical layer of the material and the religious background of the tragedy, remained undiscovered.

<sup>5</sup> It is certainly to J. Ch. Gottsched's credit that he opened German literature to the adoption of philosophical ideas, even if he himself thwarted the best effects in a very humourless manner. His works had a strong impact on his contemporaries and are therefore of great importance for literary history.

<sup>6</sup> As a university lecturer, E. Feuchtersleben became one of the co-founders of psychology as a science and made Vienna the centre of research.

In addition to the intellectual movements that either view ancient tragedy purely from a historical perspective or reinterpret it in Christian, superstitious or fatalistic terms, Romanticism also gave rise to a movement that, as early as the 19th century, led to an inner religious view of ancient tragedy and paved the way for the poetry of the 20th century to uncover the deeper mythical layers of the Oedipus story. The impetus for this movement emanated from several sources, namely the liberation of eroticism from all social barriers, which consequently led to a re-evaluation of erotic motifs, including the incest motif. Furthermore, a new, partly psychological, partly religious perspective on ancient myths emerged, which, in turn, gave rise to the recognition of the common roots of myth and tragedy.

One of the most compelling pieces of evidence of the potency of emancipation ideologies during the Romantic period, and of the psychological ramifications of such ideologies, is furnished by Clemens Brentano's youth novel *Godwi oder Das steinerne Bild der Mutter* (*Godwi, or The Stone Image of the Mother*)<sup>7</sup>, alongside Friedrich Schlegel's *Lucinde*. The text delineates the peregrinations of the roving bon vivant Godwi, from his infatuation and bereavement for his mother to his advocacy for free love and the sepulchre of a courtesan, guided by women, who in this context represent the stronger sex in this context. The journey of Godwi can be seen as analogous to the psychological journey of the child who has recognised the sexual nature of his mother for the first time, as later theorised by psychoanalysis. In his depiction of the erotic-mystical love between Molly and Römer, who do not initially recognise each other as mother and son, Brentano provides another poetic foreshadowing of psychoanalytic insights into the unconscious erotic attraction between mother and son.

The psychological understanding of myth that the Romantics gradually gained also points to Sigmund Freud. Friedrich Schlegel acknowledges the symbolic importance of myths in expressing the deepest human emotions, perceiving the chaos of human nature reflected in the concept of a multitude of ancient gods. Schelling's theory posits that the genesis of the mythological tradition can be traced back to the fundamental aspects of primitive humanity. "The assertion is made that the elements with which humanity engages in the process of mythological composition are not the subjects in question; rather, it is the powers that arise within consciousness itself that exert influence"<sup>8</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> C. Brentano, *Godwi oder Das steinerne Bild der Mutter. Ein verwilderter Roman*, [in:] <https://www.digitale-sammlungen.de/de/view/bsb10857426?page=7> (accessed: 25 September 2025).

<sup>8</sup> F. W. J. von Schelling, *Introduction to the Philosophy of Mythology*, [in:] *idem, Complete Works*, sec. II, vol. 1, Stuttgart / Augsburg 1856, p. 207.

The historical phenomenon of the Dionysian is summarised by Johann Jakob Bachofen, who, with his matriarchy, still stands at the end of Romanticism<sup>9</sup>. Bachofen interprets the Oedipus saga as humanity's memory, clothed in myth, of the historical event of the overcoming of Dionysian, pre-civilised tellurism<sup>10</sup>, the state of lawless promiscuity, through the moral and masculine life principle of Apollo. Oedipus is depicted as a saviour of humanity. Finally, Friedrich Nietzsche, the pioneering thinker of the new century, offers an interpretation of the phenomenon of the Dionysian from a psychological perspective. In doing so, he effectively transcends the conventional boundaries of the unconscious, which are typically associated with the material central motifs of the Oedipus saga. In this way, he unveils the mythical and religious underpinnings that are intricately woven into these motifs<sup>11</sup>.

Psychoanalysis, with its scientific method of interpreting human mental life as instinctual life, is based on the materialism and naturalism that characterised the second half of the 19th century. However, in its attempt to blur the boundaries between meta-science and myth, to interpret metapsychological hypotheses as mythologems, and to develop instinct theory into a mythology, it follows Romanticism. It is evident that a multitude of connections may be forged between psychoanalysis and antecedent schools of thought. Nevertheless, Sigmund Freud appears to have pursued a distinct course of action. The author repeatedly emphasises his own lack of education in philosophical literature.

