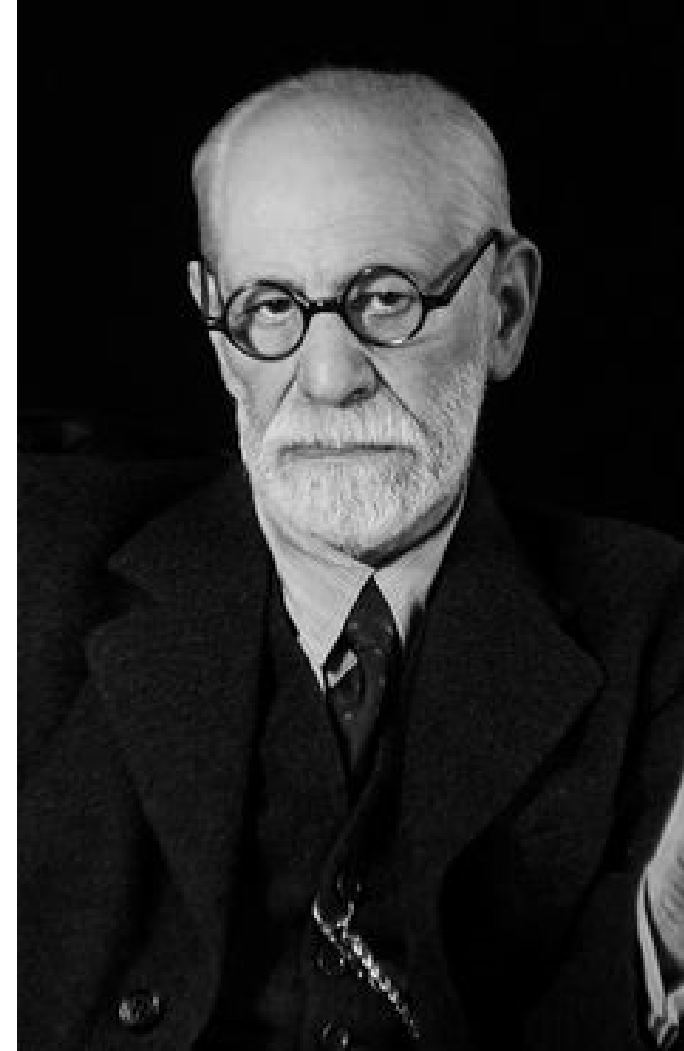


# An Exploration of Psychoanalysis and Translation

From dream-work to object-relations

Christopher Waite, IPCITI, December 2024



Sigmund Freud

*'I want to consider what kind of analogy translation is for what goes on in psychoanalysis, how it is linked to a consciousness of history and possibility; and whether, by implication, this can tell us something about the act of translation, as well as about psychoanalysis itself.'* (Phillips 2000: 129)

- Adam Phillips, the psychoanalyst and essayist, explores the translational metaphor in his essay 'On Translating a Person'
- Both translation and psychoanalysis rely on an exchange of words driven by acts of interpretation.
- Patients in psychoanalysis are considered to bring a repetitive 'text' (their verbal preoccupations) and this constitutes the symptom.
- The psychoanalyst's task is to explore, through interpretation, how a patient's existing 'text' is too rigid and life-limiting; cure is found by the discovery that this 'text' is not the definitive translation of the patient's life, and indeed that no definitive translation exists.
- Are we translating a person when we translate an author? The text was the product of their mind, which itself was a product of its time; is there a definitive translation to be found?



