

Retrieving the status of dream: towards a Process revision of Freud

In this essay I propose to explore some key elements of Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* through the lens of Alfred North Whitehead's Process philosophy. In particular, I will examine the status of the manifest dream, and how a Process revision might serve to retrieve its status as meaningful in, and of, itself.

The reason for this approach is that both Freud and Whitehead propose similar constructive principles in determining how a particular event comes to occur (in Freud's case, the manifest dream; in Whitehead's, the 'actual entity'¹, or event) and yet ultimately they adopt polarized perspectives on how such material should be regarded. Notably, Freud eschews any notion of generative creativity² in the manifestation of the dream, whilst for Whitehead the influx of creativity is central to the manifestation of a new event and its subsequent effect³.

For Freud, 'Dreams construct a *situation* out of the images; they represent an event which is actually happening' (PFL4, p114). At first glance, this seems to support an event ontology: what is important is the summative event or occurrence. In Whiteheadian terms, the 'images' are gathered into a single moment of expression, or concrescence, and constitute – in their completion – the event itself. Yet as Freud's thesis develops it becomes clear that he emphasises the *representation* rather than the *occurrence* of the dream-event; that is, the event is granted only secondary status as representative of something else:

¹ Whitehead: "Actual entities"... are the first real things of which the world is made up... [they] are drops of experience, complex and interdependent... The notion of "substance" is transformed into that of "actual entity".' (PR, pp18–19)

² Freud's process of dream formation is highly inventive in its manipulation of its source material; but he is clear that the dream-work 'restricts itself to giving things a new form.' (PFL4, p650)

³ Whitehead summarizes his rejection of full determinism, thus: 'The doctrine is, that each concrescence is to be referred to a definite free initiation and a definite free conclusion.' (PR, p47)

'in quite a number of cases one can reconstruct from a single remaining fragment not, it is true, *the dream* – which is in any case a matter of no importance – but all the dream-thoughts.' (PFL4, p662) (my emphasis)

Freud thus limits the significance of the dream to an entry-point into the 'dream-work', or underlying trains of psychical activity that construct the dream. From a Process perspective this sharp limitation of the significance of the dream is disappointing, as the manifest dream is exactly the completion of a process that gives reality to its precursive and formative attributes. As a completed event, the dream constitutes a condition of actuality for the dreamer⁴. Although Freud uses its manifestation as a basis for further enquiry, his regard of the manifest dream as wholly determined by factors external to it⁵ renders the summative act as mere documentation of something other than itself. This is akin to a written text representing a complex performance: the documentation contains the appropriate elements from which the outward (perceived) form of the experience can be re-constructed, but it cannot duplicate the experience of witnessing (or participating in) the process itself. Pontalis comments on this outcome of the Freudian method when he states:

'Freud... circumscribed the dream to its *meaning*; thereby to some extent neglecting it as an *experience*.' (FIP, p23)

⁴ In this context the dream is not 'dreamt by' the dreamer. Rather, the condition of dreaming the dream constitutes the summative actuality of the dreamer at that moment.
⁵ That is, by pre-existing factors within the personal and/or psychical history of the dreamer (including phylogenetic material).

In demoting the experiential value of the dream, Freud causes it to become a lifeless artefact, albeit one redefined as an appropriate focus for interpretation. Pontalis again:

‘there will always be a gap between the dream put in pictures and the dream put into words – sometimes one might even say put to death.’ (FIP, p27)

This ‘death’ of the manifest dream acts as a conceptual barrier to forward progression, and effectively requires meaning to be regarded as theoretically (if not actually) prior to the dream’s emergence. Although at the time of formulating his theory of dreams Freud had not yet developed the concept of the ‘death instinct’, Laplanche and Pontalis comment:

‘it is possible to recognise the death instinct as a new guise for a basic and constant *sine qua non* of Freudian thought.’ (LoP, p103)⁶

It is here that the sharp distinction between Freud and Whitehead is most apparent. Freud’s ultimate position is that ‘it would be in contradiction to the conservative nature of the instincts if the goal of life were a state of things which had never been attained’ (PFL11, p310), and that ‘*the aim of all life is death*’ (PFL11, p311). In contrast Whitehead’s position can best be expressed by his focus on existence as a ‘creative advance’ (PR, *passim*). The backward looking emphasis in Freud is important in understanding the shape his theory takes in discovering repressed⁷ or infantile memories⁸ within the underlying dream content. Whitehead’s position, in contrast, allows the dream’s experiential status to be elevated to that of a creative agency in the production of future actualizations. It also militates against it being regarded as a point of finality from which we cannot but retrace our steps.

