

Reading, Modernity, and the ‘Mental Lives of Savages’

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One is bound to employ the currency that is in use in the country one is exploring—in our case a neurotic currency.

Sigmund Freud, *Formulations of the Two Principles of Mental Functioning* (1911)

This article does not set out to forge an impervious argument but to juxtapose a series of impressions, like so many flashes of light, from which to intimate a shift in the history of European reading.¹ This coheres, at the turn of the twentieth century, around perceptions of Australian Aboriginality. My impressions have three sources: (a) high-profile British novels of the 1850s and 1860s with settings in, or significant references to, the Australian colonies; (b) ‘discoveries’ made by scientists of reading after 1878; and (c) the work of deeply influential European modernists James Frazer, Sigmund Freud and Émile Durkheim, whose theories of the evolution of religious belief made extensive use of Francis Gillen’s and Baldwin Spencer’s work on the Arrernte people, notably *The Native Tribes of Central Australia* (1899). In the interests of space I will here form impressions principally from sources (b) and (c), while my assertions about set (a) must, for the most part, be taken on trust. Within set (c), moreover, I will focus on Freud’s *Totem and Taboo: Resemblances Between the Mental Lives of Savages and Neurotics*, a work first published in German in the journal *Imago* in 1912-1913.

Before proceeding let me note that Freud and his contemporaries interested themselves in Australian Aboriginal peoples for two reasons: firstly, Australian cultures represented, in these writers’ minds, the world’s most primitive cultures; and secondly, the sheer success of the invasive imperial settlement of Aboriginal lands made data on them relatively easy to obtain. As Frazer put it in his 1911-12 Gifford Lectures:

Just as biology or the science of life naturally begins with the study of the lowest sorts of living beings, the humble protozoa, so we shall begin our enquiry with a study of the lowest savages of whom we possess a comparatively full and accurate record, namely, the aborigines of Australia. (Frazer 71)²

This is, of course, a completely discredited premise, but the erroneous ideas it gives rise to are highly significant for my purposes. Below I will illustrate the ideas, and their invalidity, by discussing at length a scene in Rolf de Heer’s and Peter Djiggir’s film *Ten Canoes* (2006).

I

In or about 1878, reading changed. Working in the Paris laboratory of Émile Javal, one Monsieur Lamare *heard* it change, just after his assistant had *seen* and then *felt* it change.

Un aide peut *voir* ces mouvements ; il peut les *sentir* avec les doigts posés sur la paupière fermée d'un œil.

Mais le procédé qui donne les meilleurs résultats est celui par lequel on *entend* ces mouvements au moyen d'un petit tambour, dont la membrane d'ébonite supporte à son centre une petite tige qui s'applique sur un point du globe oculaire (conjonctive ou paupière), sans aucun inconvénient et dont la caisse communique avec les oreilles à l'aide de deux tuyaux de caoutchouc. (Lamare quoted in Javal 129)³

What Lamare heard laid the foundation for the modern science of eye-movement while reading. And it still has the power to surprise readers. Shut your left eye by gently holding down the lid with your finger. As you continue reading this page with your right eye, you will feel your left eyeball make a series of short, sharp jumps, while experiencing no such sensation from your right eye. Really both eyes are working in unison: the jumps you feel from your left eye are caused by the series of jerks (saccades) and pauses (fixations) effected by your right eye while it reads. Perhaps the most disconcerting thing about replicating Lamare's discovery is the sense of losing control of reading coupled with the 'robotic' precision of the eye's newly evident movements.

After Lamare's discovery, the science of reading proceeded, in Dieter Heller's words, as a veritable 'cult of apparatuses', with increasingly elaborate equipment devised to observe, measure, and record saccades and fixations (Heller 37).⁴ This research also found the eye's gathering of information from the page was limited to those moments when it 'fixated' momentarily at a particular point along the line, reacting to general shapes, not individual letters, before making its leap to the next point. In 1908 Edmund Burke Huey recognized this as the decisive break from the historic understanding of reading. The 'old and deeply rooted assumption' about the smoothness of reading, wrote Huey, 'was founded partly on the general belief that the eye passed from letter to letter along the line, the recognitions following the fixation point successively', but science had proved otherwise (Huey 71).

Reading science's fixation-saccade series is the first of my impressions; experimental psychology's concept of projection is the second.