Freud's couch in the Freud Museum, London

**Opening Thoughts**

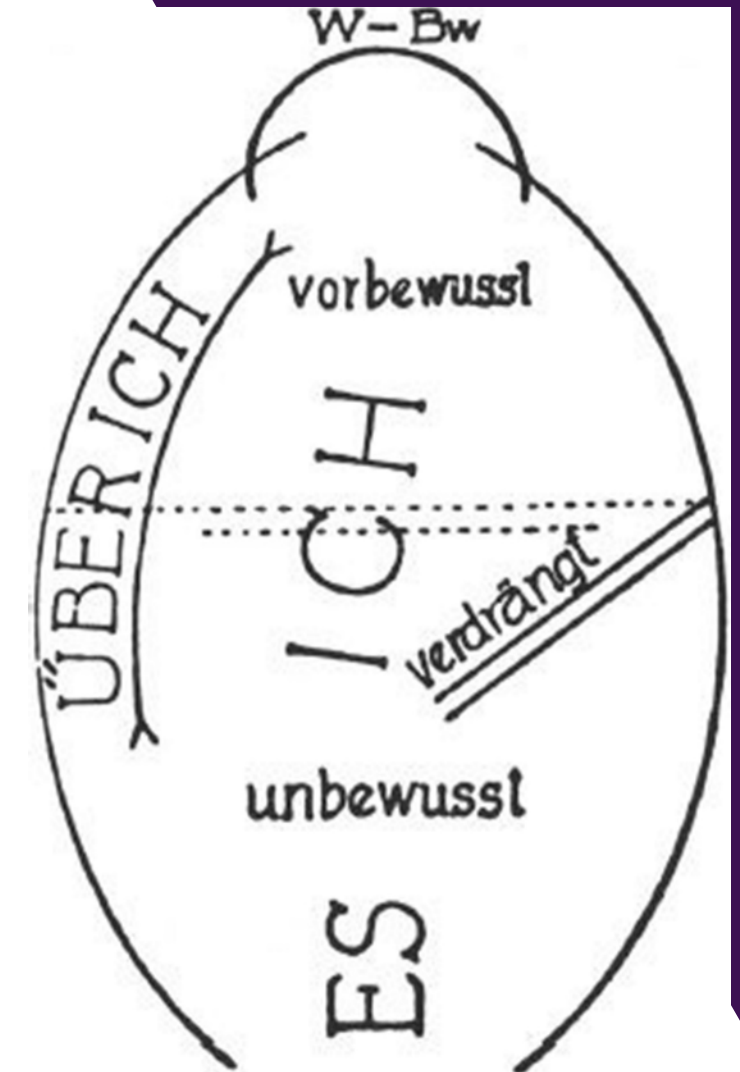
## What is psychoanalysis?

Developed in Vienna in the 1890s by Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist and physician Sigmund Freud (1856-1939), psychoanalysis is a theory and practice largely based on the hypothesis that most of our mental activity is either entirely unconscious or preconscious -only the latter can become conscious.

