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UNFORBIDDEN PLEASURES

Adam Phillips

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Against Self-Criticism

All silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility.

John Stuart Mill, *On Liberty*

I

Jacques Lacan famously remarked that there must surely be something ironic about Christ's injunction to love thy neighbour as thyself, because actually people hate themselves. Indeed, it seemed rather as if, given the way people treat each other, they had always loved their neighbours in the way they loved themselves. That is, with a good deal of cruelty and disregard. 'After all,' Lacan wrote in *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, 'the people who followed Christ were not so brilliant.' Lacan, at this moment in his talk, is of course implicitly comparing Freud with Christ, many of whose followers in Lacan's

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view had betrayed Freud's vision. And that meant, simply, that they had read him in the wrong way. There had been a failure of literary criticism – literary criticism being notably a phrase, and a practice, that has had rather more staying power than the idea of literary appreciation (literary appreciation, with its Paterian associations, has a whiff of the effete, whereas criticism always implies something more determinedly robust and intelligent). In broaching the possibility of being, in some way, against self-criticism, we have to imagine a world in which celebration is less suspect than criticism; in which the alternatives of celebration and criticism are seen as a determined narrowing of the repertoire; and in which we praise whatever we can.

Lacan's comparison, which he immediately qualifies – 'Freud was not Christ, but he was perhaps something like *Viridiana*' (the eponymous character in Luis Buñuel's film, who is a corrupted nun) – is itself a suggestive interpretation of at least this one element in Christianity. Lacan could be understood to be saying here that, from a Freudian point of view, Christ's story about love was a cover story: a repression of, and a self-cure for, ambivalence. In Freud's vision of things we are, above all, ambivalent animals: wherever we hate, we love; wherever we love, we hate. If someone can satisfy us, they can also frustrate us; and if someone can frustrate us, we always believe that

they can satisfy us. We criticize when we are frustrated – or when we are trying to describe our frustration, however obliquely – and praise when we are more satisfied, and vice versa. Ambivalence does not, in the Freudian story, mean mixed feelings, it means opposing feelings. ‘Ambivalence has to be distinguished from having mixed feelings about someone,’ Charles Rycroft writes, in his appropriately entitled *A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis* (as though an ‘Uncritical’ dictionary would be somehow simple-minded):

It refers to an underlying emotional attitude in which the contradictory attitudes derive from a common source and are interdependent, whereas mixed feelings may be based on a realistic assessment of the imperfect nature of the object.

Love and hate – a too simple, or too familiar, vocabulary, and so never quite the right names for what we might want to say – are the common source, the elemental feelings with which we apprehend the world; and they are interdependent in the sense that you can’t have one without the other, and that they mutually inform each other. The way we hate people depends on the way we love them, and vice versa. And given that these contradictory feelings are our

‘common source’ they enter into everything we do. They are the medium in which we do everything. We are ambivalent, in Freud’s view, about anything and everything that matters to us; indeed, ambivalence is the way we recognize that someone or something has become significant to us. This means that we are ambivalent about ambivalence (and the forbidden, we should remember, is an object of desire, which is why it is forbidden), about love and hate and sex and each other and ourselves, and so on. Wherever there is an object of desire, in this account, there is ambivalence. But Freud’s insistence about our ambivalence, about us as fundamentally ambivalent animals, is also his way of saying that we are never quite as obedient as we seem to be: that where there is devotion there is always protest; that where there is trust there is suspicion; and that where there is self-hatred (guilt) there is self-love. We may not be able to imagine a life in which we don’t spend a large amount of our time criticizing ourselves and others; but we should keep in mind the self-love that is always in play.

We are never as good as we should be; and neither, it seems, are other people. Indeed, a life without a so-called critical faculty would seem an idiocy, though quite what kind of idiocy is not entirely clear. What are we, after all, but our powers of discrimination, our taste, the violence of our preferences? Our insufficiency is patent (though we

do need to bear in mind that to feel not good enough is to have already consented to the standard we are being judged by). Clearly, self-criticism, and the self as critical, are essential to our sense, our picture, of our so-called selves. 'It often happens,' Swift wrote, 'that if a lie be believed only for an hour, it hath done its work, and there is no farther occasion for it' (*Examiner*, No. XIV, 1710). The lie that self-criticism can so easily be – the relentless misnaming of the self – seems to require endless reiteration, like the propaganda that it is.

And, by the same token, nothing makes us more critical, more confounded – more suspicious, or appalled, or even mildly amused – than the suggestion that we should drop all this relentless criticism; that we should be less impressed by it. Or at least that self-criticism should cease to have the hold over us that it does. One reason, for example, that we might be less impressed, less in awe, of the part of ourselves that criticizes ourselves, is that there is one very striking fact about it, which I will come back to. The self-critical part of ourselves – which Freud calls the 'superego' – is remarkably narrow-minded; it has an unusually impoverished vocabulary; and it is, like all propagandists, relentlessly repetitive. It is cruelly intimidating – Lacan writes of 'the obscene superego' – and it never brings us any news about ourselves. There

are only ever two or three things we endlessly accuse ourselves of, and they are all too familiar; a stuck record, as we say, but in both senses – the superego is reiterative. The stuck record of the past, it never surprises us ('something there badly not wrong', Samuel Beckett's line from *Worstward Ho*, is exactly what it must not say). It is, in short, strikingly unimaginative; both about morality and about our selves – the selves it insists on diminishing. Were we to meet this figure socially, as it were, this accusatory character, this internal critic, we would think there was something wrong with him. He would just be boring and cruel. We might think that something terrible had happened to him. That he was living in the aftermath, in the fallout of some catastrophe. And we would be right.