In chapter 6 of *Interpretation*, Freud makes clear that to understand a dream we must move beyond the manifest content, and approach the latent dream-thoughts behind it. That is, ‘it is from these dream-thoughts and not from a dream’s manifest content that we

⁶ They acknowledge that the formulation was a conceptual departure, but the comment regarding the general shape of Freud’s thinking is pertinent.

⁷ ‘Repressed’ is used in the sense of residing fully in the unconscious.

⁸ Freud’s interpretation sometimes fails to adduce infantile wishes (see pp11–12 below).

disentangle its meaning' (PFL4, p381). He further adds:

'The dream-thoughts are immediately comprehensible, as soon as we have learnt them. The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script... If we attempt to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error... A dream is a picture-puzzle...' (PFL4, pp381–382)

Thus Freud argues for a process of translation, of unravelling the composite image of the manifest dream, and deriving from the resultant elements the true content from which it is made. In so doing, he needs to address the fact that a dream might manifest as a fleeting occurrence, but may yet result in an extended and extensive interpretation. That is:

'[t]he first thing that becomes clear to anyone who compares the dream-content with the dream-thoughts is that a work of *condensation* on a large scale has been carried out.' (PFL4, p383)

He noted that in the formation of the manifest dream-content a range of material has come to be represented by composite forms in which distinct elements are compressed into a shared idea or image. Thus, two people might be represented by a single person who features aspects of personality or physical appearance relating to each of the originating figures, but which in combination are shared by neither. Similarly, words can be compounded to create neologisms, or actions can relate to person A in reality but be presented as belonging to person B within the manifest dream⁹. The analytical process is intended to re-assign these individual characteristics to their originating source, thereby revealing 'meaning'.

The act of condensation closely resembles the principle of concrescence outlined by

⁹ See Freud's analysis of the 'Irma's injection' dream and that of the 'uncle with the yellow beard' (both PFL4).

Whitehead (PR, pp208–215), in which an entity comes into being by a process of ‘prehension’¹⁰, centred upon a subject. In effect (and this is a very brief summary of the complexities of the overall process), the subject becomes aware of everything that can serve as data to its emergence (including physical and non-physical data¹¹) and, through a process of valuation and assimilation, generates a nexus in which every element serves a unique function. In so doing, duplicated functions are conflated so that nothing that finally becomes part of the complex entity (which manifests as a single, and singular, moment of actuality) is functionless, and no function is duplicated.

This view (treating the dream as a particular instance of concrescence) supports Freud in that every word – including prepositions and conjunctions – appearing in a dream-report must be regarded as having specific and particular relevance. It also supports the metonymic construction in the grammar of dreams (PFL4, p428). Moreover, the concrescence is ordered and developed about, and by, its own subject and achieves fulfilment only by the ‘satisfaction’ of its ‘initial’ or ‘subjective’ aim. That is, the act of becoming is one of self-creation in which the outcome (or ‘actual entity’/event) is the concretization of the originating drive. On achieving satisfaction, the actual entity generates a ‘superject’¹², which serves as starting point and subject for a new process of becoming. This bears close comparison with Freud’s concept of a wish serving as both the instigator and resultant meaning of a dream.

Of further significance is that the process of concrescence occurs over a duration (which being incomplete, is atemporal), and yet emerges ‘all at once’. Freud similarly emphasises the simultaneity of the occurrence of the manifest-dream, following the developmental process characterized as the ‘dream-work’. Unlike Freud, however, Whitehead does not

¹⁰ ‘Prehension’ is the ‘feeling’ of other entities. ‘A prehension reproduces in itself the general characteristics of an actual entity: it is referent to an external world.’ (PR, p19)

¹¹ The term ‘eternal object’ is used by Whitehead to describe ‘pure potential’ (PR, p23), and the concept allows for non-actualized possibility as well as actual material to be brought into play.