Freud's psychoanalytic perspective identifies the fundamental cause of the ancient drama of Oedipus in the individual psychological conflict of the incest fantasy. This fantasy originates from the child's ambivalent feelings towards their parents and is characterised by the common dream motif of the death of the parent of the same sex and incest with the parent of the opposite sex. Freud's theory posits that the Oedipus saga originates from an ancient dream motif<sup>12</sup>.

In Sophocles' *King Oedipus*, according to Freud's theory, the myth has already entered a stage of repression. The hero's original desires are only realised in his unconscious. The suppression of desires is facilitated by a sense of fear and guilt. The same repression is enacted during the dream by the pre-conscious, the psychological instance, which positions the fear affect alongside the wish images of patricide and incest, thereby effecting a kind of dream

<sup>9</sup> J. J. Bachofen, *Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynaikokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*, Stuttgart 1861.

<sup>10</sup> D. G. Kieser, *System of Tellurism or Animal Magnetism. A Handbook for Naturalists and Physicians*, vol. 1–2, Leipzig 1822.

<sup>11</sup> F. Nietzsche, *Die Geburt der Tragödie oder Griechentum und Pessimismus*, Köln 2012.

<sup>12</sup> S. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung*, Hamburg 2010, p. 639.

rehabilitation. From this analogy between dream work and tragedy, Freud can compare the plot of the Oedipus tragedy with the therapeutic method of a psychoanalyst, which consists of making the neurotic aware of the unconscious cause of his complex. In a similar manner, the unconscious nature of Oedipus is revealed to the audience: “The play’s narrative is characterised by a gradual escalation and meticulous delay in the disclosure of information, akin to the psychoanalytical approach, which unveils Oedipus’s dual identity as both the perpetrator of Laius’s murder and the offspring of the murdered man and Jocasta”<sup>13</sup>. Freud’s perspective on the figure of *King Oedipus* is that of a “tragedy of fate”. However, this notion does not imply a predetermined fate that ultimately leads to the downfall of the protagonist. Instead, it signifies an occurrence that unveils the clandestine aspirations of all human beings, which reside in the unconscious psyche of each individual and have the potential to become the collective fate of the group. The concept of fate, as it is traditionally understood, is transferred to the human psyche.

According to Jung, two distinct categories of neurotic individuals can be identified on the basis of their relationship with their mothers. The first category, termed the “neurotic Don Juan”, is characterised by a persistent renunciation of full erotic experience, thereby perpetuating a state of immaturity. In contrast, the “inactive dreamer” exhibits a preoccupation with the maternal realm, yet lacks the fortitude to pursue life’s aspirations and consequently experiences a state of alienation from reality<sup>14</sup>. By establishing correspondences between the inner life of the individual and humanity with myth-forming activity, and even placing myth in a relationship of dependency on psychological constellations, psychoanalysis unveils hitherto unexplored dimensions to the interpretation of myth, particularly the dimension of the archetypal as developed by Carl Gustav Jung. Conversely, other pivotal dimensions, such as religion and mystery, tend to be neglected.

Freud’s analysis of the Oedipus saga identifies motifs of patricide and incest as symbols of the primal and revolutionary liberation of the fraternal horde from paternal power and violence. These motifs represent two distinct aspects: firstly, the liberating nature of sexual instinctuality, and secondly, the passive fixation of the individual’s sexual desires on early childhood objects. According to Jung, religious myths represent endeavours to consume the incestuous desires of humanity’s infantile past. The mythical “image of the immaculate mother” is interpreted as a substitute for the actual creation of the child, arising from fear of the incestuous father. This combination of histori-

<sup>13</sup> S. Freud, *Die Traumdeutung. Studienausgabe*, vol. 2, Frankfurt am Main 2000, p. 266.

<sup>14</sup> C. G. Jung, *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido. Beiträge zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Denkens*, Leipzig / Wien 1938, p. 393, 369.

cal and psychological interpretation of myths, and reduction of mythologems to primal human acts that persist as unconscious desires in the human psyche, elevates the myth from the sphere of history and temporality to that of archetypal expression. In this realm, the myth becomes an articulation of human nature, thereby obviating the necessity for allegorical reinterpretation<sup>15</sup>.