II

When inferring psychological processes from their new physiological observations of the reading eye, reading scientists built on Hermann von Helmholtz's 'theory of the interpretation of the visual sensations' (Helmholtz, *Treatise* I.47).⁵ Working with principles of sensory perception established by Johannes Peter Müller, Helmholtz asserted that the brain does not make vision from light but from stimulations of nerve cells as variously qualified by the intensity, wavelength and direction of the light

falling upon the retina. The brain thus interpreted retinal stimulations *symbolically*, *projecting* the reality that was most likely to have caused such stimulations in the first place:

Thus all the stimulations of the fibres of the optic nerve are referred out in space, according to the law by which luminous phenomena are supposed to occur in those parts of the field (or of both fields), where material objects appear to be that are in such a position to send light to the corresponding places on the retina. (Helmholtz, *Treatise* III.260)

Huey's *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* (1908) marks the point where Helmholtz's projection theory of visual perception is applied to a fully articulated theory of reading, including an explicit assertion that words on the page, also, are 'referred out in space' when reading. This derived from Huey's own experiments, building on more than a decade of similar work by others, which conclusively demonstrated that readers fill in, that is project and 'see', letters which ought to be in certain word-shapes but which, in the experiments, had been removed by various means.

In reading, the deficient picture is filled in, retouched, by the mind, and the page is thus made to present the familiar appearance of completeness in its details which we suppose to exist in the actual page. The defective retinal picture, taken in connection with all the other clues [sic] available to consciousness at the moment, *means* such a page, and we project this meaning outward, just as we fill in mentally the gap in the visual field left by the blind spot. (Huey 67-8)

Huey concludes:

The simple fact is that the words and all other objects that we ever see are thus thrown outward, projected upon a page in the case of reading, somewhat as a lantern might throw them outward upon a screen. In the case of perception it might be said that the mind furnishes the screen as well. (Huey 106)

Projection for Huey, then, is the principal function by which perception, and therefore reading, occurs: 'perception is always a projection or localization outward of consciousness'. Actual print matter has a part to play—perception 'is aroused or suggested by the stimulations that have come inward'—but it 'is conditioned strongly, also, from within' (Huey 105). In fact there is an almost instantaneous interplay between 'stimulations that have come inward' and projection, a form of reality testing, such that, with practice, an increasingly accurate though never absolutely foolproof vision of reality—in this case of what is actually printed on the page—is produced.⁶

III

In Freud's theory of projection, the next impression, projection is identified as 'a primitive mechanism', an ancient formation in the evolution of mental life pre-dating all forms of 'reality-testing', indeed needing no external phenomena to proceed. Now

Darwin, not Freud, is the progenitor usually identified in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century reading science; but Freud's own Darwinism enables the juxtaposition of his theories and the 'discoveries' made by reading scientists. Two of Freud's fantasies of evolutionary history will be useful in this regard: his construction of what I will refer to as a primeval slug, 'an undifferentiated vesicle of a substance that is susceptible to stimulation', in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* from 1920; and his description of the primal horde at the end of *Totem and Taboo*.

These fantasies are deployed by Freud to describe in evolutionary terms two fundamental principles of his psychology: *resistance* (here, protection against stimulation) and *projection*. The first, resistance, rests on the counterintuitive notion that our senses develop as much from a need to limit stimulation as to obtain information, as derived from the primeval slug's predicament, 'suspended in an external world charged with the most powerful energies; ... it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a protective shield against stimuli' (Freud, *Beyond* 297). Thanks to an evolutionary hardening of the slug's outer layer

the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity; and these layers can devote themselves, behind the protective shield, to the reception of the amounts of stimulus which have been allowed through it. ... *Protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of* stimuli. (Freud, *Beyond* 297-8)

'In highly developed organisms', Freud goes on, the senses have developed behind the shield 'to take small specimens of the external world, to sample it in small quantities' (Freud, *Beyond* 298). Thus the senses 'may perhaps be compared with feelers which are all the time making tentative advances towards the external world and then drawing back from it' (Freud, *Beyond* 299).

The first thing to note here is the correspondence between fixations and sampling. To extend the correspondence, one can see the fixation-saccade series in the notion of 'feelers which are all the time making tentative advances towards the external world [fixation] and then drawing back from it [saccade]'. The second thing to note is Freud's subsequent problematisation of the distinction between the slug's response to external and internal stimuli.