¹² Whitehead uses the combined term ‘subject-superject’ to indicate that ‘an actual entity is at once the subject experiencing and the superject of its experiences.’ (PR, p29)

require that all the material brought into the event pre-exists; he allows new factors or potentials to ingress into the process of concrescence (see footnotes 11 and 19). Additionally for Whitehead, reality resides within the process of becoming, with the emergent actual entity becoming (effectively) an artefact or datum for subsequent processes. If the emerging dream is taken to be a fully-fledged event in his terms, its purpose is therefore forward-looking; and meaning resides not wholly in its formative elements, but rather in its actualization and role as an efficient cause for a subsequent experience.

In the context of psychoanalysis, this 'subsequent experience' can be regarded as the analytical and interpretative process itself. Pontalis, for example, comments that 'it is not the dream's contents, but the subject's "use" of it that reveals his true pathology' (FIP, p29). As well as acknowledging the loss in the status of the dream afforded by Freud, Pontalis thus also recognizes that if such is the case it follows that what is now important and primary is the attitude adopted by the dreamer towards the self-created text. Although Freud too stressed the importance of the associations produced by the dreamer in furthering the interpretative process, for Pontalis it is in the 'how' of understanding, and not the 'what', that significance resides. Instead of utilizing the text as a means of proving its formative elements, Pontalis shows a willingness to reach into new territory in a creative search for meaning, which for him is exemplified in the active psychoanalytical *process* (FIP, p26).

Freud, however, was wedded to a need to regard the past as the principal source of meaning, either, as Grünbaum suggests, because he 'explicitly modelled his interpretation of dreams on his repression etiology of neurosis' (FP, p229)¹³, or because of his essentially economic approach and regard for constancy, which had been explored in the *Project* of 1895 and reached ultimate expression in the 'death instinct' as set out in

¹³ See also PFL4, p674–5: 'We might also point out in our defence that our procedure in interpreting dreams is identical with the procedure by which we resolve hysterical symptoms.' Freud also refers to the 'indisputable analogy between dreams and insanity' (PFL4, p165).

Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Freud's willingness there to hypothesize an absolute to return from a living to an inorganic state, and to utilize such an approach within his curative practices, may perhaps reflect a religious perspective¹⁴, but certainly cannot be disregarded in assessing his work on dreams.

In several places¹⁵ Freud addresses the problem of linking the condensed material to the dream-thoughts from which he suggests they are derived. The difficulty is that the dream-thoughts are considered primary in dream-formation, yet they are only discoverable after the event by interpretative analysis via free-association. Freud acknowledges that one may rightly ask whether the dream-thoughts truly pre-date the manifest dream-content, or whether they are in fact the result of the process of free-association:

'It is no doubt true that some trains of thought arise for the first time during the analysis. But one can convince oneself in all such cases that these new connections are only set up between thoughts which were already linked in some other way in the dream-thoughts.' (PFL4, p385)

However, the thinking here is flawed. Although the manifest dream-content can be 'unpacked', the resultant dream-thoughts do not emerge in isolation. Grünbaum addresses the method of free-association at some length, pointing out the potential falsity of data so derived. He concludes, with some force, that:

'the epistemic devices confined to the analytic setting cannot reliably *sift* or decontaminate the clinical data so as to *identify* those that qualify as authentic.' (FP, p245)¹⁶

¹⁴ By this I mean he is adopting a traditional Jewish teleology of an ultimate return to Eden (See PFL11, p310 and David Bakan, *passim*).

¹⁵ PFL4, p385, 421, 673-9.

¹⁶ Stuart Hampshire suggests that reasonable proofs are available to the clinical method, though he acknowledges that Freud only rarely pursued this line of argument. (PEF, p75-91)

The general criticism centres on the active relationship engendered in the process of analysis and its possible impact on the material produced. Freud regards the free-associative process as somehow detached from influence, but this causes a radical conceptual disjunction between the necessarily integrated factors of the dream, the dreamer, and the interpretative method¹⁷. Even though the possibility of transference (for example) during the analytical process is acknowledged, Freud places what seems an unwarranted guarantee on the ability of the analyst to divine the truth behind the material produced. This relates partly to his underlying belief that the memory traces drawn out by the method are permanent and fixed, a theory set out in his discussion of the psychical apparatus in chapter 7b of *Interpretation*, and partly because for him all dreams must express 'a (disguised) fulfilment of a (suppressed or repressed) wish' (PFL4, p244). Thus the production of a wish-fulfilment during analysis is required to both disclose and act as proof of the putative memory traces which are presumed to have produced it.

