

## Freudian Slips of Paper

A review of the exhibition: *Psyche & Muse*, at the Yale Beinecke Library, February 2011

By Geoffrey Detrani

One of the fascinating consequences of the fall of autocratic governments is that the state archives get pried open. More often than not, the flood of revelations that follow from this give the historical record a considerable jolt. The newly revealed documents are like time-release medication providing a slow-drip narcotic historical corrective.

This feeling of archival revelation is one impression given off by the exhibition “Psyche & Muse: Creative Entanglements With the Science of the Soul,” at the Yale Beinecke Library. What we see takes the already complicated story of Psychoanalysis and its intersection with the creative arts and complicates it further.

Since it’s origins in the 1890’s, Psychoanalysis has proven itself an important feature of the mental landscape of modernity. It’s theories and effects have permeated through the culture such that off-hand signifiers such as “Freudian slip,” or “inferiority complex” are part of common speech. Psychoanalysis is now a global text within which are inscribed cultural affects both “high” and “popular”- From Freud to Tiny Tots Comics, From Anton Artaud to Tony Soprano.

“Psyche & Muse,” takes from this wide field and filters it down to a compelling panoramic presentation of archival documentation cataloging the intense engagement artists and writers have had with this hugely influential idea.

The show contains a trove of documents: books, letters, manuscripts, posters, video and assorted ephemera – many of them hand annotated - that help to chart the winding thread of meaning running through a century of cultural production. And it bundles its contents up into chunky sections – like case studies. We see sections on psychoanalysis and race, class and homosexuality, psychoanalysis and the creative impulse, and psychoanalysis and madness.

However, nothing much post dates the nineteen seventies. This lends the whole thing a feel of the eclipsed – that we are looking back at the conceptual shards of a past, subsequently superceded paradigm with its complex rules and gestures withering away on yellowed sheets in brittle folios.

But there is no lack of drama embedded in those yellowed and brittle sheets. Through hand-annotated manuscripts, letters and notes, we see into the internal dilemmas and conflicts that fueled artists and writers.

Carl Jung’s noted “Redbook” – only recently revealed to the public - is a notable feature of the show. Jung, a one-time disciple of Freud, was tormented by unsettling dreams and visions. Taking his own advice to his patients he set his dreams down in

image and word. Jung's concept of psyche was deeply enmeshed in notions of the soul, and this overture to the spiritual realm is clearly evident in this artifact. Here we see colorful pictures of figures and scenes that enact what feels like quite familiar, even clichéd, signifiers of the "spiritual."

On a more radical-political front, a section of the show is devoted to the conflict of race in America and the role of psychoanalysis for those artists and writers who confronted it. Through the books and papers of Chester Himes, LeRoi Jones, Ralph Ellison and others, we see how the language and the devices of psychoanalysis and existentialism were shaped to address both de facto and de jure racial discrimination.

Then there is the reaction – the turn away from the great paradigm. From the late 1960's and 1970's we see documentation of the counter-push against psychoanalysis' prevailing winds. Many opposed to the dominant capitalist political structure saw psychoanalysis as a song and dance routine that bolstered or excused the system. A-list theorists such as Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari, Michel Foucault and others rejected psychoanalysis from a political standpoint, and the documentation of the popularization of this rejection and counter punch is suffused with the strident words and clenched fists so typical of the era.

"Psyche & Muse" is a dense and demanding show. But it rewards on many levels. It documents the thick, knotted process of artistic self-reflection. And it shows psychoanalysis to be a many-headed apparition surfacing here there and everywhere – a force, no longer in the vanguard, perhaps – but not yet wrung dry of catalytic potential.