II

Hamlet, we should remember, wanted to 'catch the conscience of the king', and thought the 'play' was where it could be caught – 'The play's the thing / Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king'. For 'catch' the *OED* has: 'to seize or take hold of, to ensnare, to deceive, to surprise . . . to take, to intercept . . . to seize by the senses or intellect, to apprehend'; it also had, in the sixteenth

century, our modern connotation of 'to catch out', but the term derives originally from hunting and fishing. Clearly it would be a very revealing, perhaps overexposing, thing to be able to do, to have been able to catch the conscience of a or the king (and especially, perhaps, in 1604, when James I's kingship was in question); conscience did not then have simply or solely our more modern sense of some kind of internal moral regulation but also meant 'inward knowledge or consciousness'; the dictionary has, for 1611, 'inmost thought, mind, heart'. To catch the conscience of a king would be to radically expose his most private preoccupations and, in the words of the dictionary, it would be to expose 'the faculty or principle which pronounces upon the moral quality of one's actions or motives'. These definitions are interesting not least because they raise the question of just how private or inmost or intimate conscience is supposed to be. And questions about what we should want to know about a king, or indeed about any authoritative voice (about, say, James I, and what his religious affiliations might entail). We might wonder, for example, whether conscience itself has a conscience, and so on. Morality, one might think – not to mention the religion of state that the king represented – would have to be public. And yet these definitions contemporary with *Hamlet* intimate that one's morality might also be the most

private thing about oneself – private from the authorities, given that the language of morality was the language of religion, and *Hamlet* was written at a time of considerable religious divisions; but also, perhaps, private in the sense of hidden from the self.

One might carry a morality, live as if a certain morality were true, without quite knowing what it was. It would be like a morality that had no texts to refer to; nor even knew, perhaps, that reference was required. It could be like certain versions of Protestantism (the inner light is not a reading light). And at its most extreme the 'faculty or principle which pronounces upon the moral quality of one's actions or motives' might have no discernible or remotely popular cultural moorings. So in speaking one's mind one might be speaking all sorts of other minds, some recognizable, some not. Hamlet, Brian Cummings writes in *Mortal Thoughts*, 'far from speaking his mind, confronts us with a fragmentary repository of alternative selves, and searches within for the limits of being'. Once we have the idea of alternative selves, we will have questions about the limits of being, about what or who we can take ourselves to be. If conscience can be caught – like a fish, like a criminal – it might become part of that fragmentary repository of alternative selves that resembles a troupe of actors. If the play is the thing, then we can say that

it was useful to have a cultural form in which the conscience of a king – or indeed of anyone; conscience itself being like a king – could be caught, exposed, seen to be like a character. And therefore thought about, and discussed and argued with. What does the conscience of the king look like? Who, or what, does it remind us of? Being able to reflect on one's conscience – being able to look at the voice of conscience from varying points of view – is itself a radical act (and one that psychoanalysis would turn into a formal treatment). After all, if the voice of conscience is not to be obeyed, what is to be done with it?

Freud, it is worth remembering, used *Hamlet* in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) as, among other things, a way of understanding the obscene severities of conscience (he hadn't coined the term 'superego' in 1900: he first used it in *The Ego and the Id* in 1923). In what seems, in retrospect, a rather simple picture of a person, Freud proposed that we were driven by quickly acculturated biological instincts, tempered by controls and prohibitions internalized from the culture through our parents. Conscience, which Freud would later incorporate into his notion of the superego, was there to protect and prohibit the individual from desires that endangered him, or were presumed to. In Freud's view, we have conscience so that we may not perish of the truth – the truth, that is, of our desire. *Hamlet*

was unusually illuminating for Freud because it showed him how conscience worked; and how psychoanalytic interpretation worked; and how psychoanalysis could itself become part of the voice of conscience. It showed too that conscience was voracious in its recruitments. 'The loathing which should drive [Hamlet] on to revenge,' Freud wrote, 'is replaced in him by self-reproaches, by scruples of conscience, which remind him that he himself is literally no better than the sinner whom he is to punish.' Hamlet, in Freud's view, turns the murderous aggression he feels towards Claudius against himself; conscience is the consequence of uncompleted revenge. Originally there were other people we wanted to murder; but this was too dangerous so we murder ourselves through self-reproach, and we murder ourselves to punish ourselves for having such murderous thoughts. And we have to be clear about this: Freud is using *Hamlet* to say that conscience is a form of character assassination, the character assassination of everyday life. We are continually, if unconsciously, mutilating and deforming our own character. Indeed, so unrelenting is this internal violence that we have no idea what we are like without it. We know virtually nothing about ourselves because we judge ourselves before we have a chance to see ourselves (as though in panic). Or, to put it differently, we can judge only what

we recognize ourselves as able to judge. What can't be judged can't be seen. What happens to everything that is not subject to approval or disapproval, to everything that we have not been taught how to judge?