When an author engages in the creation of literary fiction, they establish a means of processing repressed desires through the medium of socially appropriate expression, often without being fully cognisant of this process. It can thus be concluded that the interpretation of literary texts provides insights into the author's psyche, in a manner analogous to the interpretation of dreams and the subsequent insights they offer into the dreamer's psyche<sup>16</sup>.

In his naturalistic story *Ödipus im Norden* (*Oedipus in the North*), published in Swedish in 1892 and in German in 1907, Paul Adolf (pseudonym for Georg Wiedersheim) already anticipates important insights of psychoanalysis. The title of the story is purely symbolic. The main motifs of patricide and incest, both lacking the element of the unconscious the element of the unconscious, serve to recall the Oedipus myth. The narrative is set in a rural milieu, and the plot appears to be a depiction of an Oedipus complex in action. This observation underscores the profound influence of naturalism on the psychoanalytic movement. A notable point of convergence between naturalism and psychoanalysis can be identified in the domain of heredity theory, a concept that received significant attention from naturalist poets. In a manner akin to Paul Adolf, Gerhart Hauptmann too employs the theory of heredity to explore the theme of incest in his social drama entitled *Vor Sonnenaufgang* (*Before Sunrise*).

In line with psychoanalysis, the novel *Ödipus* by Wilhelm Speyer and the novel *Jokaste die Mutter* (*Jocasta the Mother*) by Curt Moreck reinterpret the Oedipus myth as an erotic experience. Speyer's novel portrays the healing of a young person from a neurotic complex in the manner of a coming-of-age narrative, while in Moreck's novel, the hero's journey after engaging in a sexual relationship with his mother leads, in a typical fashion, to encounters with prostitutes.

In his 1909 drama *Griselda*, subsequently expanded in 1942, Gerhart Hauptmann offers an interpretation of the Griselda motif as an expression of a neurotic complex. In this drama, the sudden and seemingly incomprehensible humiliation of the heroine by her husband is portrayed as a man-

<sup>15</sup> C. G. Jung, *Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido. Beiträge zur Entwicklungsgeschichte des Menschen*, München 1991, p. 308.

<sup>16</sup> H. de Berg, *Freuds Psychoanalyse in der Literatur- und Kulturwissenschaft. Eine Einführung*, transl. from English by S. Dietrich, Tübingen 2005, p. 96.

ifestation of such a complex<sup>17</sup>. In his novel *Die Insel der großen Mutter* (*The Island of the Great Mother*), Bachofen's conceptions of a primordial matriarchy, Freud's theory of the rebellion of the brother horde against the primal father, and Jung's theory of the notion of supernatural procreation arising from the fear of incest become evident. The psychological reality of the Oedipus complex is thus applicable to a wide variety of subjects. At the beginning of the 20th century, popular literature frequently employed analogous psychological accusations. Hans Lungwitz, for example, employs the incest motif to symbolise unbridled female and earthbound instinctuality in his novel *Welt im Winkel* (*World in the Corner*). Similarly, Emil Lucka portrays the profound sense of unity between female love and motherliness in his drama *Die Mutter. Ein Schauspiel in drei Aufzügen* (*The Mother. A Play in three Acts*)<sup>18</sup>.

Freud's discovery of the Oedipus complex led to a psychological re-evaluation of poetic material, which is also reflected in the striking preference of early 20th-century authors for the Ninon story and its central motif of a young man's love for a courtesan whom he does not recognise as his mother.

[...] The question of what love is, in contrast or in addition to instinct, narcissism, interest, hatred, humility or other concepts, and how it develops in culture or history, for example, is unrecognisable and therefore ultimately uninteresting. The phenomenon that can be described is the formation and subsequent dissolution of the semantics of love, which facilitates the expression of feelings (including those that are suppressed and hidden) that are themselves unrecognisable<sup>19</sup>.