Towards the outside [the living vesicle] is shielded against stimuli, and the amounts of excitation impinging on it have only a reduced effect. Towards the inside there can be no such shield; the excitations in the deeper layers extend into the system directly and in undiminished amount, in so far as certain of their characteristics give rise to feelings in the pleasure-unpleasure series. ... This state of things produces two definite results. First, the feelings of pleasure and unpleasure ... predominate over all external stimuli. And secondly, a particular way of dealing with any internal excitations which produce too great an increase of unpleasure: there is a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield

against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them. This is the origin of *projection*, which is destined to play such a large part in the causation of pathological processes. (Freud, *Beyond* 300-301)

Freud's prioritisation of internal excitations in the primeval slug is also evident in his 1911 paper *Formulations of the Two Principles of Mental Functioning*, where he reasons that a

state of psychical rest was originally disturbed by the peremptory demands of internal needs. When this happened, whatever was thought of (wished for) was simply presented in a hallucinatory manner, just as still happens to-day with our dream-thoughts every night. (37)

Projection is here the first-born psychical activity and proceeds, with no reference to reality, as a full-blown hallucination: the living substance simply dreams up the satisfaction of its internal need (like hallucinating the consumption of food when hungry). This notion is elaborated in a footnote:

It will be rightly objected that an organization which was a slave to the pleasure principle and neglected the reality of the external world could not maintain itself alive for the shortest time, so that it could not have come into existence at all. The employment of a fiction like this is, however, justified when one considers that the infant—provided one includes with it the care it receives from its mother—does almost realize a psychical system of this kind. It probably hallucinates the fulfilment of its internal needs; it betrays its unpleasure, when there is an increase of stimulus and an absence of satisfaction, by the motor discharge of screaming and beating about with its arms and legs, and it then experiences the satisfaction it has hallucinated. (Freud, *Formulations* 37)

Using the hallucinating baby as an example of a primeval 'organization which was a slave to the pleasure principle' Freud converts into psychological terms the principle from embryology that humans pass through prior evolutionary states in the course of their physical development.

In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud is concerned with how the 'primitive mechanism' of unmediated projection, still evinced momentarily in infant behaviour, conditions 'primitive' culture. This is contrasted to the psychological mechanisms proper to 'civilised' persons and cultures wherein projection, while still powerful, has been counterbalanced by perception.

The projection of inner perceptions to the outside is a primitive mechanism which, for instance, also influences our sense-perceptions, so that it normally has the greatest share in shaping our outer world. ... [E]ven inner perceptions of ideational and emotional processes are projected outwardly, like sense perceptions, and are used to shape the outer world, whereas they ought to remain in the inner world. [...] Only with the development of a language of abstract thought through the association of sensory remnants of word representations with inner processes, did the latter gradually become capable of perception. Before

this took place primitive man had developed a picture of the outer world through the outward projection of inner perceptions, which we, with our reinforced conscious perception, must now translate back into psychology. (825)

This statement requires some unpacking: the issue is the distinction between *projection* (marked as primitive) and *perception* (marked as advanced/civilized); or more accurately between 'outward projection of inner perceptions' and 'reinforced conscious perception' of the 'outer world'.

Let me clarify this distinction with reference to a scene in *Ten Canoes*. That is, I propose to clarify Freud's notion of the 'primitive' projection of inner perceptions by concocting a Freudian *misreading* of the scene.

In the scene, tribal warrior Ridjimiriril (Crusoe Kurddal) spies an intruder whom he suspects is the kidnapper of his wife. Spearing the man at a distance, Ridjimiriril is dismayed to discover that he has killed a complete stranger. He and fellow elder Birrinbirrin (Richard Birrinbirrin) are considering what to do next when the screech of a cockatoo causes them to look cautiously about themselves. Clearly the screech means something significant to Ridjimiriril and Birrinbirrin which is impenetrable for most viewers. Elsewhere I have developed an approach to *Ten Canoes* which would render Ridjimiriril's and Birrinbirrin's reaction a deeply perceptive and entirely sensible response to a very real and materially threatening power; in this approach the characters' perception exceeds that of a non-Indigenous audience (Henderson). In my Freudian (mis)reading the perceptive abilities of the audience—here an audience of one; Freud—exceeds that of the 'primitive' characters: Ridjimiriril and Birrinbirrin are projecting inner processes which do not tally with reality as he knows it through the 'reinforced conscious perception' of the evolved human being. He 'translate[s]' the reactions 'back into psychology', surmising that the cockatoo lives in Ridjimiriril's and Birrinbirrin's 'picture of the outer world' developed 'through the outward projection of inner perceptions'; it lives in their dream-world, and it does so as a demonic ancestor. This rises from the fact that Australian Aboriginals, according to Freud, *have* advanced on hallucinating babies. They are not simply hallucinating the fulfilment of inner needs—like dreaming the consumption of breast-milk—but projecting 'inner perceptions of ideational and emotional processes', namely the most ancient of belief systems: totemism.