Freud's way of formulating this shows us how conscience obscures self-knowledge, and he intimates that this may be its primary function; that the judged self can only be judged but not known; and that guilt hides the self in the guise of exposing it. This then allows us to think that it is complicitous not to stand up to, not to contest, this internal tyranny by what is only one part – a small but loud part – of the self. So frightened are we by the superego that we identify with it, we speak on its behalf, to avoid antagonizing it (complicity is delegated bullying). Tragedy is the genre that shows us what is at stake in contesting and abiding by conscience, and its related terms. So in this play, or rather, in one way of seeing this play, Hamlet is arguing with his own and other people's consciences, with unique eloquence and subtlety.

Hamlet, Freud intimated, has such complex self-rumination and such relentless self-accusation – the two becoming virtually synonymous, the so-called internal world being among other things an ongoing revenge tragedy – because of the violence he has been unable to enact. The drama is internalized. Hamlet's battling with

his conscience – not the voice of conscience alone but the voices called up in Hamlet to contest it – is the drama of the play. So Hamlet, we should notice, is a genius of self-reproach, because of the dialogues with his conscience that he can engage in. In this play – and in this sense literature might be the thing to catch the conscience – the dialogues around and about self-criticism seem like one of the most imaginative things we can do. Hamlet captures our imagination because of what has captured his imagination, and the ways in which it has captured his imagination. It is the links between self-criticism and what Brian Cummings called the 'limits of being' that Shakespeare dramatizes in *Hamlet*. Indeed, it is only because our consciences are as they are – are the kind of artefact we have made for ourselves – that there is such a thing as tragedy at all. Tragedy, one could say, is the cultural form in which we have been trying to reveal something not about the real horror of life, but about the horror of life lived under the aegis of a certain kind of conscience. Self-criticism is nothing if it is not the defining, and usually the overdefining, of the limits of being. But, ironically, if that's the right word, the limits of being are announced and enforced before so-called being has had much of a chance to speak for itself. The Freudian superego is the limit that forbids you to discover your own limits. It is pre-emptive in its

restrictiveness. Hamlet's conversation with himself and others about conscience allows him to speak in ways no one had quite spoken before.

It is, then, of some interest that Freud chose *Hamlet* to start really thinking about conscience, and that thinking about conscience requires thinking about tragedy. There is, it dawned on Freud, something we may need to be freed from. After interpreting Hamlet's apparent procrastinations in the play with the new-found authority of the new-found psychoanalyst, Freud then needed to add something by way of qualification that was at once itself a loophole and a limit. 'But just as all neurotic symptoms,' he wrote,

and, for that matter, dreams are capable of being 'over-interpreted', and indeed need to be, if they are to be fully understood, so all genuinely creative writings are the product of more than a single impulse in the poet's mind, and are open to more than a single interpretation.

It is as though Freud's guilt about his own aggression in asserting his interpretation of what he calls the 'deepest layers' in *Hamlet* – his claim to sovereignty over the text and the character of Hamlet – leads him to open up the play, having closed it down (the Freudian superego always has a sovereign interpretation of our behaviour; we

consent to the superego's interpretation; we believe our self-reproaches are true; we are overimpressed without noticing that that is what we are being). You can only understand anything that matters – dreams, neurotic symptoms, literature – by overinterpreting it; by seeing it from different aspects as the product of multiple impulses. Overinterpretation here means not settling for one interpretation, however apparently compelling it is. Indeed, the implication is – and here is Freud's ongoing suspicion, or ambivalence, about psychoanalysis – that the more persuasive, the more compelling, the more authoritative, the interpretation is, the less credible it is, or should be. The interpretation might be the violent attempt to presume to set a limit where no limit can be set (if one interpretation 'explained' *Hamlet* we wouldn't need *Hamlet* any more: *Hamlet* as a play would have been murdered). Authority wants to replace the world with itself. Overinterpretation means not being stopped in your tracks by what you are most persuaded by; it means assuming that to believe one interpretation is to radically misunderstand the object one is interpreting, and indeed interpretation itself.

Tragic heroes always underinterpret, are always emperors of one idea. And the tragic hero is always the enemy of what Freud calls, and calls for – overinterpretation. Hamlet, we could say, is a great overinterpreter of his

experience; and it is this – the sheer range and complexity of his thoughts; his interest in his thought from different aspects – that makes him such an unusual so-called tragic hero, and that gives *Hamlet*, I think, its unique status. ‘Emerson was distinguished,’ George Santayana wrote, ‘not by what he knew but by the number of ways he had of knowing it.’ Freud was beginning to fear, at this moment in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, when he was writing about *Hamlet* – and rightly, as it turned out – that psychoanalysis could be undistinguished if it had only one way of knowing what it thought it knew. It was dawning on him, prompted by his reading of *Hamlet*, that psychoanalysis, at its worst, could be a method of underinterpretation. And to take that seriously was to take the limits of psychoanalysis seriously; and indeed the limits of any description of human nature that organizes itself around one essential metaphor. The Oedipus complex – a story about the paramount significance of forbidden desire in the individual’s development – was the essential psychoanalytic metaphor. Comparing *Hamlet* with the psychoanalytic readings of *Hamlet* as an Oedipal crisis would soon more than confirm Freud’s misgivings about the uses and misuses of psychoanalysis. Indeed, it confirms Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari’s point in *Anti-Oedipus* that the function of the Oedipus myth in psychoanalysis is, paradoxically,

to restore law and order; to contain within a culturally prestigious classical myth the unpredictable, prodigal desires that Freud had broached, and which psychoanalysis threatened to unleash.

