

# Freud and Great Greece. Metamorphoses of the 'exotic' journey between ancient and modern imaginary

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Freud's passion for Italy is not perhaps as famous as some illustrious predecessors' one. He himself, moreover, was inspired in his Italian expeditions, by the two major models of the XVIII and XIX centuries: Goethe and Heine. In the literature which houses the great number of travellers who crossed Italy since the Middle Ages, Freud would deserve a place of honour with more than twenty excursions in Italy, where he combined the tourist passion with the psychoanalytical one. And if Rome marked the peak of his Italian adventure for the intensity of investments and for the many reinterpretations, he was also fascinated by the charm of other cities such as the beautiful Venice and, for reasons closely linked to the psychoanalytic research, he was fascinated by Southern Italy, by Campania and Sicily, in other words he was enchanted by *Magna Graecia*, whose appointed places he visited twice: Naples and surroundings in 1902 and Sicily in 1910.

During the first route in September 1902 in Great Greece, a step lovingly prepared on the books<sup>1</sup>, was obviously intended to Pompeii. Freud wanted to visit the city unearthed by recent excavations a few years before. The never made project of a congress with Fliess in Naples or Pompeii is dated back to 1896, whom it is alluded to at the end of the letter of December the 6<sup>th</sup> 1896 (Freud-Fliess 1985) in which he announces to his friend his growing passion as a collector of antiques. In the report by Ernest Jones about his first experience in

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<sup>1</sup> Freud had got some books about Pompeii (cfr. Trosman-Simmons 1973: 681-682).

Great Greece<sup>2</sup> two *leitmotiv* clearly emerge and accompany Freud in Southern Italy in Goethe's wake: the nature and antiquity. It is enough to run again through some pages of *Italienische Reise* to find in the Freudian text the deep mark left by Goethe, maybe the most loved poet together with Shakespeare. The journey to Italy was for the writer of Weimar, as we know, the capital experience of his life and Sicily, firstly excluded from his strictly planned route, then became the litmus test of the whole Italian adventure, the land in which the tireless poet and the restless researcher thought he discovered, among the lush public gardens of Palermo, the *Urpflanze*, the original plant<sup>3</sup>.

In Sorrento, from the terrace of his hotel room, the Cocumella – where Goethe had already stayed in –, Freud could contemplate and describe the stunning scenery of the Bay of Naples in the letter of September the 3<sup>rd</sup> 1902, which opens with the famous verse of the Mignon's song, «*Kennst du das Land wo die Zitronen blühen?*» (Galvagno 2010: 56-57)<sup>4</sup>.

Echoes from the first archaeological stage in Great Greece can be found also in Dr. Freud's theoretical works: Pompeii, Paestum, the landscape of Amalfi, will become a privileged space of analytic knowledge, will be set as true letters included in fundamental texts as *Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's Gradiva* (1906) and *Constructions in Analysis* (1937). The flying visit of only three days in Athens, in September 1904, the few available evidences perhaps worth more than a detailed chronicle of the trip. Apart from a personal communication to Marie Bonaparte reported by Jones, Freud discussed of this unforgettable experience in Athens only in two circumstances. In 1927 he gave a short notice in *The Future of an Illusion*<sup>5</sup> and in 1936, three years before his death, he made a meticulous analysis of his disturbance of memory on the Acropolis of Athens in an open letter to Romain Rolland on the occasion of his seventieth birthday<sup>6</sup>.

During the summer vacation of 1906 he read, encouraged by Jung, the short story *Gradiva* by Wilhelm Jensen – *ein pompejanisches*

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<sup>2</sup> Jones 1953.

<sup>3</sup> Goethe 2004 (Palermo, Tuesday, April the 17<sup>th</sup> 1787).

<sup>4</sup> Freud's letters from Great Greece and Sicily (see Freud 2003) have been collected by me in a recent edition (Galvagno 2010) I quote from. English translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> SE, 21: 25.

<sup>6</sup> SE, 22: 239-248.

*Phantasiestück*<sup>7</sup>. Captured by this plot he immediately wrote a comment remained famous in psychoanalytic literary criticism<sup>8</sup>. The curiosity about Jensen's tale fits primarily in Freud's archaeological passion, that would never abandon him and that coincides with the passion for psychoanalysis itself.