Now what distinguished Freud's approach to totemism from that of his contemporaries is his focus on taboo customs as cause and explanation of the totem (for others taboos are effects of totemism), and his drawing a comparison between taboos and the prohibitions created by 'compulsion neurotics'. 'Primitive' culture is therefore extrapolated from the pathological processes of neurotic individuals.⁷ Expanding on taboos, Freud writes that they

are very ancient prohibitions which at one time were forced upon a generation of primitive people from without, that is, they probably were forcibly impressed upon them by an earlier generation. These prohibitions concerned actions for which there existed a strong desire. (Freud, *Totem* 799)

In this case Ridjimiraril's actions (the spearing of a formidable stranger) rouses inherited guilt derived from ancient veneration for a powerful figure—an elder—which was unconsciously accompanied by a desire to kill that figure. When the elder dies, the prohibited desire is transformed into unconscious self-chastisement which is projected onto the dead body rendering it demonic. '[D]emons', writes Freud, are 'mere projections of hostile feelings which the survivor entertains towards the dead' (Freud, *Totem* 823). As the real memory of the actual ancestor fades, the 'capacity for displacement' of 'taboo customs' (and 'symptoms of compulsion neurosis') transpires (Freud, *Totem* 797): the demonic presence is displaced onto another object. In this case the cockatoo has been imbued with accusatory powers. Thus, in a Freudian view, Ridjimiraril's murder of the stranger is the transgression of a taboo which was always already desired: to destroy the power of others.

Another key aspect of my Freudian (mis)reading of the *Ten Canoes* scene is the *simultaneity* of Ridjimiraril's and Birrinbirrin's reaction to the cockatoo: a 'primitive' group psychology is in place. This is derived, in the Freudian view, from the Aboriginals' perceived proximity, in Freud's evolutionary terms, to the 'original deed' that prompted both the first group projection of unconscious guilt onto an external object and the sociability that process obtained. The 'deed', as described in the final section of *Totem and Taboo*, is the banding together of sons of a sexually-dominant male of the 'primal horde' to murder and eat their father, distribute his females between them, share the guilt, invest the murdered father's body with demonic power, and, at regular intervals, ritually re-enact the moment (in a 'totem feast') which marked the beginning of their society (Freud, *Totem* 884). It is the shared projection of the inner processes to which this 'deed' gave rise which more generally manifests itself as totemism.

In this regard, totemism for Freud is a 'stage' in the development of cultural life that has been surpassed in more 'advanced' cultures through individual reality-testing. As Freud writes in *Formulations of the Two Principles of Mental Functioning*, the development of the 'reality principle' was a 'momentous step' in evolution, heightening 'the importance ... of the sense-organs that are directed towards the external world, and of the *consciousness* attached to them', enabling the comprehension of qualities other than of pleasure or unpleasure, namely 'whether a given idea was true or false', engendering 'attention' from the 'special function ... which had periodically to search the external world, in order that its data might be familiar already if an urgent internal need should arise', necessitating the formation of memory, where such data is stored, and translating 'screaming and beating about' into 'action', the necessary restraint on which led to 'thinking' (37-8).

The evolutionary model of cultural development apparently occasioned by the reality principle can also be illustrated through Ridjimiraril's cockatoo. For a start, if Ridjimiraril had had, in the Freudian (mis)reading, 'a language of abstract thought through the association of sensory remnants of word representations with inner processes', he would have been able to *perceive* rather than simply project his own beliefs: it is the difference between seeing/hearing a demonic ancestor (projection) and saying *I believe that cockatoo is a demonic ancestor* (perception). If, pursuing this view, Ridjimiraril's mental life had developed still further, his conscious perception ('I believe that cockatoo is a demonic ancestor') would be 'reinforced' by

reality-testing and the powers of the cockatoo would diminish as they are tested by the senses through experience and are discussed in a language of abstract thought.