So there is Cummings’s distinction between the notion of Hamlet speaking his mind as opposed to his speaking a ‘fragmentary repository of alternative selves’; and there is Freud’s authoritative psychoanalytic interpretation of Hamlet highly qualified by his subsequent promotion of ‘overinterpretation’; and Shakespeare’s and Hamlet’s troupe of actors who will perform a play that will be the thing to catch the conscience of a king. And there is of course Hamlet’s question in the famous soliloquy in which he tells us something about suicide, and something about death, and something about all the unknown and unknowable future experiences that death also represents. And he does this by telling us something about conscience. Or, rather, two things about conscience.

The first quarto of *Hamlet* has, ‘Thus conscience does make cowards of us all,’ while the second quarto has, ‘Thus conscience does make cowards.’ If conscience makes cowards of us all, then we are all in the same boat; this is just the way it is. If conscience simply makes cowards we can more easily wonder what else it might be able to make. Either way, and they are clearly different,

conscience makes something of us; it is a maker, if not of selves, then of something about selves. It is an internal artist, of a kind. Freud will say that the superego – which, as we shall see, is both similar to and different from conscience – is something we make, which then, in turn, makes us into something, into certain kinds of people (just as, say, Frankenstein's monster makes Frankenstein into something that he wasn't before he made the monster). The superego, I will say, after Freud, casts us as certain kinds of character: it, as it were, tells us who we really are. It is an essentialist: it claims to know us in a way that no one else, including ourselves, can ever do. And, like a mad god, it is omniscient: it behaves as if it can predict the future by claiming to know the consequences of our actions (when we know, in a more imaginative part of ourselves, that most actions are morally equivocal, and change over time in our estimation; no apparently self-destructive act is ever only self-destructive; no good is purely and simply that). The superego is the sovereign interpreter, and it forbids what Freud calls, usefully, 'overinterpretation', the word making us wonder what the standard of proper or sufficient interpretation might be if this (psychoanalytic reading) is overinterpretation, and overinterpretation is required. What is the norm, and what kind of norm is it, if this excess is necessary? The superego

tells us what we take to be the truth about ourselves. Self-criticism, that is to say, is an unforbidden pleasure. We seem to relish the way it makes us suffer. It gives, and has given, unforbidden pleasure a bad name. Unforbidden pleasures are always the pleasures we don't particularly want to think about; we just implicitly take it for granted that each day will bring its necessary quotient of self-disappointment. That every day we will fail to be as good as we should be; but without our being given the resources, the language, to wonder who or what is setting the pace; or where these rather punishing standards come from. How can we find out what we think of all this when conscience never lets go?

The new Arden *Hamlet* glosses 'conscience': 'some commentators argue that conscience means "introspection" here rather than a sense of morality . . . Certainly the context indicates that Hamlet means "fear of punishment after death" rather than "innate sense of good and bad".' The ambiguity, as I have said, between conscience as inner mentation as opposed to conscience as inner morality is integral to the matter at hand. The question is whether there is more to our inner worlds than our sense, innate or otherwise, of good and bad. Or indeed, whether there are multiple, or competing, or largely unconscious, moralities that we live by unwittingly. *Hamlet* makes us wonder: if conscience makes us cowards, what is

conscience like? Cowardice, after all, may be, as the dictionary puts it, the 'display . . . of ignoble fear in the face of pain, danger or difficulty', a coward being a 'pusillanimous person', someone 'wanting firmness of mind . . . mean-spirited' in Chambers modern dictionary. Cowardice is deemed to be unimpressive, inappropriate, shameful fear. We are cowardly when we are not at our best, or as we should be, when frightened. There are, in other words, acceptable and unacceptable versions of fearfulness; and this means we should be fearful in certain ways, and fearful of certain objects. Fear, like everything else, is subject to cultural norms. So if conscience makes cowards, it demeans us; it is the part of ourselves that humiliates us, that makes us, in that horrifying phrase, ashamed of ourselves. But what if it makes the very selves that it encourages us to be ashamed of? What if it makes us into humiliatable objects by always underinterpreting, by being so starkly narrow-minded? As Hamlet famously tells us, sometimes conscience torments us by stopping us killing ourselves when our lives are actually unbearable. It can, as Hamlet can't quite say, be a kind of torturer; even making us go on living when we know, in a more imaginative part of ourselves, that our lives have become intolerable. Conscience, that is to say, can seduce us into betraying ourselves. Indeed, in Freud's figure of the superego, as we

shall see, it is the part of our mind that makes us lose our minds; the moralist that prevents us from evolving a personal, more complex and subtle morality; that prevents us from finding, by experiment, what may be the limits of our being. So when Richard III says, in the final act of his own play, 'O coward conscience, how dost thou afflict me!', a radical alternative is being proposed. That conscience makes cowards of us all because it is itself cowardly. We believe in, we identify with, this starkly condemnatory and punitively forbidding part of ourselves; and yet this supposedly authoritative part of ourselves is itself a coward.