Italy thus becomes the holder of a hidden treasure and the place of an irresistible attraction. The numerous trips to Italy, especially those in southern Italy and Sicily, in fact realize his irrepressible desire to untie the knot of the Oedipus. This is based on two mythical places – Rome and Syracuse – which, in the configuration of the Oedipal tale of the inventor of psychoanalysis, metaphorically correspond the first one to the site of the father, and the second one to the "maternal site". The hypothesis of a "maternal site", which we extended to Syracuse, was made by Jean-Bertrand Pontalis about Pompeii:

Sur la difficulté pour Freud d'atteindre Rome, lui-même et ses commentateurs nous ont largement éclairés. Sur le trouble qui le saisit à l'Acropole d'Athènes, nous n'ignorons pas non plus grand-chose. Dans ces deux lieux sacrés, l'image du Père était au rendez-vous. Mais à Pompéi – serait-ce un site maternel? – apparemment pas d'angoisse, pas d'*Unheimlichkeit*. Ou de trouble de mémoire. C'est que la mémoire y est heureuse, c'est que l'étrange et le familier y font bon ménage. On y imagine un Freud joyeux et pour une fois, tel Zoé Bertgang, conforme à son nom, un Freud émerveillé, disert le soir à l'*Albergo* et tout confiant dans les pouvoirs de l'analyse. (Freud 1986: 11-12)

The fervent reading and the extraordinary comment of *Gradiva* explains, if placed under the sign of Freud's archaeological passion and in the *après coup* of his first trip to Pompeii in 1902. When he read the short story of Jensen, his preference for the archaeological sites had been cultivated not only through meticulous studies and attention, but also satisfied with the first journey to the places of Pompeii.

*Gradiva* finds a wide resonance in the correspondence of Freud. The crossing of this text repeats once again the crossing of Great Greece in terms of literary transfiguration. It fits perfectly in this journey of discovery, like a ruin, a monument, a site.

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<sup>7</sup> Jensen 1903.

<sup>8</sup> SE, 9: 7-95. See also Mario Lavagetto's foreword (Jensen-Freud 1992: VII-XVII).

There is no need to remember that Pompeii is, in a sense, the true protagonist of Jensen's tale and Freud's comment. Pompeii is the mythic place of the desire of the main character, Norbert Hanold, a disappointed archaeologist who seeks, in the footsteps of his hallucinations, Zoe Bertgang, the girl of his childish love. Pompeii became the scene of a chase and a discovery. If Freud was sensitive to the Jung's proposal of reading the text by Jensen, and if he immediately wrote in the summer of 1906 an exceptional comment about it, it is because his artistic and geographical memory was subject to the charm of the town of Vesuvius.

Sicily comes after Pompeii, Paestum later, after Athens. This time Freud chose as a travelling companion Sandor Ferenczi, the young follower of psychoanalysis, who will be traumatically marked by the Sicilian experience.

Before arriving in Sicily he wanted to go to Paris where a visit to Louvre was a must, in order to admire the Mona Lisa, after the recent labours dedicated to *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, published at the end of May 1910. After a quick transition from Florence and Rome, the two travellers reached Naples where they boarded the ship "Syracuse" at Palermo on the same evening of their arrival.

In Palermo, Freud has the same emotional impact with the nature that had overcome him the first eight years before in Naples. From the Sicilian chief town he writes to his wife: «Palermo is a unheard-of pleasure [...]. Such a splendour of colours, smells, views - and wellness I've never had all at once» (Galvagno 2010: 157). The Hotel de France<sup>9</sup> that hosted him in a three rooms apartment, was in the beautiful "Piazza della Marina" still filled with dense vegetation and some magnificent specimens of *figus magnolioides*, lined on the back of Butera street where the namesake seventeenth-century palace is. From Palermo he made obligatory trips to Monreale and to the ruins of the surroundings, while in order to visit Minerva's temple and Selinunte he had to stay in Castelvetrano, the city that, by virtue of its name, will be immortalized in a note added in the edition of 1912 in the third

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<sup>9</sup> This hotel, which later became an academic residence called "Casa del Goliardo", is currently used as a guesthouse for foreign researchers and visiting professors of the University of Palermo.

chapter of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*<sup>10</sup>, as an example of oblivion of a city name.

In the correspondence from the island the fundamentally archaeological desire of the Sicilian journey can be read. «The temple of Segesta, [...] was a wonderful vision in a deeply solitary and lonely space», he writes to his wife Martha (September the 13<sup>th</sup> 1910) at the station of Alcamo-Calatafimi, and «It was really worth making the trip of h. 2 and 1 / 2 round trip on a miserable cart» (*ibid.*: 153).