## Why explore psychoanalysis and translation?

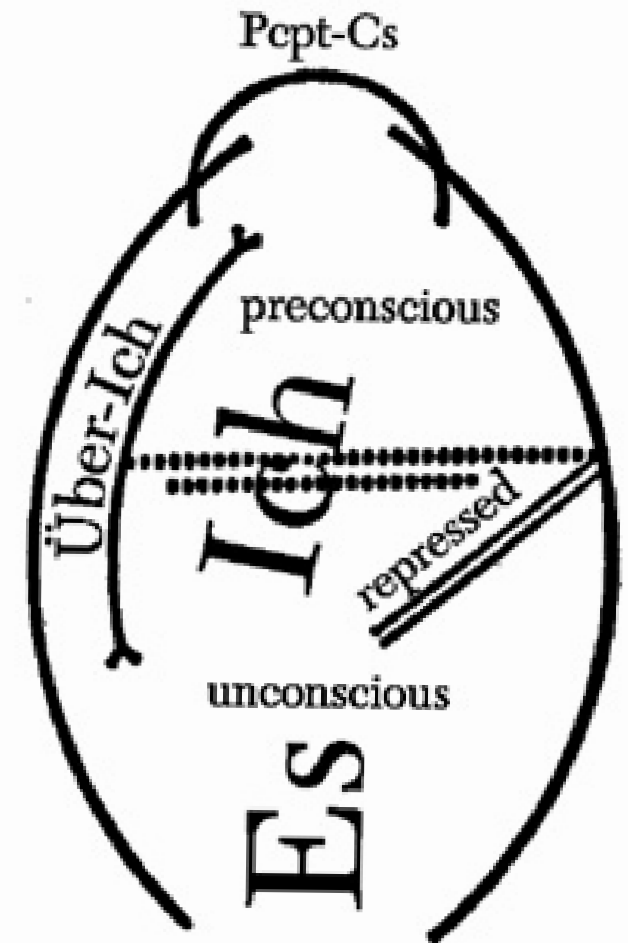
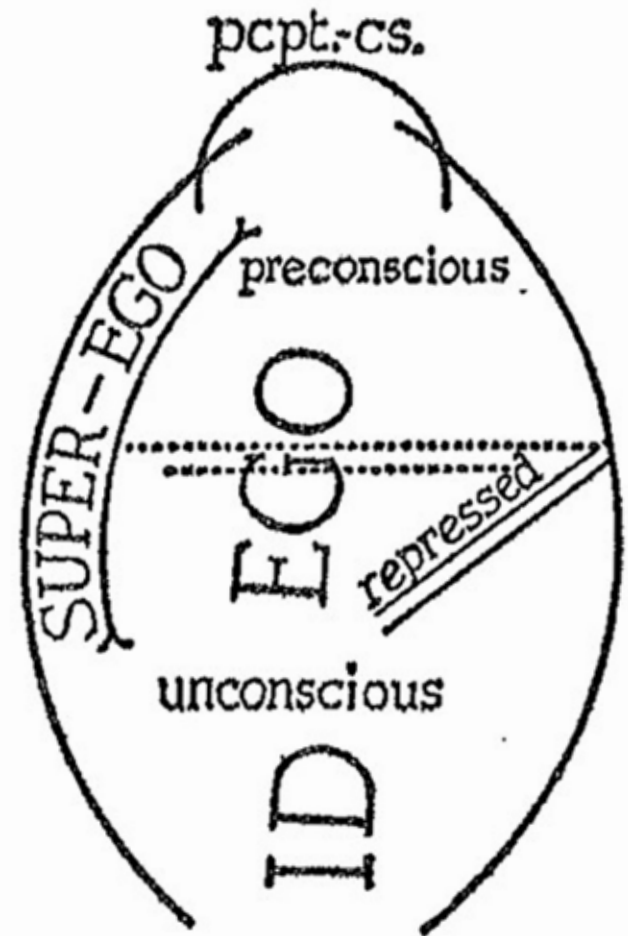
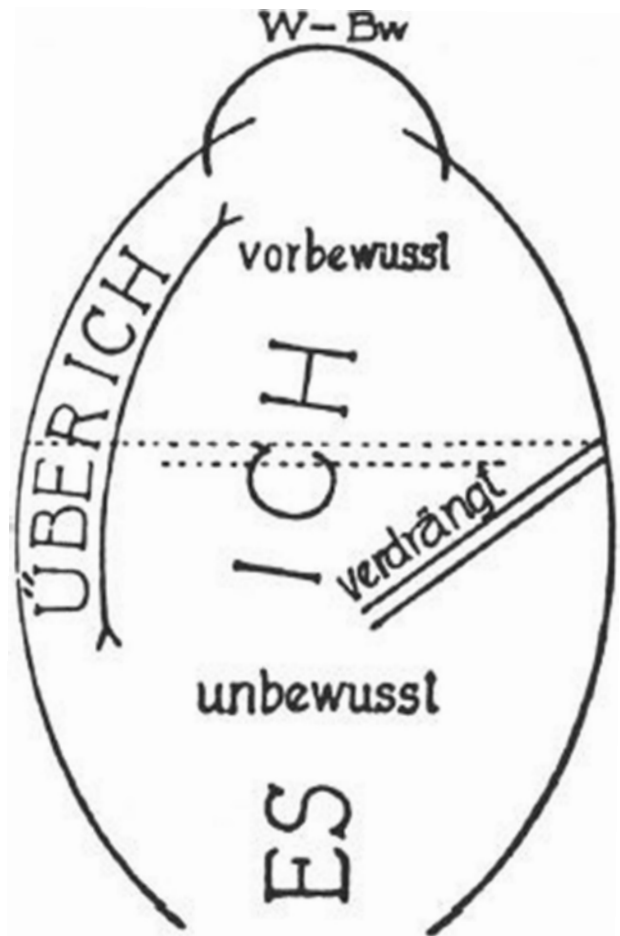
It is of interest to translators for many reasons, some of which are:

- 'Translation' was a metaphor used by Freud from the outset to describe his theories of mind: at the boundary of different periods of development our memories are 'subjected [...] to a rearrangement [...] to a retranscription' (1896:207); a failure to 'translate' psychic material into words at these maturational boundaries results in neurosis: repression is thus a failure of this translation. Hence the treatment is 'talking', a process of verbalising the unsaid.
- His theories about symptom and dream formation offer a hermeneutic and a poetics that can be applied to literature and the arts.
- Later psychoanalytic theories about how we relate to others 'object-relations' can be used to interrogate how literary translators relate to their texts and the persons of the text (the author, characters, readers).
- How Freud's texts (written in German) have been translated is itself an area of study. The *id*, *ego* and *superego* of James Strachey's translation are of note [das Es = 'the it' das Ich = 'the I', and das Überich = 'the over-I']



Freud's model of the mind 1933

# Freud in English Translation



Freud's original (1933); James Strachey's 1964 translation; Helena Ragg-Kirby 2003 translation.



Bertha Pappenheim (Anna O.) (1859-1936)

- An Austrian patient of Josef Breuer, with whom Freud collaborated on with *Studies in Hysteria* (1895), known by the pseudonym 'Anna O.' experienced marked symptoms in relation to language: she often could not speak at all, or would speak in English, French or Italian without realising she was not speaking German.
- She coined the now famous description of psychoanalysis as being a 'talking cure', saying these words in English to her fellow Austrian Breuer.
- She also described the treatment (in English) as being 'chimney sweeping'.
- This last example gives a hint of what Freud believed lay behind symptoms: sexual ideas that could not be acknowledged, and hence not verbalised, described in words. Bertha is metaphorically suggesting that she has a build up, a blockage in an internal channel/canal (does this have to have a sexual connotation?) and the treatment involves clearing out this blockage so that words and desires can flow freely.
- Freud's ideas about symptoms are based on a theory of words where there are '**thing-representations**' (perceptions) that need a '**word-representation**' to become conscious. Without an associated word thing-representations remain unconscious.

Translation as symptom – the case of 'Anna O.'



Penguin Modern Classics edition,  
2006, translated by J A Underwood

Freud's 'dream-work': the latent, unconscious thoughts and wishes in dreams are translated into the manifest dream through condensation and displacement. Symptoms, jokes, slips, and some memories are similarly translations of this kind.

*'Dream-thoughts and dream-content lie before us like two representations of the same content in two different languages – or, rather, a particular dream-content appears to us as a version of the relevant dream-thoughts rendered into a different mode of expression, the characters and syntax of which we are meant to learn by comparing the original with the translation.'* Chapter VI 'The Dream-work'

The translation is between the unconscious 'dream-thoughts' and the conscious 'dream-content'. The former operates according to the '**primary process**' a mental activity characterised by a lack of reality (no laws of time and space), fluidity and flexibility of association utilising primitive similarities. Here **displacement, condensation** (processes often repeated to create **over-determination**) form the grammar of dreams. The '**secondary-process**' is the conscious, rational mental activity of everyday thought and speech, which we use to talk about the dream itself. (Interpretation begins after several translations have taken place!).