We are afflicted with its cowardice. Conscience is intimidating because it is intimidated. What, we might wonder – and this was to be Freud's question – is our conscience intimidated by if it is not intimidated by God? And how is it, and why is it, that morality as we have conceived of it is born of intimidation? What other kind of morality might there be? If it is, as Richard says, 'coward conscience' then we might be fearing the wrong objects in the wrong way. If we have been living by a forbidding morality, what would an unforbidding morality look like? We have to imagine not that we are cowardly, but that we have been living by the morality of a coward. So this too we need to consider: that the ferocity of our conscience might be a form of cowardice. Clearly there are moralities inspired by fear,

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but what would a morality be, or be like, that was inspired by desire? It would, as Hamlet's great soliloquy perhaps suggests, be a morality, a conscience, that had a different relation to the unknown. The coward, after all, always thinks he knows what he fears, and knows that he doesn't have the wherewithal to deal with it. The coward, like Freud's superego, is too knowing. A coward – or rather, the cowardly part of ourselves – is like a person who must not have a new experience (a character in one of Norman Mailer's novels says, 'you learn everything fighting your fear': conscience says, this is a fear you can't fight). Hamlet is talking about suicide, but talking about suicide is a way of talking about experiences one has really never had before.

*Who would fardels bear,
To grunt and sweat under a weary life,
But that the dread of something after death,
The undiscovered country from whose bourn
No traveller returns, puzzles the will
And makes us rather bear those ills we have
Than fly to others that we know not of?
Thus conscience does make cowards –
And thus the native hue of resolution
Is sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought,
And enterprises of great pith and moment*

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*With this regard their currents turn awry,
And lose the name of action.*

'The undiscovered country from whose bourn / No traveller returns' is also the unknown and unknowable future, 'bourn' reminding us that our relation to the future is also a continual 'being born', as well as something we have to find ways of bearing. One of the ways we bear the unknowness of the future is to treat it as though it was, in fact, the past; and as though the past was something we *did* know about (Freud would formalize this idea in his concept of transference; we invent new people on the basis of past familial relationships: as if we really knew those people and could use that knowledge as a reliable guide). This fear of death, and of the unknowable future – the fear that it will be, one way or another, only punishing, as our conscience instructs us – makes us cowards. There is, we should note, in this so-called melancholia no expectation that the unknown will be either better than expected, or wholly other than the way it can be imagined. 'The native hue of resolution', something perhaps more innate (the dictionary has, 'natural to a person'), is then 'sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought'. As if to say, thinking like this – thinking as conscience makes us think – is like an illness; if there is a pale cast of thought, there must be or

could be a bright, or brilliant, or full-blooded cast of thought; 'cast of thought' reminding us of the cast of a play, and that thoughts might be cast like actors are cast; thoughts in role, thoughts as playing parts, thoughts as scripted. Conscience as scripted can never be out of character; and we may never be quite able to work out who wrote the script. It is likely, in the context, and in the moment of the play, that Hamlet, as the Arden editors Anne Thompson and Neil Taylor say, is talking about fear of punishment after death; the life after death as conceived by the contested Christianities that Shakespeare inhabited. But Hamlet is also talking about, in the context of this play – a play acutely self-conscious about its own theatricality – how conscience feeds us our lines, and whether, indeed, conscience feeds us our best lines; especially given its pale cast of thought.

Talking about conscience though – and, of course, the prospect of death – gives Hamlet some of his best lines. If conscience doesn't feed us our best lines, Hamlet at least suggests, talking and writing about conscience might. Conscience, in its all too impoverished vocabulary and its all too serious and suffocating drama, needs to be over-interpreted. Underinterpreted it can only be taken on its own terms as propaganda (the superego speaks only propaganda about the self, which is why it is so boring,

and yet so easy to listen to). Psychoanalysis was to be about whether the superego – not conscience, but akin to it – could be changed through redescription. Something as unrelenting as our internal soliloquys of self-reproach, Freud realized, necessitated unusually imaginative re-descriptions. Without such re-descriptions – and *Hamlet* is of course one – what Cummings calls the 'fragmentary repository of alternative selves' will be silenced. The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune are as nothing compared with the murderous mufflings and insinuations and distortions of the superego. Because it is the project of the superego, as conceived of by Freud, to render the individual utterly solipsistic, incapable of exchange: so self-mortified, so loathsome, so inadequate, so isolated, so self-obsessed, so boring and bored, so guilty that no one could possibly love or desire them. The solitary modern individual and his Freudian superego, a slave and a master in a world of their own. 'What do I fear?' Richard III asks at the end of his play; 'Myself? There's none else by.'