In modernity the cockatoo loses all that remains of its original 'richness' of meaning to become a comparatively weak ('empirical') creature of science. So too, for Freud, science abolishes the last major remnant in 'civilized' societies of collectively projecting non-reality-tested inner processes: religion. Thus the extraordinary reality-testing enabled by scientific apparatus—modernity's prosthetic sensory organs—leaves humankind in a 'sober world where there are only material values'. Hence Freud's warning when considering 'the world of primitive man':

We must beware of introducing the contempt for what is merely thought or wished which characterizes our sober world where there are only material values, into the world of primitive man and the neurotic, which is full of inner riches only. (Freud, *Totem* 897)⁸

If collectively projected religious belief has diminished, in modern individuals (and in unusually situated groups of individuals), another remnant of the pleasure principle's former domination of mental life is retained. Freud writes:

With the introduction of the reality principle one species of thought-activity was split off; it was kept free from reality-testing and remained subordinated to the pleasure principle alone. This activity is *phantasying* [sic], which begins already in children's play, and later, continued as *daydreaming*, abandons dependence on real objects. (Freud, *Formulations* 39)

Here 'daydreaming' and 'phantasying'—words forged in 'the language of abstract thought through the association of sensory remnants of word representations with inner processes'—circumscribe projection with perception: because of the reality principle one can *know about* its occasional surrender. Meanwhile, the artist, for Freud, works with another 'reconciliation' of sorts between the pleasure and the reality principles:

An artist is originally a man who turns away from reality because he cannot come to terms with the renunciation of instinctual satisfaction which it at first demands, and who allows his erotic and ambitious wishes full play in the life of phantasy. He finds his way back to reality, however, from this world of phantasy by making use of special gifts to mould phantasies into truths of a new kind, which are valued by men as precious reflections of reality. Thus in a certain fashion he actually becomes the hero, the king, the creator, or the favourite he desired to be, without following the long round-about path of making real alterations in the external world. But he can only achieve this because other men feel the same dissatisfaction as he does with the renunciation demanded by reality, and because that dissatisfaction, which results from the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle, is itself a part of reality. (Freud, *Formulations* 41-2)

What interests me here is the implication for *readers* of this vision of novelists as artists, as those who also momentarily turn away from reality to recognize nonetheless 'precious reflections of reality' in a strategically sanctioned 'phantasy'. The reading of fiction, then, relies on the 'one species of thought-activity' which 'was split off' from reality testing, where the 'primitive mechanism' of projection is resurgent. In this light modern novel-reading involves a momentary resurgence of 'savage' mentality.

This notion can be clarified with reference to Freud's early monograph *On Aphasia* (1891). There he accounts for a series of associations which determine childhood processes of learning to speak, read and write. A printed word invokes a memory of sound, notably a particular sound made by our parents, which 'acquires *its* meaning by being linked to an "object-presentation"' which 'itself is a complex of associations made up of the greatest variety of visual, acoustic, tactile, kinaesthetic and other presentations' (Freud *Aphasia* 221; emphasis mine). To read (and comprehend) is to follow a set of associations between printed shapes and object-presentations, the latter being open ended and peculiar to the individual though reality-testing renders them similar enough across the group to enable communication. That is, the printed word 'apple' is collectively associated with individual memories of sensory experiences of an apple which reality testing renders sufficiently similar across the group for us to agree on the association. Unless a specified apple is within reach of the reader, the word 'apple' printed in a novel or its counterpart in a biological treatise provoke much the same set of mental processes. The difference with novel-reading is that the *world* in which the apple has meaning is understood to be a virtual one. That world may afford 'precious reflections of reality', but it is not necessarily subject to reality testing in the same way: an entirely alternative reality (say, where apples float in the air) may have been collectively endorsed by readers in their submission to the author as 'king'. What distinguishes this from the collective projection by 'savages' of an 'unreal' epistemology is the *suspension of disbelief*.

That is, curbing the lasting return of savage mentality in modern novel-reading is a perpetual return to 'dissatisfaction' with the nonetheless acknowledged necessity of 'the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle' (Freud, *Formulations* 42).⁹ Put another way, a 'primitive mechanism' is necessary to the creation of any virtual world, but modern novel-reading must restrict as soon as it releases this capacity: recurrently one must also *see* reality; that one is reading. Modern novel-reading might be characterised, then, as the rhythmic release and containment (the *management*) of savagery-neurosis.¹⁰

IV

The juxtaposition of Freud's notion of primitive projection and the discoveries of reading science creates the fourth, highly speculative impression: that the rhythmic release and containment of savagery-neurosis that characterizes modern reading might be located in the fixation-saccade series.