Whilst it is reasonable for Freud to establish connections between the manifest dream-content and the dream-thoughts (the experiencing subject of both is the same: the dreamer), and to suggest that this material may relate to prior events¹⁸, there is a presumption in Freud's argument of stasis. In regarding the dream-thoughts as previously established traces or paths existing within the psychical apparatus, they are accorded the status of permanent, developed structures. In this sense the unconscious can be regarded as a store-house of past events, or as Freud writes (quoting Scholz):

'nothing which we have once mentally processed can be entirely lost.'

(PFL4, pp79–80)

¹⁷ Freud seeks to avoid this issue when he writes: 'We learn... that an unconscious idea is as such quite incapable of entering the preconscious and that it can only exercise any effect there by establishing a connection with an idea which already belongs to the preconscious' (PFL4, p716). However, this is an attempt to have the argument both ways: if a connection can be made (and Freud insists that it can), then he cannot claim that an unconscious idea is 'incapable' of entering the preconscious. It may require a particular method to do so, but enter it can. Freud is here attempting to exclude the possibility of a secondary influence.

¹⁸ Freud acknowledges that subsequent events can merge with the content of the

This retention of the past as data conforms to Process thought, which regards completed events as attaining 'objective immortality' (PR, p29), but there is an important distinction. For Freud, the mental apparatus is a closed, static system. Its goal is to ensure a state of minimum excitation. The accretion of cathexes to the unconscious (or repressed) content allows that content to become active and to commence a drive towards consciousness, but it is difficult to discern where in Freud's model original or non-derivative material can be obtained. This problem is only partially answered by notions of a primal scene (which itself only introduces a level of non-personal, but nonetheless pre-existing, information). The result is that the human subject becomes an entirely reactive or instinctual entity within a fully deterministic world.

If, however, the unconscious/conscious polarity is equated with Whitehead's dipolar structure of a mental and physical pole, both of which are necessary in the formation of an actual entity, the model becomes open to new possibility. The physical data of a concrescence are combined with mental (or in this sense 'psychical') data which themselves represent potentialities rather than prior actualities. Prior events also remain available as data. This revision allows for creative constructions to be placed on the material selected (or cathected), and that the unconscious be regarded as playing a genuinely creative (rather than manipulative) role. Analysis and interpretation remain possible along the lines of Pontalis' mode of active psychoanalysis: that is, meaning obtains from the use, rather than origin, of the material presented in the manifest dream.

The position outlined above might serve as a partial response to critics such as Grünbaum. Freud's basic structure of the retention of past event, and its utilization in the construction of the dream, would remain; the distinction would be in the treatment of the unconscious as a realm of conceptual potential, rather than solely as that of recorded (or previously desired) event. This may take us nearer to Jung's conception of the unconscious (or to a microcosm of God¹⁹), but the need to assert a specific and universal

dream-thoughts during analysis (PFL4, p421).

¹⁹ In Whitehead, the primordial nature of God comprises a unity of eternal objects. It is in

cause and function for every dream would be avoided, as would the epistemological difficulty of deriving absolute truth from abstracted knowledge²⁰.

In arguing that consciousness can re-create with even approximate certainty the unconscious process, Freud confuses two distinct modes of operation²¹ and grants the conscious mode an ultimate sanction over what is presented by the unconscious in the very form that it uses. The dream might be reproducing a prior event that has evaded consciousness due to a process of repression, but equally it might be positing non-actualized potentials in the final formulation it offers. All that analysis can offer is *interpretation*. It cannot adduce certainty for its conclusions, and I would further argue that Freud is wrong in rejecting the means of presentation as incapable of direct meaning or agency. Indeed, the Freudian notion of a wish-fulfilment should lead away from a theory of 'actual cause' and towards one in which unrealized potentials take a greater role. It is in the actualization (in the form of a dream) that the unconscious best expresses its creativity and makes evident its meaning.