Like many travellers of that time, Freud also admits of being influenced by certain prejudices about the fact that in Sicily people still lived like savages and everyone was thus exposed to extraordinary hazards. He will not hesitate to acknowledge that feelings and living conditions were the same as in Florence or Rome: «At least in Palermo it is so, and in the countryside or in smaller towns everything will surely be more primitive, but not more disturbing» (*ibid.*: 151).

After a stop in Agrigento, where the south wind begins to be felt, it is still «Africa but wonderfully beautiful» (*ibid.*: 160), on September the 17<sup>th</sup>, the two travellers arrived in Syracuse. At first glance the city seems very nice to Freud, even if uncomfortably hot because of the impending sirocco. During the dinner he is happy to enjoy a Muscat (as delightful as the country wine of Agrigento) and he is delighted to find excellent drinking water. He plans to spend there at least four days or even a week. The day after, the first day of visit, he finds Ortigia to be «dull, cramped and smelly, [...], all the remains of the grandiose and beautiful ancient monuments are located on the mainland, where we have not been yet» (*ibid.*: 162).

The hotel where they stayed in, The Hotel des Étrangers, is facing the fountain of Arethusa, surrounded by walls and full of bushes, papyrus and sacred fish. But from that point a delightful walk along the sea starts, full of fragrant oleanders. Freud is happy to enjoy of a great sea view from his window, only a little disturbed by a palm tree. As in Palermo, as in Vienna, Bergasse Strasse 19, the hotel rooms are equipped with a modern bathroom plant.

The Central European traveller, very attentive to the comfort and cleanliness, did not fail to notice that “the deepest Sicily” crossed during a visit to the temple of Segesta was austere and “dirty”. Unfortunately, the hot temperature starts to tire him, «There is an

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<sup>10</sup> SE, 6: 30-32.

atmosphere a bit crippling, and something overwhelming in the air, the sky is clear, everything is muffled, a bit disturbing». But «Among the treasures of the museum we have forgotten everything», he wrote to his family members (*ibid.*).

In short, this exotic trip deeply influenced Freud, if still after two years he is concerned, as we have seen, to integrate a *tranche* in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*.

But we find Sicily even in a footnote added in 1911 to the fifth chapter of *Interpretation of Dreams*<sup>11</sup>. The quotation concerns the statue of Archimedes, at the time of Freud's visit collocated at the fountain of Arethusa in Syracuse, where he had come with Ferenczi in September the 17<sup>th</sup> 1910, after a brief stop in Agrigento. Archimedes, who wields the burning mirror, studying the Roman army of the besiegers, impressed Freud so much so that after a few weeks from the journey he penetrated in his dream of the 10<sup>th</sup> or the 11<sup>th</sup> of October 1910.

Unfortunately we can't count among the travel impressions of the illustrious Viennese those that may be reserved for two other major cities included in the canon island tour: Catania and Taormina. Cholera in fact broke the route of Freud and Ferenczi in Syracuse. Catania will only be quoted in the aforementioned letter of September the 11<sup>th</sup> 1910 and, as a likely step, in a letter of September the 18<sup>th</sup> 1910: «Only Catania remains, if we stop there» (*ibid.*: 163). On the postcard of the following day Catania and Taormina are mentioned as two stages now impossible to reach because of the checks on travellers in Rome: «[...], in Catania, Taormina etc. the situation won't be different and the news that in Rome travellers from Naples are checked makes us eager to get Naples behind» (*ibid.*: 168).

However, the three days spent in Syracuse<sup>12</sup>, the stay in Palermo, and the visits to the most beautiful temples of Great Greece were decisive and unforgettable. Why Syracuse «considered the most Greek city of Italy», represented «the main goal of the journey» (*ibid.*: 162), and why was he expecting there «something even more beautiful» (*ibid.*: 157)? Syracuse not only offered the spectacle of white Ortigia lying on a blue similar to the characteristic landscape of many Greek coasts, but it was also the city of papyrus, the plant with which Freud had adorned the cast of Gradiva that he had hung on the wall next to the sofa in his studio in Vienna; it was the city whose museum finally

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<sup>11</sup> SE, 5: 167-168.

<sup>12</sup> SE, 5: 167-168.

referred an interesting collection of feminine figurines that it is reasonable to suppose he admired with great curiosity. He will write it in the famous letter sent to Jung on the 24<sup>th</sup> of September 1910, that not only «Sicily is the most beautiful region of Italy», but that it «has kept truly unique pieces of the Hellenism disappeared, childish memories that allow us to draw conclusions about the nuclear complex» (*ibid.*: 169)<sup>13</sup>.