III

Like all unforbidden pleasures, self-criticism, or self-reproach, is always available and accessible. What needs

to be understood is: why is it unforbidden, and why is it a pleasure? And, following on from this, how has it come about that we are so bewitched by our self-hatred, so impressed and credulous in the face of our self-criticism, as unimaginative as it usually is? And why is it akin to a judgement without a jury? A jury, after all, represents some kind of consensus as an alternative to autocracy (when Algernon Sidney wrote in his posthumously published 1698 *Discourses Concerning Government* that 'the strength of every judgment consists in the verdict of these juries, which the judges do not give, but pronounce or declare', he was making the figure of a judge a spokesperson for a diversity of voices, not a sovereign authority). I want to suggest that guilt – apparently legitimated self-hatred – can also be a refuge. That we need to be able to tell the difference between useful forms of responsibility taken for acts committed, and the evasions of self-contempt (shame is as much about being exposed as about what is exposed). An orgy of self-criticism is always preferable to the other, more daunting, more pleasurable, engagements (or arguments: this doesn't mean that no one is ever culpable; it means that culpability will always be more complicated than it looks; guilt is always underinterpreted). And that self-criticism, when it isn't useful in the way any self-correcting approach can be, is self-hypnosis.

It is judgement as spell, or curse, not as conversation; it is an order, not a negotiation; it is dogma, not overinterpretation. Psychoanalysis, that is to say, sets itself the task of wanting to have a conversation with someone who, because he knows what a conversation is, is determinedly never going to have one. The superego is both a figure for the supreme narcissist, and is itself a supreme narcissist. Like the referee in football, the superego is always right, even when he is wrong.

The Freudian superego is a boring and vicious soliloquist with an audience of one. Because the superego, in Freud's view, is a made-up voice – a made-up part – it has a history. Freud sets himself the task of tracing this history with a view to modifying it. And in order to do this he has to create a genealogy that begins with the more traditional, non-secular idea of conscience. Separating out conscience from his new, apparently secular, concept of the superego involves Freud in all the contradictions attendant on unravelling one's history. To put it as simply as possible, Freud's parents, Freud's forebears, like most of the people living in *fin de siècle* Vienna, probably thought of themselves as having consciences; and whatever else they felt about these consciences they were the more or less acknowledged legacy of a religious past, a cultural inheritance. Their consciences were one of the signs of the

traditions they belonged to; their more or less shared assumptions about what to do when. Freud wanted to describe what was, in effect, the secular heir of these religious and secularized-religious consciences as the superego. In the telling image in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud writes of the individual as a 'conquered city', living under the regime of the superego.

'We see how one part of the ego,' Freud wrote in *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), 'sets itself over against the other, judges it critically and, as it were, takes it as its object.' The mind, so to speak, splits itself in two, and one part sets itself over the other to judge it. It 'takes it as its object'; that is to say, the superego treats the ego as though it were an object not a person. In other words, the superego, the inner judge, radically misrecognizes the ego; it treats it, for example, as though it can't answer back, as though it doesn't have a mind of its own (it is noticeable how merciless and unsympathetic we are to ourselves in our self-criticism). It is intimated that the ego — ourselves as we know ourselves to be — is the slave of the superego. How have we become enslaved (to this part of ourselves); or rather, how and why have we consented? What's in it for us, or indeed for someone else? And in what sense is the superego Freud's implied critique of the Judeo-Christian religions and their God?

Internally, there is a judge and a criminal, but no jury.

Annabel Patterson writes in *Early Modern Liberalism* of Algernon Sidney, that 'his agenda was to move the reader gradually to understand that the only guarantor against partisan jurisprudence was shared jurisprudence'. Freud's agenda in psychoanalysis, continuing in this liberal tradition, was the attempt to create — to experiment with the possibility of — shared internal jurisprudence. Self-criticism might be less jaded and jading, more imaginative and less spiteful. The enslaved and judged ego could have more than his judge to appeal to (the psychoanalyst would be the patient's ally in this project, suggesting juries, revealing unconsidered aspects, offering multiple perspectives on underinterpreted actions: underinterpreted, that is, by the patient himself). This, of course, was not possible, at least not in quite this way, in a monotheistic religion, or an absolutist state. To whom could the modern individual appeal in the privacy of his own mind? To which Freud would answer, through the experiment of psychoanalysis, 'there's more to a person — more parts, more voices, more fragmentary alternative selves — than the judge and the judged' (or as Mill, whom Freud translated in his youth, would put it in *On Liberty*, 'the interests of truth require a diversity of opinions'). There is, in effect, a repressed repertoire. Where judgement is, there conversation should be. And we can add, where there is absolute authority,

there is the sabotaging of a conversation. Where there is dogma there is an uncompleted experiment. When there is self-condemnation it is always more complicated than that. Mercilessness is cowardice.

