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The Latent and the Manifest: Freudianism in *A Guest for the Night*

> Repression is not a simple event (as traditional Freudian analysis has it), but an ongoing process of marking and suppressing differences, a process which, as Ferdinand de Saussure and others have suggested, is the basis of signification. In this view, repression, in turn, creates a textual unconscious.
>
> Davis, *Lacan and Narration*

THE HISTORY OF AGNON CRITICISM can be viewed as paradigmatic of the fate of psychoanalytic thought in Hebrew/Israeli culture in general. And if contemporary readings help change our understanding of Agnon's work, then several larger questions come to mind. First and foremost: How can we explain the ostensible "blindness" of earlier readers to the abundance of Freudian motifs, images and concerns "discovered" by contemporary readers?[1] Were these previously taken for granted, or were they knowingly ignored? And more generally: What happened to the psychoanalytic impulse that had animated the cultural discourse of the Erets-Israeli Moderna in the 1920s and 30s?[2] Why was it relegated to the margins of the cultural system in the decades that followed, and why has it made a halting comeback in the last decade?[3]

Agnon is an excellent test case for these issues, not only in the

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vagaries of the critical "reception" of his work, but in the very ambivalence he himself manifested toward Freudian psychologism. His ambivalence may be adduced from such extrinsic evidence as the removal of Freud's name from earlier versions of the novella *Panim aḥerot* (1932), one of his explicitly psychological fictions. Yet I think that intrinsic evidence is available too—provided we are ready "to cancel the traditional privilege of the manifest order as a sole determiner of meaning," as recently formulated by Robert Con Davis, one of the American propagators of the Lacanian "return" to Freud.[4]

A careful reading of Davis' statement in the epigraph may call into question the labelling of Freudian repression as "a simple event." Yet this questioning should not detract from the usefulness of Lacan's major contribution, the discovery of the "semiotic Freud." By reading psychoanalytic processes (e.g., "repression") through the lens of Saussurian linguistics (e.g., the recognition of the inevitable rupture between the signifier and the signified, hence the constant "threat" of the "slippage" of meaning), Lacan embedded psychoanalysis within the discourse of semiotics—and vice versa. It is but a short step from highlighting the general principles of symbolization underlining Freud's intrapsychic system to reach the complementary discovery—the "psychoanalytic" behavior of language itself. This makes possible the transition from the analysis of literary Oedipal complexes (whether of the author or of his characters) to a psychoanalytic analysis of narration itself.[5] And it is in this sense that the concept of the "textual unconscious" is evoked here—as the different repressed "other" that is ever-present just beneath the manifest order of the ostensibly fixed and stable text. What follows, then, is a proposed reading of the different ways—the manifest and latent—in which Freudianism signifies in Agnon's novel *A Guest for the Night* (1939). More accurately, it is a rereading of my own earlier analysis of what I consider one of Agnon's most supreme riddles—the irony of the key.[6] And perhaps this layered chain of interpretations, the product of a single reader, is in itself a modest illustration of the transferential function of reading, as well as of the direction this transference has recently taken in Agnon criticism.

A Guest for the Night tells the story of the protagonist's visit to his east European hometown after the Great War. Having left for the Land of Israel as a youth, despite his father's objections, the narrator-protagonist returns as a mature man—a writer by profession—in search of the past he remembers. That this past is forever lost is a lesson he learns by the end of his sojourn. But before this stage is reached, he undergoes phases of hope and expectation in his attempt to reconstruct days gone by. Needless to say, the narrator's desperate

project of reconstruction is ironically thwarted by the text on the levels of both action and discourse. This irony is to a great extent structured by the motif of the key, the massive, old key to the Beit Midrash, which is given to the protagonist by the townspeople on the eve of the Day of Atonement. Charged with the key to the study of the Torah, the protagonist embarks on a mission of restoration; he reopens the house of study, trying to recapture what he conceives of as the old way of life.

From this moment on the subplot of the key motif assumes a life of its own. It takes unpredictable and sometimes unlikely turns. The key is lost and replaced by another key; often used and suddenly neglected, it is mistaken for still another key and is even spoken to by its owner; finally, the substitute key is bequeathed to a new-born baby, while the original one unexpectedly turns up in Jerusalem.

Critical consensus has long recognized the role played by the key motif in establishing the ironic or grotesque symbolism of the novel. My initial question concerning this enigmatic key irony was semiotic; namely, I tried to understand how it was possible for a single signifier, the word *mafteaḥ*, key, to convey the contrariness inherent in its binary signifieds. This problem grew especially troublesome when I considered the fact that the universally positivized symbolism of the key as a literary convention is coupled in Hebrew with the semantic transparency of the language (the derivative meaning of *mafteaḥ* being "an opener"). The issue then became the unravelling of the ways in which the author de-automatized cultural conventions, thereby compelling them to generate meanings that are contradictory to their "original" ones. The first clue I discovered was on the level of semantics. A rigorous reading of the text reveals that the familiar key motif should be really defined as the motif of the "lock and key." By its derivational meaning, the Hebrew "lock," *manʿul*, acts as a natural complement of *mafteaḥ* for producing the binary axis "open" ⟷ "lock." It is clear, then, that the combination *manʿul umafteaḥ*, "lock and key," provided Agnon with a bipolar signifier to accommodate his playful paradoxes and ironic statements. Moreover, with the unfolding of the plot, one realizes that the syntagmatic accumulation of this bipolar paradigm evolves in three stages: Chapters 1–5 show a balanced use of the two components, thus establishing an initial ambivalence. In the next stage this indeterminant state seems to be resolved—in Chapters 6–19 only the opening function of the key is operative. Finally, from Chapter 23 on we follow the adventure of the substitute key, the one made by the locksmith in Chapter 22. Unlike its authentic counterpart, the new key is used only once for opening (p. 131). In all further instances it is mentioned in connection with locking and closing (pp. 185, 218, 242, 312, 454) or is associated with the inability to open (p. 245).[7]