Freud therefore satisfied with the trip to Sicily one of his most intimate and intense desires: to visit, to travel, to sail the Other Scene to the point of being able to say that he has drawn conclusions about the nuclear complex. Which Other Scene is it? We can use *Interpretation of Dreams* or the entire Freudian production in order to discover the enigma. But already the letter dated September the 24<sup>th</sup> 1910, where Freud moves from the description of Sicily to his uncanny travelling companion to finally end with some reflections on purely analytical issues, offers a number of clues.

The Sicilian stage of Freud and Ferenczi went to the history of psychoanalytical movement under the name "Syracuse 1910", because here a capital meeting between the pair Freud-Ferenczi is consumed. In the fateful Sicilian September Freud came, at the expense of Ferenczi, at the end of his self-analysis going through what Diane Chauvelot titled, in his masterful article, "Syracuse 1910. La passe supposée de Freud"<sup>14</sup>.

Freud wants to enjoy the antiquities and to profit at the same time, as he wrote to Karl Abraham in a letter dated August the 22<sup>nd</sup> 1910, the company and the active presence of Ferenczi in order to do "much psychoanalytic work" (Freud - Abraham 2002). Ferenczi, on the other hand, would benefit from the exclusive presence of the *Maître* in order to satisfy his request for love.

Freud in Sicily will look for and apparently find a way to solve his oedipal bound: now free from his transference to Fliess, he could venture into the unexplored depths of psychosis. The partially implemented project of a work about the paranoia, that he will be able to complete only returning from holiday, is dated back to Sicilian journey. It is furthermore interesting to note how the 1910 opens with

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<sup>13</sup> The "nuclear complex" will be called the "Oedipus complex" from the 1910 essay "A special type of choice of object made by men" (*Contributions to the psychology of love I*) (SE, 11:171).

<sup>14</sup> Chauvelot 1977: 127-137.

the study *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* and closes with the *Clinical case of president Schreber*, that are two works where the narcissistic problems are at the heart of the analytic inquiry.

The name of the boy reflecting in the source is used for the first time in the commentary on *Leonardo* where Freud tries to explain the homosexual choice of the artist<sup>15</sup>. Only in a later work he will explicitly connect the clinical definition of narcissism to the mythical character: «The condition in which the ego retains the libido is called by us 'narcissism', in reference to Greek legend of the youth Narcissus who was in love with his own reflection» (SE, 17: 139). But behind the haughty self-sufficiency of the unaware ephebe there is the mysterious smile of Mona Lisa that most concerns here, about which Freud will add, in 1919, almost ten years after the first edition, a relevant note found in the study on *Leonardo*:

The connoisseur of art will think here of the peculiar fixed smile found in archaic Greek sculptures—in those, for example, from Aegina, he will perhaps also discover something similar in the figures of Leonardo's teacher Verrocchio and therefore have some misgivings in accepting the arguments that follow. (*Ibid.*: 107)

But for us, and certainly for Freud himself, the reference to the archaic Greek sculptures substantiates “the following considerations” (i.e. the critical review of Mona Lisa's enigmatic smile), because that archaic smile may well marry with the memory of Mona Lisa and even Catherine, Leonardo's mother. In order to confirm it, it is enough to read again the fourth paragraph of the essay where the works dedicated to the unfathomable smile of the Mona Lisa were reviewed, from Vasari to Freud contemporary scholars and specialists<sup>16</sup>.

And if the imagination of kite, examined in the first part of the study on *Leonardo*, pushed Freud to assume the phantasy of an androgynous mother who summarizes all the characteristics of masculinity and femininity, the yet elusive smile forever fixed by the genius of the artist cannot open a unfathomable rift – already foretold by the veil of Gradiva and then revived on the oblivion at Acropolis –

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<sup>15</sup> SE, 11: 99.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*: 213 fol.

in the apotropaic and tender mother's body. Freud was able to meet this archaic feminine figure so wisely and carefully delineated, plastically figured in Sicily, the island of "childhood memories" as he wrote to Jung with chaste displacement.

The forbidden object of desire, «that prehistoric unforgettable Other that then it will never be matched by anyone», as he wrote in his letter to Fliess of December the 6<sup>th</sup> 1896 (Freud-Fliess 1985) is never explicitly named by Freud. The maternal body will pass through the Freudian text always protected from the screen-memories, from the inventions of poets and artists' creations, from the clinical analysis or, as stated in the letter dated October the 3<sup>rd</sup> 1897, from another language, and even a dead language like Latin, "*Matrem [...] nudam*" (*ibid.*: 302).

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