The kind of mental activity driven by the unconscious is associated with creative thinking; 'free-association' (saying whatever comes into one's head with no censorship however irrelevant, weird, or perverse the words are) Freud's main technique – can aid our thinking on literary translation problems. Translators need to play with words.

*Die Traumdeutung- The Interpretation of Dreams (1900)*

## The unconscious and creativity

*“the unconscious mind, by [...] not clinging to the distinction between self and other, seer and seen, can do things that the conscious logical mind cannot do. By being more sensitive to the samenesses rather than the differences between things, by being passionately concerned with finding ‘the familiar in the unfamiliar’” (Milner, 1956)*

Marion Milner (1900-1998), a psychoanalyst who explored the creative process and the unconscious – which can help us find suitable representations (translations) through being sensitive to a wider range of possibilities. Informed by the work of the French philosopher Maritain - who thought that creativity was the result of an illogical and ‘peculiar’ mental activity – poetry is as a world where:

*‘we enter a nocturnal empire, a primeval activity of the intellect which, far beyond concepts and logic, exercises itself in vital connections between imagination and emotion.’*

The techniques of dream-work and the primary process can be seen as rhetorical devices: displacement is the work of metonymy (on basis of contiguity) and condensation is the work of metaphor and synecdoche (on basis of often primitive similarity). (Bonfiglio, 2023:2). Psychoanalysis can thus be seen as a ‘science of poetry’ (Phillips, 2000:9), where the function of poetry is ‘to find the words to say how words fail’ (Leader, 2009:191). As literary translation is often dealing with the potential loss of poetry through translation, psychoanalysis offers us insights into how accessing the unconscious can help the process of translation.

Metonymy = use the name of a related thing to refer to an object (‘White House’ used to refer to US government)

Metaphor = non-literal implied comparison, a symbol (‘chimney-sweeping’)

Synecdoche = part for whole / whole for part/ general for specific / specific for general (‘wheels’ used for car)