In Freudian terms a fixation is a sampling of reality which is tested against memories of similar data gathered in the memory, an almost instant exchange between retinal excitation and vision (the latter itself understood as a mediated process of projection). But in the saccade the opposite of sampling occurs: seemingly, nothing. As Palmer

notes, a saccade is very rapid indeed, but it is not so fast that optical nerves *could* not be stimulated by the light they receive during the jump. What is certain, however, is that a consequent blurred dash is *not* projected during reading. Even today, as Palmer notes, the 'physiological mechanisms' of 'saccadic suppression' or 'masking are currently unknown'; nobody knows why we see nothing during a saccade (Palmer 523-24). Something *may* occur—a blur of light—which is immediately masked by the brain; or nothing may happen at all.

It is in this paradoxical saccade I would locate the momentary resurgence of 'savage' mental life. It is, in my view, not the only place where Freud's concept of 'savage' mental life might be found in reading—it finds a place wherever there is projection of inner states, including the 'localization outward' of letters during fixation—but in the saccade Freudian savagery prevails over all for a split second. As such, the saccade occasions regression to the mentality of 'savage' man: both total projection and a momentarily fantasised fulfilment of the death-wish (regression to inanimation). Hence the saccade becomes at once a flash of light and its mask. And hence modern reading can be characterized as an oscillation between the resurgence of projection (saccade) and its circumscription by perception (fixation).

Rather than being drawn from a single textual source, this model of 'how readers were thought to have read' is formed from impressions of nineteenth-century physiological optics, the science of reading and Freud's evolutionary psychology. But from it we can infer an actual change in how novel-readers really read: the role of something like the unconscious in reading could only be articulated where there is both a questioning of the existence of a soul, and consciousness of the inadequacy of consciousness in the account of reading. In fact a number of high-profile British novels from the third quarter of the nineteenth century which share references to the Australasian colonies continuously conscripted readers to test what parts of their selves—body, mind and/or soul—took part in the act of reading, and to consider the broader philosophical and religious implications of the results of their experimentation. When, for example, in Edward Bulwer Lytton's *A Strange Story* (1862), Dr Julius Faber contends 'that images can be seen even by the blind as distinctly and vividly as you and I now see the stream below our feet and the opossums at play upon yonder boughs', the seeing blind are Dr Faber's rhetorical clairvoyants, invoked while he is in Australia, but also Bulwer Lytton's British readers, readers who 'saw' the stream and the opossums at play 'yonder', but for whom 'yonder' was also only so many black marks on a page (Bulwer Lytton Ch. 71). Elsewhere in the novel there is reference to 'an extraordinary cerebral activity, a projectile force given to the mind, distinct from the soul, by which it sends forth its own emanations to a distance in spite of material obstacles' (Bulwer Lytton, Ch. 31). This 'projectile force' is nothing if not like an occult version of science's projection, and it is this which is brought into dialogue with the very process in which Bulwer Lytton's readers were engaged: projecting Australia as the place to confront reading's inner mysteries.

V

The fifth impression, then, is that representations of Australia in the mid-Victorian novel conscript explorations of the unconscious, though in pre-Freudian terms.¹¹ To create this impression one need look no further than resonances between Freud's 1912

Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis and Dickens's Australia. Freud introduces the unconscious in his *Note* by discussing 'psychical elements' which are 'present', 'absent' then 'present again' (Freud, *Note* 50). He posits that 'an unconscious conception is one of which we are not aware, but the existence of which we are nevertheless ready to admit on account of other proofs or signs', not least this return from absence (Freud, *Note* 51). In both *David Copperfield* (1850) and *Great Expectations* (1861), characters present in the action become absent when they go to Australia. The continent remains wholly inferred: its actual existence within the worlds of both novels can only be admitted 'on account of other proofs or signs', that is, the return of those characters bearing histories of their transformation.

But Australia as forged in mid-Victorian novel-reading does not so much anticipate the character of Freud's unconscious as modernize mental habits traditionally aroused in the encounter with narratives of the Antipodes. For centuries Europeans have staged pageants exposing the inner workings of the imagination in the Antipodes: it is imagination's realm. In Richard Brome's 1638 play *The Antipodes* this process is rendered explicit: the scenes set in the Antipodes are presented as a play-within-the-play of which the protagonist, Peregrine, is unaware. Thinking he has *really* travelled to, and must prevail on, the other side of the globe, the territory Peregrine must actually confront and conquer is his own psyche. For, unlike the protagonist, the audience knows Peregrine's physician has set out to immerse him in a virtual (hemi)sphere of Antipodean madness to cure him of an obsession with travel narratives. Overall *The Antipodes* advocates the healthiness of *playing* (role-playing and play-making) conditioned by knowledge that one is doing it. So too, one should enjoy travelling to distant lands via print culture as long as one also sees oneself reading (and so knows one is not *really* 'there' but 'here').