The superego, Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis write in *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, is 'One of the agencies of the personality as described by Freud . . . the superego's role in relation to the ego may be compared to that of a judge or a censor. Freud saw conscience, self-observation and the formation of ideals as functions of the superego.' It is useful to call the superego an agency, because it has agency; and the complementary alternatives – it is like a censor or a judge – speaks of the punitive, the forbidding and the restrictive. So, paradoxically, being forbidden something – being forbidden to speak, or to act, or to think, or to desire in certain ways – can be itself an unforbidden pleasure. As can turning oneself into an object; the object of censorship and judgement. But what is also perplexing, and adds insult to injury, is that Freud's superego, because it is more than conscience, because it includes this traditional form, is also, in a very limited sense, benign. It is the provider and the guardian of what Freud called our 'ego-ideals'. The ego-ideal, Laplanche and Pontalis write, 'constitutes a model to which the subject attempts to conform'. And, once

again, Freud preferred the multiple view: 'Each individual,' he wrote, 'is a component part of numerous groups, he is bound by ties of identification in many directions, and he has built up his ego-ideal on the most various models.' The ego-ideal is both composite – made up from many cultural models and influences – and divisive. It keeps alternative models at bay, but it can also be surprisingly inclusive. In this ambiguity, which Freud could never quite resolve, he was wondering just how constricted the modern individual really is, or has to be. In making the ego-ideal, at its best, the ego has overinterpreted his culture, beginning with the family; he has taken whatever he can use from his culture to make up his own ideals for himself. Whereas the superego as censor or judge, Freud believed, is simply an internalized version of the prohibiting father who says to the Oedipal child: 'Do as I say, not as I do.' But the superego, by definition, despite Freud's telling qualifications, underinterprets the individual's experience (in the Freudian story the father is never imaginative enough about the son, and so vice versa). It is, in this sense, moralistic rather than moral. Like a malign parent, it harms in the guise of protecting; it exploits in the guise of providing good guidance. In the name of health and safety it creates a life of terror and self-estrangement. There is a difference, which makes all the difference, between not doing something out of fear of

punishment, and not doing something because one believes it is wrong. Guilt, that is to say, is not necessarily a good clue to what one values; it is only a good clue to what (or whom) one fears. Not doing something because one will feel guilty if one does it is not necessarily a good reason not to do it. Morality born of intimidation is immoral. Psychoanalysis was Freud's attempt to say something new about the police and the judiciary, about the internal legal system.

We can see the ways in which Freud was getting the superego to do too much work for him: it is a censor, a judge, a dominating and frustrating father, and it also carries a blueprint of the kind of person the child should be, and therefore should want to be. It forbids, but it also promotes certain ideals and values. And this reveals the difficulty of what Freud was trying to come to terms with; the difficulty of going on with the cultural conversation about how we describe so-called inner authority, or individual morality. But in each of these multiple functions the ego seems paltry, merely the slave, the doll, the ventriloquist's dummy, the object of the superego's prescriptions: the superego's thing. And the id, the biological drives that drive the individual, are also supposed to be, as far as possible, the victims, the objects of the superego's censorship and judgement. The sheer scale of the forbidden in this system is obscene. And yet, in this vision of things, all this

punitive forbidding becomes, paradoxically, one of our primary unforbidden pleasures. We are, by definition, forbidden to find all this forbidding forbidden. Indeed, we find ways of getting pleasure from our restrictedness.

How, in Freud's view, has our virulent, predatory self-criticism become one of our greatest pleasures? How has it come about that we so much enjoy this picture of ourselves as objects, and as objects of judgement and censorship? What is this appetite for confinement, for diminishment, for unrelenting, unforgiving self-criticism? Freud's answer is beguilingly simple: we fear loss of love. Fear of loss of love means forbidding certain forms of love (incestuous love, or interracial love, or same-sex love, or so-called perverse sexuality, and so on). We need, in the first instance, the protection and cooperation of our parents in order to survive; so a deal is made (or, in a different language, there is a social contract). The child says to the parents, 'I will be what you need me to be, as far as is possible, in exchange for your love and protection.' Not unlike Thomas Hobbes's story about sovereignty – in which the sovereign literally makes life liveable – the protection required for survival is paramount: everything must be sacrificed for this, except one's life. Safety is preferred to desire; desire is sacrificed for security. But this supposed safety, at least in Freud's version, comes at considerable cost; at the cost, in effect, of being

turned into, by being treated as, an object. It depends upon our being made to feel that we are the kind of creatures that need an excessive amount of critical and condemnatory scrutiny. We must be packed with forbidden desires, if so much censorship and judgement is required. We are being encouraged to believe, by all this censorship and judgement, that forbidden, transgressive pleasures are what we really crave. That really, essentially, deep down, we are criminals; we need to be protected primarily from ourselves, from our wayward desires.

What this regime doesn't allow us to think, clearly, is that we are also packed with, and inspired by, unforbidden desires; or that our moral ideals could be anything other than forbidding (we cannot easily imagine 'the moral ideal being presented as *attractive* rather than *imperative*', as the nineteenth-century philosopher Henry Sidgwick put it in his *The Methods of Ethics*). Just as the overprotected child believes that the world must be very dangerous and he must be very weak if he requires so much protection (and the parents must be very strong if they are able to protect him from all this), similarly we have been terrorized by all this censorship and judgement into believing that we are essentially radically antisocial and, indeed, dangerous to ourselves and others. We must be the only animal that lives as though this grandiose absurdity were true.