One further point I wish to raise in this regard is Freud's contention that all dreams are both initiated by, and expressions of, wish-fulfilments, and that:

'a wish which is represented in a dream must be an infantile one.'

(PFL4, p705)

To accept this view, it is necessary that from the manifest dream-content we are able to derive the relevant dream-thoughts and that these disclose a wish dating back to childhood. It is these dual claims about dreams (that they are wish-fulfilments, and that the wish must be an infantile one) that place most pressure on the need to derive prior,

²⁰ effect a realm of non-actualized potential or possibility (PR, p343).
Freud grudgingly accepts this when he later wrote: 'It is not to be wondered at if this work of interpretation... fails occasionally to arrive at complete certainty.' (SEXXIII, p169)

²¹ Freud posits 'the presence of two kinds of *processes of excitation* or *modes of its discharge*... near the motor end of the [psychical] apparatus', when differentiating between unconscious and conscious thoughts. (PFL4, p770)

causally efficient material from the analytic process.

Grünbaum takes exception to this notion of infantile wishes, focusing on the dream of 'Irma's Injection' to which Freud gives such prominence. It was this dream that provided Freud with confirmation of his nascent theory that dreams are the fulfilment of a wish.²² However, as Grünbaum points out:

'nowhere in his magnum opus on dream interpretation does Freud explicitly offer a repressed wish for *this* dream, let alone an infantile one.' (FP, p225)²³

And indeed, there are numerous examples throughout *Interpretation* where nothing resembling an infantile wish is brought forward either as the initiating cause, or resultant meaning of the dream in question (for example, Freud's dream of his son returning from the front. Freud comments: 'Deeper analysis at last enabled me to discover what the concealed impulse was... it was the envy which is felt for the young by those who have grown old' (PFL4, p713)). Nonetheless, the idea of the dream both being and expressing a wish-fulfilment is a productive one, even if we must doubt the infantile-origin theory²⁴.

In his discussion (PFL4, pp701–705), Freud identifies three possible sources of wishes: i) unsatisfied wishes from immediate waking life; ii) suppressed wishes from the immediate waking life; and iii), those with no connection with waking life. The categories are representative of the structure of the psychical apparatus, ranging from full location in the *Pcs* (i), to initial location in the *Pcs* but driven into the *Ucs* by reason of suppression (ii), and full location in the *Ucs*. Freud is clear in prioritizing the wish located fully in the *Ucs*:

'In my view, therefore, wishful impulses left over from conscious waking life

²² See footnote, PFL4, p199

²³ Grünbaum notes that the primary motifs developed by Freud in his interpretation can all be assigned to pre-conscious or conscious thoughts shortly prior to the occurrence of the dream.

²⁴ Freud later revised the theory so that 'dreams may arise either from the id or from the ego.' (SEXXIII, p166)

must be relegated to a secondary position in respect to the formation of dreams.' (PFL4, p705)

In taking this view, Freud effects a defence of his theory of the psychoanalysis of neurosis (see footnote 13) in that he draws on the earlier theory, and states:

'I consider that these unconscious wishes are always on the alert, ready at any time to find their way to expression when an opportunity arises for allying themselves with an impulse from the conscious...'. (PFL4, p704)

The process requires the unconscious wish to be cathected by conscious or pre-conscious content so that, by transferring that source of energy to itself, it can move towards manifestation. The distortion so common in dreams, and epitomized in the process of condensation (though it may take other forms as well), results from the need of the unconscious wish to evade censorship. It is a principle of the theory that the latent psychological content is suppressed and that the censor acts to prevent its emergence into consciousness. What we have in effect, therefore, is a pressurized system in which the unfulfilled wish continually seeks a means of obtaining access to consciousness, or actualization. This may result in neurotic symptoms, but also explains the occurrence of dreams.