The European Antipodes tradition exposed by Brome underwent a process of modernization in the course of the nineteenth century: the location of the Antipodes wandered less about the globe, settling for the most part on the Australasian colonies. The Antipodes was 'realized', its object-presentations 'hardened'. In the same century technological advances in media communications greatly expanded the virtual world of print culture. Measures for the successful negotiation of that world became more sophisticated, just as they became more necessary to ordinary readers: new techniques of 'realist' representation (be it in terms of journalist reportage, literary style, or graphic illustration) made print culture ever more convincing; seeing oneself consuming text, not reality, was an increasingly vital skill, one accompanied by suspicion of surface appearance. In this manner of reading, the word-shape 'Australia', denoting a noble seat of empire, ought also to be recognised as 'a trap-door to the Antipodes', to quote Mary Elizabeth Braddon's 1862 sensation novel *Lady Audley's Secret* (Braddon 154), denoting the opposite of a noble seat, the coexistent readings encapsulating the savagery and madness that might underlie anything's or anyone's public appearance. In the same novel George Talboys is the archetype of one who is unable to grasp such modern dualities: a failed reader. He believes a misleading account of the gold rushes, precipitously abandoning his wife for a life-threatening stint in the Australian bush; he forgets the other side of the world (that things in Britain will change) when there; and on his return he takes the false notice of his wife's death in *The Times* at face value; all mistakes that leave him psychologically broken. Overall *Lady Audley's Secret* dramatizes, and conscripts readers to confront, the joint processes I infer: the outbreak of madness/savagery

under realism's shield; and the role of the Antipodes in exacerbating the process. These are as much signs of the novel's modernity as its plot's references to new Victorian technologies.

Correspondingly, Aboriginal characters in the mid-Victorian Antipodes novel embody the imagination run wild, something the reader must allow (to prevail in modernity) at the same time as contain (to avoid madness/regression). Hence, in *A Strange Story* an encounter between the British narrator, Dr Fenwick, and three Aboriginal Australians can be read as staging a confrontation between the two functions of modern reading:

A band of the savage natives were stealthily creeping on my track. ... [T]hree hideous forms suddenly faced me, springing up from a thicket, all tangled with honeysuckles and creepers of blue and vermilion. I walked steadily up to them. They halted a moment or so in suspense; but perhaps they were scared by my stature or awed by my aspect; and the Unfamiliar, though Human, had terror for them, as the Unfamiliar, although but a Shadow, had had terror for me. They vanished, and as quickly as if they had crept into the earth. (Bulwer Lytton, Ch. 72)

In the course of Bulwer Lytton's novel Dr Fenwick must incorporate reality's terrifying shadow—the occult—into what begins as a materialist *Inquiry into Organic Life* and ends as *A Strange Story*. He must, then, acknowledge and surpass these elusive 'savages' by recognising them as his own rational mind's Shadow, incorporating them as subjects of his psyche, 'as if they had crept into' his self. (It is a portentous reading of Freud's phrase: 'we can recognize in their psychic life a well-preserved, early stage of our own development' (Freud, *Totem* 775)). Similarly, although Bulwer Lytton's Aboriginals are explicitly placed on the frontier of the human, in the novel's finale a demonic white character, Margrave, takes centre-stage as embodiment of in-humanity, exceeding the 'the wild dwellers on the verge' in that he *chose* (where 'primitive' characters can *never* choose) to become as he did: the Aboriginal tribe are instead silent witnesses to Margrave's spectacular demise, and to their British readers' annexation of their powers.