Eckart von Naso subsequently elaborates on the Ninon theme in a comparable manner in his novel *Die große Liebende* (*The Great Lover*). It is interesting to note that, in contrast to the other figures discussed in this study, the

<sup>17</sup> „His next drama, *Griselda*, reworks a much-discussed theme in world literature. At its core is the glorification of those female virtues that men found most desirable: loyalty and gentleness, patience and submissiveness, both elevated to a degree that is incomprehensible to today's sensibilities. [...] What appealed to the 20th-century poet was probably the peasant woman as the prince's wife, but his *Griselda* promises neither humility nor obedience, and Margrave Ulrich does not cast his young wife out to test her, but leaves her because of her love for her and his child; the husband who is jealous of his own child is a new trait, foreign to the original *Griselda* story“ – transl. by Z. T. (E. Sulger-Biegel, *Gerhart Hauptmann*, Leipzig 1922, pp. 86f).

<sup>18</sup> E. Lucka, *Die Mutter. Ein Schauspiel in drei Aufzügen*, München 1918.

<sup>19</sup> R. Reiche, *Von innen nach Außen? Sackgassen im Diskurs über Psychoanalyse und Gesellschaft*, [in:] *Psychoanalyse und die Geschichtlichkeit von Texten*, ed. by J. Cremerius [et al.] = *Freiburger Literaturpsychologische Gespräche*, vol. 14), Würzburg 1995, p. 25.

neoclassicist Paul Ernst is the only one to depart from the Ninon cult. This is evident in his Ninon drama, in which he accuses the unmotherly prostitute.

In the literary works of Arthur Schnitzler, specifically his novel *Frau Beate und ihr Sohn* (*Mrs Beate and her Son*), and in Josef Popper-Lynkeus's narrative *Gährende Kraft eines Geheimnisses* (*The Fermenting Power of a Secret*), published in *Phantasien eines Realisten* (*Fantasy of a Realist*), the theme of a young lover breaking with his mother in the fulfilment of sexual desire is explored<sup>20</sup>. In the narratives *Schicksal spielen* (*Playing Fate*) by Jakob Wassermann and *Frühlingsnot* (*Spring Distress*) by Clara Viebig, both published in 1911 and 1912 in the Viennese newspaper "Die Zeit", the demise of the young lover is attributed to the unattainability of his love for his mother. This archetype of the hero, who is impeded by his conscious love for his mother, bears a psychological resemblance to the hero who, due to an unconscious fixation on his mother, is incapable of establishing a connection with lived reality. Ottomar Enking's popular novels *Wie Truges seine Mutter suchte* (*How Truges Sought His Mother*), *Dämon Mutter* (*Demon Mother*) and *Auch eine Mutter* (*Also a Mother*) are notable examples of this literary genre. In accordance with psychoanalytic theory, the character of Don Juan is representative of an individual who is unable to successfully transition into the real world, due to an unconscious preoccupation with his mother. This character type is exemplified in Kurt Münzer's novel *Der Ladenprinz* (*The Shop Prince*).

The reemergence of ancient themes and motifs in 20th-century poetry can be traced back to the late Romantic period, as exemplified by Bachofen's theories, Nietzsche's conceptions of the genesis of tragedy, and the contributions of Sigmund Freud and Carl Gustav Jung. Contemporary poets are now able to access the mythical layer of the material through the logos, utilising the form of the Oedipus material provided by Sophocles. As has been previously indicated in 19th-century theory, the incest motif occupies a central position in the new Oedipus poems. In the course of adapting such material, the pull of the unconscious incestuous content is overcome not on a real, content-related level, but on a psychological level. The sphinx motif also assumes significance for the content of Oedipus writings for the first time. As is evident in the narrative depictions of erotically updated Oedipal experiences, the dramatic adaptations of the Oedipus myth also reveal an endeavour to synthesise the material.

In 1898, Gertrude Prellwitz authored a conceptually constructed Oedipus drama entitled *Oedipus oder Das Rätsel des Lebens* (*Oedipus or The Riddle of*

<sup>20</sup> The depiction of incest in the quoted story led to the strict ban of the prose collection *Phantasien eines Realisten* (*Fantasies of a Realist*) until 1922.

*Life*)<sup>21</sup>. This work marks a significant development in German literature, as it represents the first attempt to engage with the mythical layer of the Oedipus material. While it does not yet condense the myth into psychological reality, it is a noteworthy pioneering effort in the realm of German literary exploration of the Oedipus narrative. In accordance with the theoretical framework proposed by Bachofen, the figure of Oedipus is regarded as a paradigm of heroism, tasked with the mission of subduing the dominion of the Sphinx and the darkness that pervades the earth. On the whole, the drama is a failed attempt, but one that is nevertheless significant and interesting for the literature of the time.