IV

The books we read in adolescence often have an extraordinary effect on our lives. They are, among other things, an attempt at regime change. In Freud's language we could say that we free ourselves of our parents' ideals for us by beginning to use the available culture to make up our own ego-ideals, to evolve a sense of our own affinities beyond the family, to speak a language that is more our own. In the self-fashioning of adolescence, reading, for those people who like it – and for many people music and films are much more important – begins to really take, having a subtle and often indiscernible effect throughout a person's life. We should, therefore, note, by way of conclusion, Freud's adolescent passion for *Don Quixote*, a story about a 'madman', as he is frequently referred to in the book, whose life is eventually entirely formed by his reading, in his case by the reading of chivalric romances. Don Quixote is a man who all too literally inhabits, living in and through, the fictions about knights errant that he has consumed. He is a fictional character who makes himself out of fictional characters.

As a young man Freud was an avid reader, and was very good at, and interested in, languages. And he learned

Spanish, as he wrote to a correspondent in 1923, for a particular reason: 'When I was a young student the desire to read the immortal *Don Quixote* in the original of Cervantes led me to learn, untaught, the lovely Castilian tongue.' This 'youthful enthusiasm' was born of a passionate relationship with a school friend called Silberstein. He was, Ernest Jones writes in his biography of Freud,

Freud's bosom friend in schooldays and they spent together every hour they were not in school. They learned Spanish together and developed their own mythology and private words, mostly derived from Cervantes . . . They constituted a learned society to which they gave the name of Academia Cartellane, and in connection with it wrote an immense quantity of belles-lettres composed in a humorous vein.

An intimacy between two boys that is based on a story about an intimacy between two men (in the service of a woman), an intimacy that inspires writing and humour and complicity. *Don Quixote* could be linked in many ways with Freud's life and the development of psychoanalysis (think of the deluded fantasist and the practical realist, the acquisition of social prestige and the psychopathology of everyday life, the power of language and

fiction in the formation of the self, psychoanalytic groups as cults that believe they are not cults – all pertinent to Freud and his work). Learning Spanish and reading *Don Quixote* together with a friend were part of Freud's unofficial education, which ran alongside his official, institutional education (Freud, like Don Quixote himself, was always interested in the unofficial life). But there is one motif that I especially want to single out in this text, so important for Freud and, not incidentally, written more or less contemporaneously with *Hamlet*, for the purposes of thinking further about unforbidden pleasure, and the often futile unforbidden pleasure of self-criticism. And it is, appropriately enough, about Don Quixote's infamous horse, Rocinante.

In a well-known passage in the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933), where Freud described the relationship between the ego and the id – between the person's conscious sense of themselves and their more unconscious desires – he used an all too familiar, all too traditional, analogy (as if to say: psychoanalysis is just a modern version of a very old story, which of course it also is). 'The horse,' Freud wrote,

supplies the locomotive energy, while the rider has the privilege of deciding on the goal, and of guiding the

powerful animal's movement. But only too often there arises between the ego and the id the not precisely ideal situation of the rider being obliged to guide the horse along the path by which it itself wants to go.

I take this 'not precisely ideal situation' to be an allusion, whatever else it may be in our overinterpreting it, to Don Quixote; and to what, in several senses, he was led by. If we read it in this way, the ego is the deluded fantastical knight who, of course, like all realists, is utterly convinced of (and by) his own plausibility to himself. And Rocinante, in this rather more Beckettian version, is what we call, perhaps appropriately, an old nag. The analogy is at once a parody of, and an exposé of, the cliché of the horse as elemental force. And where does Rocinante go, as Don Quixote is led by his horse? He goes home. But because he is a horse, not a person, home does not mean incest (nor, in all probability, does it mean where his parents are; it just means where he lives). Home, of course, has always meant more than incestuous desire; until, that is, it was underinterpreted by psychoanalysis. In this pre-Freudian and post-Freudian model of the so-called mind – one, perhaps, that Freud repressed in his urge to provide and make compatible a more scientifically bracing and traditionally religious model – the id is the nag Rocinante, the ego is

the mad Don Quixote, and the superego is the sometimes amusing, often good-humoured, frequently down to earth and gullible Sancho Panza. 'Sancho,' the critic A. J. Close writes in *Cervantes: Don Quixote*, 'is proverbially rustic; *panza* means 'belly'; and the character of the man is basically that of the clown of sixteenth-century [Spanish] comedy: lazy, greedy, cheeky, loquacious, cowardly, ignorant, and above all, nitwitted.' What does the Freudian superego look like if you take away its endemic cruelty, its unrelenting sadism? It looks like Sancho Panza. And like Sancho Panza, the absurd and obscene superego is a character we must not take too seriously.

'Sancho proves to have too much mother wit to be considered a perfect fool,' Vladimir Nabokov wrote in *Lectures on Don Quixote*, 'although he may be the perfect bore.' We certainly need to think of our superego as a perfect bore, and as all too gullible in its apparent plausibility. We need, in other words, to realize that we may be looking at ourselves a little more from Sancho Panza's point of view, whether or not we are rather more like Don Quixote than we would wish. We might, that is to say, get as much real enjoyment from life, if not more, from our unforbidden pleasures. And we may have underestimated just how restricted our restrictiveness makes us. Our pleasure in each other's company need not be quite so forbidding.