VI

There are good reasons to object to exploiting, in a cultural history of Australia, links between this country and the unconscious: it threatens to re-assert imperialist visions of the invasion of Aboriginal country as the gradual emergence of a continent from primeval darkness to rational light, a notion given monumental form in Harold Parker's *The Awakening of Australia* (c.1915) at the eastern entrance to London's Australia House (Fig. 1). Applied to a history of Australian literature (writing), the Antipodes can also reduce the country to a site where imperfect mimics—*unauthors* like Mr Micawber in *David Copperfield*—prevail. There may be something positive to be drawn from the latter: to capture Australian life produces as much stuttering as the articulation of an unconscious. But what there is definitely to be gained from *not* rejecting Europe's construction of an irrational hemisphere, and its compulsive insistence on making Australia its metonym, derives from recognizing that country in the European reader's mind as nothing less than the *space* of reading, as *where reading takes place*. It is a country that warrants exploration precisely because it is at the extremity, for me, of comprehensibility. Freud may have misconstrued

Aboriginality, but the unspoken and challenging premise of *Totem and Taboo* is that other cultures are to be met at the extremity of one's own intellectual capacity within one's own tradition. The exploration of this weird, other Australia, which is also my country, begins with the inversion of an awakening, and there one is bound to employ a neurotic currency.



Figure 1:
Harold Parker, *The Awakening of Australia*, c.1915
Australia House, London
Photograph: Ian Henderson

NOTES

¹ My cautiousness is determined by an unanswerable question that is the motor of my research, one voiced by Nicholas Dames in *The Physiology of the Novel* (2007): 'How, then, did the readers of the past—for my purposes, the Victorian novel-reader—read? What transpired in mind and body as reading occurred?' (6). Dames admits that 'We may not be able wholly to know how the novel-readers of the past read', but by revisiting theories of the inner processes of reading by Victorian critics who responded to science, he is able to conclude that 'we can know how [readers of the past] were thought to have read' (56). My venture, however, is yet more tenuous, merely inferring even the model of how readers were *thought* to have read, and doing

so not from single-authored documents, but from a loosely organised, interdisciplinary and transnational collection of 'other proofs and signs' (Freud, *Note* 51).

² Similarly, on the first page of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud states he has chosen for his study 'those tribes which have been described by ethnographers as being the most backward and wretched of tribes: the aborigines of [...] Australia' (775).

³ 'An assistant can *see* these movements; he can *feel* them with fingers poised on the closed eye-lid. But the process which gives the best results is one where you hear these movements by means of a small drum with an ebonite membrane, the centre of which supports a blunt needle which is attached, without discomfort, to the eyeball (conjunctive or pupil), and the vibrations of which are communicated to the ears by means of two rubber tubes.' Lamare's research was first reported by Javal in the *Annales d'oculistique* of November-December 1879.

⁴ See Wade and Tatler for a definitive history of eye-movement research.

⁵ Helmholtz's theory was developed in his massive *Handbook of Physiological Optics* which appeared in stages from the mid 1850s; it was expressed more accessibly in one of his popular lectures on science, the 'The Theory of Vision', published in 1868.

⁶ As Huey writes: 'It comes about [...] that just as the complicated but associatively concatenated and organized movements of hitting a target with a ball may be touched off by the mere sight of the target, in one attention-act, so the various activities involved in apperceiving a phrase or other word-group may become one complex but unitary act, and this act may be set off very simply by this or that cue or set of cues given from the page, and may be done with a minimum of consciousness concerning details' (Huey 105).

⁷ Freud summarizes as follows: 'correspondence between taboo customs and symptoms of compulsion neurosis are most clearly manifested: 1. in the lack of motivation of the commandments, 2. in their enforcement through inner need, 3. in their capacity for displacement and in the danger of contagion from what is prohibited, 4. in the causation of ceremonial actions and commandments which emanate from the forbidden' (Freud, *Totem* 797).

⁸ This recalls Frazer's comment in his Gifford Lectures: 'Outside of ourselves there stretches away on every side an infinitude of space without sound, without light, without colour, a solitude traversed only in every direction by an inconceivably complex web of silent and impersonal forces. That, if I understand it aright, is the general conception of the world which modern science has substituted for polytheism' (21).

⁹ It is a necessity which, as Freud stresses, 'is itself a part of reality' (Freud, *Formulations* 42)

¹⁰ My argument here resonates with Robert Dixon's on links between colonial modernity and the management of 'primitive' bodies and the primitiveness of the body. Dixon in fact invokes 'eye-strain', Huey's preoccupation in his 'hygiene' of reading, as one of the many modern anxieties formed around the perceived inadequacies of the body. He writes: 'Conceived of as grounded in nature, and therefore outside of modernity, the body might be out of step with the modern, technologically advanced world. Diagnoses like hysteria, neurasthenia, even constipation and eye-strain registered the stress placed on the body by civilisation and suggested that compensatory action was necessary' (Dixon 14-15).

¹¹ I draw the notion of the 'conscripted' reader from Stewart.

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