In Gertrude Prellwitz's interpretation of the Oedipus material, the poetical realisation is evident in Hugo von Hofmannsthal's play entitled *Ödipus und die Sphinx* (*Oedipus and the Sphinx*). In this text, Bachofen's interpretation of the myth as the foundation of human existence is combined with the spirit of Nietzsche, who understands tragedy as a psychological phenomenon, and with the insights of psychoanalysis, which does not place a mythological apparatus at the service of the logos, but seeks access to the myth itself through the human psyche. In the context of Gertrude Prellwitz's oeuvre, Oedipus emerges as a figure that is, in the words of the author, "redeemable". Following the Sphinx, the monster of pre-civilised tellurism that symbolises Oedipus' fear of incest, has yielded to Oedipus. Consequently, Oedipus and Jocasta enter into marriage in Dionysian immanence, as a "blind act of the gods"<sup>22</sup>. In Hofmannsthal's oeuvre, the original, mythical and cultic significance of the incest motif is brought to life. Concurrently, this matrimony symbolises a sacrifice that facilitates the transcendence of the era of pre-civilised tellurism, from which Oedipus continues to originate. Hofmannsthal's original intention, which was inspired by Sophocles' Kolonos motif, was to portray an aged Oedipus as the cosmic man who stands above the conflict between the divine and the human. However, the execution of this idea was not successful. This critique is attributed exclusively to Rudolf Pannwitz in the Dionysian drama *Die Befreiung des Oidipus* (*The Liberation of Oedipus*)<sup>23</sup>. Pannwitz interprets Oedipus's rapture at Kolonos as a becoming one of man with the divine events taking place in the cosmos. The human being is considered in this text from two distinct but connected perspectives: as both a creature and a creator.

<sup>21</sup> G. Prellwitz, *Oedipus oder Das Rätsel des Lebens. Tragödie in fünf Akten*, Freiburg im Breisgau 1898.

<sup>22</sup> H. von Hofmannsthal, *Ödipus und die Sphinx. Tragödie in drei Aufzügen*, Berlin 2014, p. 116.

<sup>23</sup> R. Pannwitz, *Die Befreiung des Oidipus*, [in:] idem, *Werke*, vol. 1: *Dionysische Tragödien*, Nürnberg 1913, pp. 199–249.

During the latter two-thirds of the 20th century, there was a literary tendency towards psychological penetration of mythical material. Simultaneously, a process of psychological updating of mythical content developed. This entailed the poetic typifications of mythical events acquiring more human and contemporary features. Max Mell's depiction of the Oedipus story in *Sieben gegen Theben* (*Seven Against Thebes*), drawing upon Euripides' *The Phoenician Women*, and Rudolf Henz's adaptation of the Gregory story in his drama *Der Büßer* (*The Penitent*), offer contemporary perspectives on the thematic exploration of ancient incest narratives. These narratives are portrayed as a statement on the redemption of humanity from the blood-based legacy of guilt, which is attributed to the pursuit of power by individuals. In Mell's work, the Christian martyr Antigone, the saviour of mankind, becomes the deliverer from the curse. In Henz's work, it is Gregory who, by renouncing the papal crown and returning to his homeland as a friar minor, leads his fellow men to God's mercy. However, if a Freudian influence can be identified in Mell and Henz, it is only a very restrained and indirect one. This is evident in the symbolic use of mythical material, which had already become a literary tradition at that time, and in the thematic exploration of the incest motif. In both works, the incest motif is employed as a sign of blood guilt and violence.

The rise of National Socialism resulted in a diminution of Freud's influence on German literature. However, it was Thomas Mann's oeuvre that succeeded in transcending this divide. In his novel *Der Erwählte* (*The Chosen One*)<sup>24</sup>, in which he engages with the old Gregorius material, Mann endeavours to bring the mythically distant events closer to modern consciousness by means of extensive psychologising of the material. The author demonstrates an understanding of myth in a psychoanalytical sense, perceiving it as a timeless, supra-personal and supra-individual reality of the soul. In his conceptualisation, the mythical becomes synonymous with the typical human condition (*conditio humana*)<sup>25</sup>.