Self-portrait by Marion Milner

## Translation and object relations

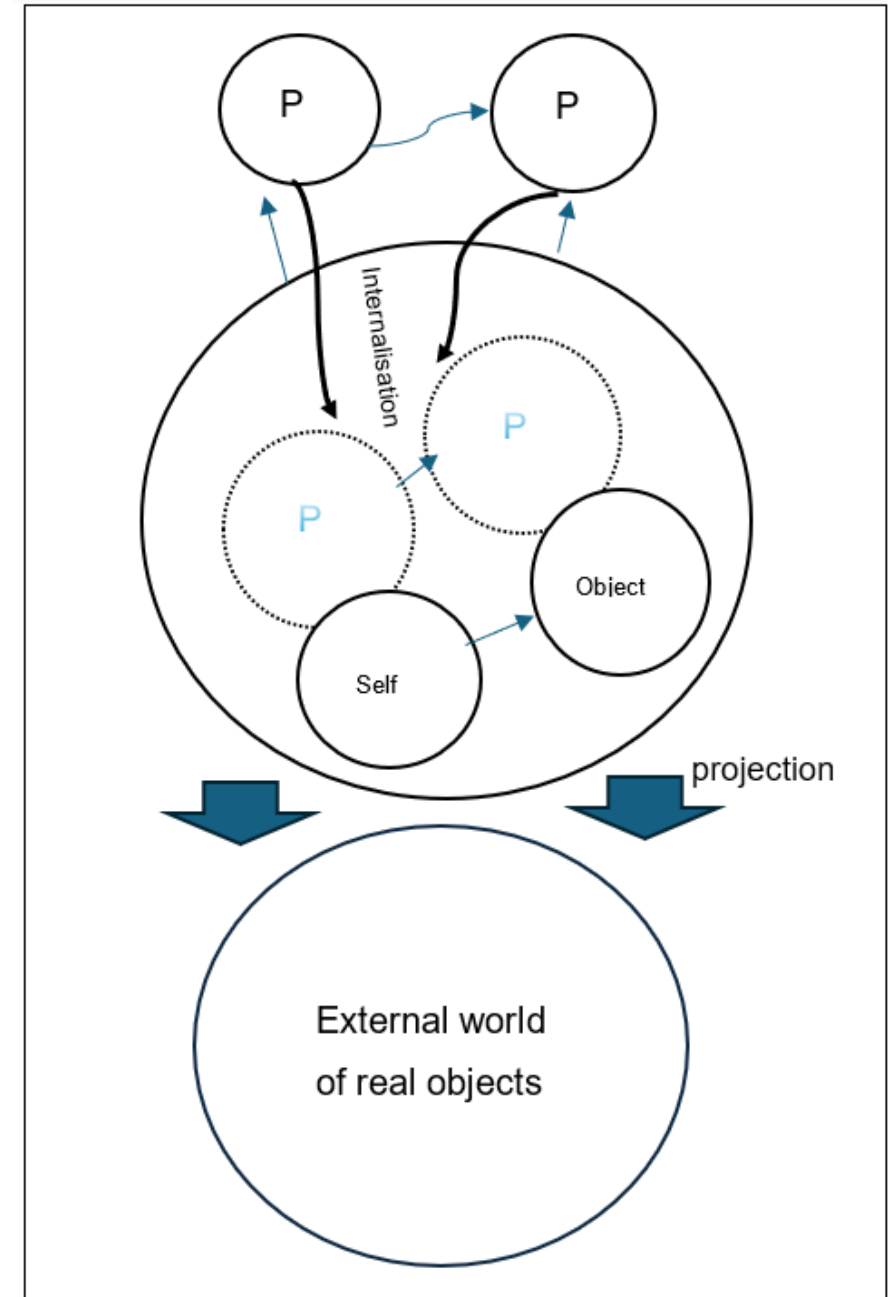
From Freud's concept of the superego being formed by identification with the parents, our first 'objects', later psychoanalysts examined how our internalised objects influence our mode of relation to the world. Our object-relationships are the **'entire complex outcome of a particular organisation of the personality, of an apprehension of objects that is to some extent or other phantasied'** (Laplanche & Pontalis 277:1967).

The concept of 'phantasy' is central: how we think about others in their absence, how we construe them, relate to them in our imaginations.

Translators are often relating to the authors they are translating in their absence. In my thesis I am exploring how translators might tend to replicate their past relationships with their earliest objects in their relation to the source text, its author and characters, applying the work of the psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas in *The Shadow of the Object* (1987).