Freud sought theoretical support for his contention (that 'the unconscious has nothing else to offer during sleep but the motive force for the fulfilment of a *wish*' (PFL4, p718)) within 'the schematic picture of the psychological apparatus' (*ibid.*). Accordingly, he presents a system in which the organism seeks to obtain 'an experience of satisfaction' (PFL4, p719) and then lays down permanent mnemonic traces. These traces are utilized as means of re-creating that moment of satisfaction whenever the appropriate triggers recur. In early psychological development this satisfaction might result in hallucinating (both the 'wish' and its 'fulfilment' are psychological acts), but the realities of physical life require engagement with the external world. In effect, his explanation of consciousness comes to this:

'Thought is after all nothing but a substitute for a hallucinatory wish; and it is self-evident that dreams must be wish-fulfillments, since nothing but a wish can set our mental apparatus at work.' (PFL4, p721)

The implication is that dreams are reversionary processes reflecting a prior state of development, and consciousness itself an expedient developed better to fulfil the emergent wishes by effecting motor responses. Again, Freud reduces activity to a deterministic model, in which the aim is to reduce excitation. The unconscious wish is presumed to have failed to achieve satisfaction, either because of other, stronger and incompatible wishes occurring at the same historical moment, or because of practical impossibilities (for example, infantile sexuality). In taking this view, however, Freud precludes the possibility of essential wishes developing throughout the life process (even though his own examples frequently contradict this basic tenet²⁵).

I mentioned earlier the resemblance between wish-fulfilment and the idea of 'satisfaction' in Whitehead's philosophy, and also the way in which an initial subjective aim is regarded as both initiating cause and summative outcome of concrescence. The limitations in Freud's model are both that it restricts the instigating mechanism to a wish otherwise confined to the unconscious, and that it treats meaning as historical (objective) data, rather than as functionally generative of future development. If a Process model is allowed scope in this regard, it must reject Freud's boundary between the conscious and unconscious. The essence of an organism is precisely its capability of holistic self-relation and its need to attain to self-determination. I would suggest that Freud's hypothesis stems from confusion in regarding distinct presentational modes as identical with absolute or functional separation.

²⁵ See footnote 23, and also the dream of 'the daughter in case' (PFL4, p237). In the latter, the wish is presumed to date back 15 years to the dreamer's pregnancy and an unfulfilled desire to lose the child. However, it is plausible to suggest that the motivation was a desire to prevent the now adult daughter departing into independent life. The events may be related, and the latter might have brought about recall of the former. It seems, perverse, however, to claim the former as necessarily the prime instigator. In either case,

The unconscious and conscious both contribute to the unity of the subject, but each presents its material in a structurally distinct way. The conscious mode takes account of the 'external' world and necessarily conforms in its subjective understanding with what Whitehead terms 'presentational immediacy'. A dream, however, has no need to place such high valuation on conforming to a 'reality test' (Freud's terminology), or 'stubborn reality' (Whitehead's). Brian O'Shaughnessy characterizes this as a loss of 'will' and notes that 'dreaming is thinking when consciousness is unaware of the world' (PEF, p120). He also offers support for the self-creative act of the dream:

"While the self that dreams has goals that are its own, these are those of the *dream*." And we mean that the self that is sleeping has the goals that it has only because the dream determines that it shall.' (PEF, p115)

Thus, if we regard the unconscious as a realm of potentiality, and noting that it need not conform fully to the strictures of presentational immediacy, it is able to concretize in less 'realistic', or more imaginative, forms; hence the ability to generate the complex manifest dream. In this sense the actualized dream effects its own existence, and belongs fully to the life-history of the experiencing subject. Its value resides in itself, and its meaning relates as much to the future response to its occurrence as to any prior causative constructions.

At the root of this revision of Freud's theory, and why Freud regarded the dream as so important and informative, is the greater subjectivity of the resulting actual entity. Essential features of Freud's model are retained, or enhanced: the relationship of dreaming to waking life; the utilization of past or unconscious material (but with a new creative potential); the condensation and structural grammar of dream (concrecence); and the notion of a wish (or subjective aim) constituting its own purpose and outcome. The dream also continues to effect an exploration of inner or unconscious content, since the state of

neither wish is 'infantile' in Freud's terms.

sleep (withdrawal of the requirements for full presentational immediacy) enables greater play to be granted to the psychical over the physical.

Freud's great insight was in identifying these elements. His teleological bias, however, pressed him to look back rather than ahead in establishing meaning, and thus it is in the application of this epistemically uncertain material that I suggest he fails. A Process revision retains much of Freud's constructive principles, but allows a new direction to be placed on the establishment of meaning. The dream becomes more, not less, of a focus for concern, and its status is preserved as a significant and creative event within the life of the dreamer.

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* Reference is to the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, followed by volume number.