The means by which the mythical-typical is exposed behind the apparent uniqueness of the events portrayed in the novel is twofold: firstly, the omniscient narrative stance; and secondly, the deep psychological penetration of the material. By accessing the subconscious domains of the protagonists' consciousness, Thomas Mann transplants the mythically distant motifs of the novel onto a universal human level. By establishing a correlation between the motifs and the sexual symbols of myth as revealed by psychoanalysis, the author elevates the plot to a level that is both humanly typical and timelessly

<sup>24</sup> Th. Mann, *Der Erwählte*, Frankfurt am Main 1992.

<sup>25</sup> Th. Mann, *Gesammelte Werke*, vol. 9: *Reden und Aufsätze 1*, Frankfurt am Main 1974, p. 494.

mythical. This process of reversal involves the initial humanisation of mythological content, followed by the subsequent enrichment of said content with temporal and human attributes, resulting in its reintegration into a realm of timeless validity. The propensity for human beings to engage in sinful acts is a characteristic that is well-documented. It is notable that this very attribute of sinfulness is highlighted as the underlying rationale for humanity's designated status. The incest motif functions solely as an ironic pretext for repentance, yet in reality, it serves as a symbol of humanity's nobility. The medieval concept of grace is supplanted by the notion that humanity is chosen by God on account of both its moral vulnerability and its spirit.

The trajectory towards the psychological-mythical typification of man may originate from mythical material, as exemplified in the oeuvre of Thomas Mann, or from profane modern material, wherein the realm of myth is unveiled through the profound inner life of the poetic characters. In his ironic novel *Ödipus siegt bei Stalingrad* (*Oedipus Triumphs at Stalingrad*)<sup>26</sup>, Gregor von Rezzori takes this second path. In a stream of poetic associations that threatens to overwhelm the novel's predetermined form, Rezzori typifies and mythologises a contemporary subject matter, which can only be linked to the Oedipus fable alluded to in the title of the work through psychoanalytic interpretation. Despite the utilisation of psychoanalytic insights by the narrator, an ironic distance from psychoanalysis is maintained, serving merely as a virtuosically handled literary instrument.

In this text, the author employs an associative narrative style, characterised by the dissolution of boundaries between dream and reality, fable and diction. Through this technique, Rezzori projects the individual fate of his protagonist, Traugott, onto a collective level that transcends the individual. Traugott's integration into the German aristocracy exemplifies the unassuming integration of this social class into the prevailing national consciousness, characterised by a sense of German ancestry and heroism. The German people's participation in the war, which materialised abruptly and unexpectedly, can be attributed to the prevailing sentiment of German identity. In the modern fable of his novel, Rezzori employs satire to reflect on the notion of indestructible German heroism, personified by an aristocratic individual of questionable moral character who, unlike the typical German soldier who perished at Stalingrad, survives and becomes the archetype of German humanity.

The incest motif, which in Hugo von Hofmannsthal serves as an expression of the Dionysian de-individualisation of man, in Max Mell and Rudolf Henz is employed as a symbol of violence and blood guilt, and in Thomas

<sup>26</sup> G. von Rezzori, *Ödipus siegt bei Stalingrad. Ein Kolportageroman*, Berlin 2005.

Mann is regarded as a sign of man's chosenness, becomes in Rezzori a psychological reality that once again forms the backdrop for the profane depiction of neurotic complexes. However, this erotic updating of the Oedipus fable remains merely an external pretext, attenuated by irony and transposed to the mythical level of timeless, eternally recurring German heroism. The inner relationships between the profane plot and the level of the timelessly typical are revealed primarily through the method of association – borrowed from psychoanalysis – which, breaking with the framework of traditional literary forms, uncovers inner connections between the most divergent events and reveals the super-real behind external realities. This literary method, already evident in the synthetic, narrative form of Thomas Mann's drama and in his abandonment of a fixed narrative position, has led to the dissolution of conventional forms in contemporary literature.

The significance of psychoanalysis for poetry is twofold. Firstly, it provides a vast new reservoir of material, including the unconscious life of the human soul and the world of dreams. Secondly, it facilitates the discovery of new symbolic relationships between the human psyche and mythology. The freshly explored domains of material and the exposed interpersonal and archetypal connections between these materials, on the one hand, and the innovative associative approach of psychoanalytic work itself, on the other, also compel poetry to reorient the poetic process and to make new efforts to develop poetic form.

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