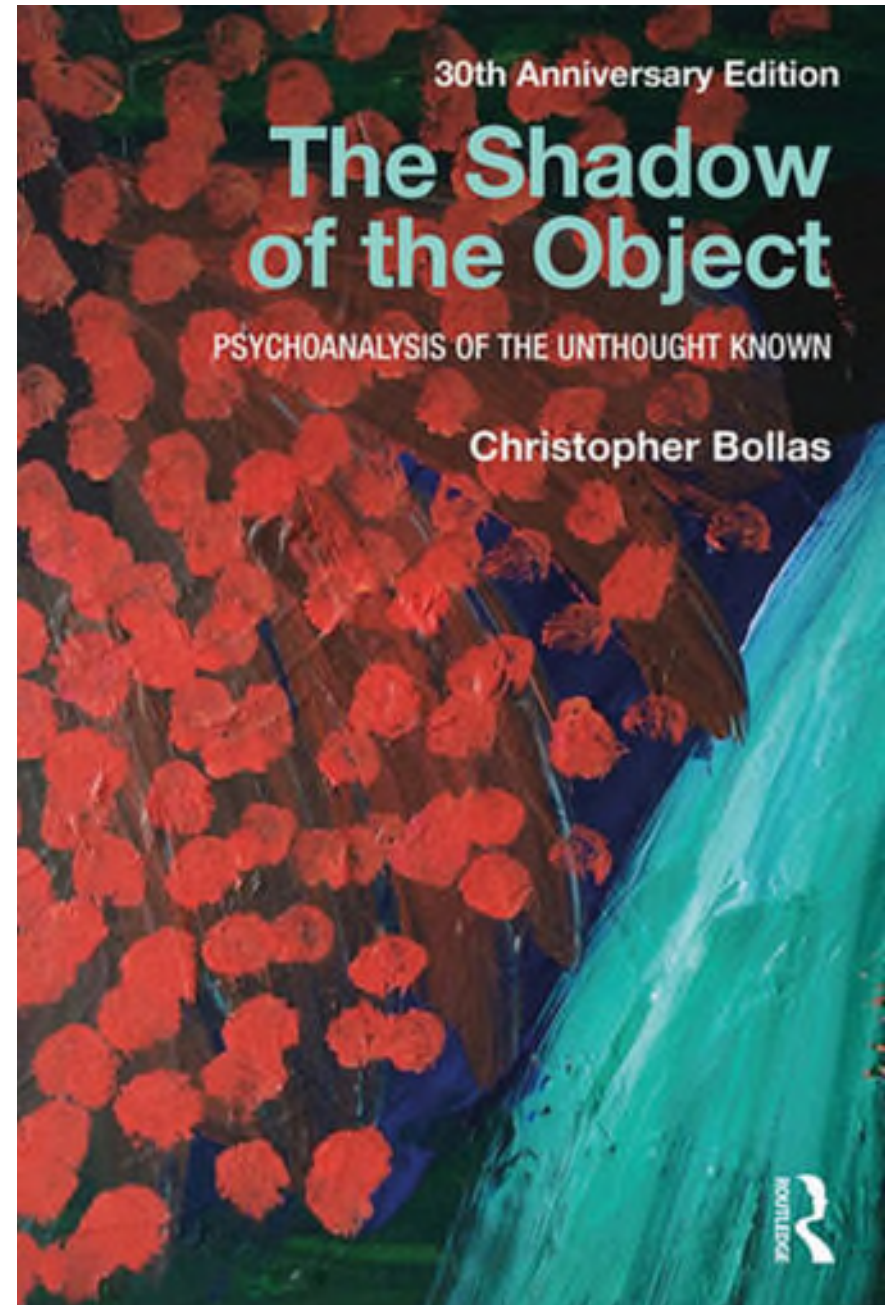
Bollas:

- Examines how we record our early experiences of relationships ('objects') using Freud's conception of the 'shadow of the object' falling on our ego.
- Considers the primary care giver as acting as a process rather than an internalised representation and as such is a 'transformational object' that is 'experientially identified by the infant with processes that alter self-experience'



## Translation and the Transformational Object

- We can repeat this form of object-seeking in adult life when we seek experiences that change us, not by seeking to possess people or things but surrendering to them as something that offers us ‘envirosomatic caring’, that we believe has the capacity to metamorphosise the self.
- We reactivate our earliest relationship(s) when we seek aesthetic experiences – through art, literature, music, the natural world – where we experience a ‘psychosomatic fusion’ and a ‘deep subjective rapport with these ‘objects’. This is not about specific accomplishments, but about achieving a certain existential state.
- My thesis aims to utilise Bollas’s hermeneutic to explore the nature of the literary translator’s relationship with their text and its author. Can the text and its author be considered a ‘transformational object’? Do translators experience deep feelings of aesthetic connection with their texts/authors? Could the act of literary translation – requiring a contemplative withdrawal into the world of the text/author – evoke intense memories of the hopes and processes of self-transformation of early infancy?
- Literary translation potentially has the capacity to help us contact with most fundamental transformations of our lives and can facilitate the most extraordinary psychological experiences for its practitioners.



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Thanks for listening!