What is the reader to deduce from this statistical distribution? On the surface it looks like a case of a clear-cut value judgment: The original key which functions in accordance with the semantics of its *Hebrew* root signifies the positive pole; its substitute, on the other hand, fulfills the negative function which is implied by the German-Yiddish *shlisl*. In other words, despite the lexical consistency (the word *mafteaḥ* is used throughout, of course), we witness here a semantic and judgmental inversion: The authentic key has been in fact substituted not with a new "opener" but rather with a "locker," or a *shlisl* if you will. This value judgment is reinforced by the final adventure of the original key; it "makes *aliya*," so to speak, behind the protagonist's back (the protagonist unexpectedly discovers it in his back-pack when he returns home to Jerusalem [Ch. 79]). Taking this final stage in the key's plot as the closure of the novel, critical consensus has appropriately arrived at a "national' interpretation of the motif: It would seem that the attempt to restore the world of the diaspora is doomed to failure. Concomitantly, it is represented by a negatively marked substitute key, the *shlisl*. The positively marked key, the Hebraic "opener," represents the Zionist solution which points, predictably, to the Land of Israel.

Nevertheless, a neatly structured interpretation of this kind, as much as it may be comforting (at least partially, from a Zionist perspective), does not do justice to Agnon's artistic irony. The newly found key, though in Jerusalem, is finally *locked up* in a box. To avoid any mistake, Agnon repeats this symbolic action twice, as the closures of the last two chapters: "I went into my house, put away the key in the box, locked the box on the outside, and hung the key of the box on my heart" (p. 476, cf. pp. 471–72). The language of these passages brings us back to the focal point of the plot: the episode of the locksmith. Rereading this episode one realizes that it functions in the story in a way similar to the role accorded by Freud to the "navel" of the dream.[8] The full irony of the novel's closure cannot be recovered without juxtaposing it with this semantic "navel," its hidden internal intertext. And since the latter is suffused with the recollection of dreams and wishes that originate in childhood consciousness, the reader is encouraged to consider a Freudian interpretation.

> "This is the gentleman who wants you to make him a *key*," said Bach. The locksmith stretched his hands to welcome me, clasping my hand joyfully, and I too rejoiced over him. First, because he will make me a *key*. Secondly, because when I was a child I used to stand at the doorway [*petaḥ*] of his store looking at the *keys* and locks. For in those days I desired a box with a lock and *key*. And when I gave up on the box later, I did not give up on the *key;* I would lie in bed at night contemplating the *key*, a big and heavy *key* that one takes out of his pocket to *open* his home with. That *key*, for which I wished, would take different shapes, but all shapes were incidental to its function

> and final purpose. Just imagine: at the hub of a town there stands a house, and that house, just like any other house, has a door on which hangs a lock. A child comes from school, puts his hand in his pocket to take out the *key*, thrusts the *key* in the lock turning it this way and that, and right away the whole house is *open* before him. What is there in this house? A table, a bed, and a lamp—namely, nothing the other houses do not have; but to that moment of *opening* the house with the *key* that the child is holding, no other moment can compare. Now you can imagine how great was that old man with more than a hundred *keys* hanging on his *doorway*. There are stored-away treasures one can *open* with a saying, as when you say, "*Open Sesame!*"; yet I did not seek invisible matters but rather the visible ones, and all I wished for was that their *key* would be in my hand. (Emphasis added)[9]

The manifest intentionality of this monologue does not call, I believe, for much interpretation. In this short passage the root *p-t-ḥ*, "open," occurs nineteen times in a variety of nominal and verbal forms. This constant reiteration of a single semantic nucleus seems to be an emotional outburst of nostalgia for the world of childhood, a world in which all options are still open. In this world any "key" would function as a metaphor of the child's ego, of his hopes and aspirations. Furthermore, the unusual use of the verb *n-ʿ-z* for inserting the key (it literally means 'stick in' or 'thrust'), highlights the "sexual" connotations of the "key and lock" motif. Even a surface familiarity with "Freudian" symbolism is enough to decode the psychoanalytic meaning of the child's wishes.

The "box," the "house," the "rooms"—are all firmly established symbols of female genitalia (*The Interpretation of Dreams*, ch. vi): "The question of whether they are "open" or "locked" will be readily understood in this connection," says Freud, and then adds: "There is no need to be explicit as to the sort of key that will unlock the room."[10] Agnon, on the other hand, seems to be so extremely explicit in his use of dream symbolism, that he practically challenges the reader to go beyond the obvious. I would even argue that the manifest Freudianism of this passage is a parody, and as such it is a false clue. It invites the reader to do precisely what Lacan objects to, namely, "the privileging of narration as a manifest order," thereby encouraging a premature foreclosure.[11]

But why should Agnon have resorted to such decentering devices? Why should he have elaborated the key motif, with all its positive connotations, semantic as well as psychoanalytic, only to have them undermined? My initial answer to this question was, as I mentioned before, "semiotic": Building up false expectations may be seen as part of that process of de-automatization that generates irony. A second look at the same material suggests, however, an additional explanation, one that readily supports Lacanian approaches to narrative. The next stage

in the plot of the key, its "fall" from the libidinal plenitude of childhood, is cleverly disguised by the text, deferring any resolution of the conflict even beyond the very end of the textual closure. We could say with Lacan that Agnon's text floats "on the surface of unconscious discourse," that this "narrative is virtually buoyant with repression," and that "if we look closely at the manifest text, we see something else, a hollowness that inhabits the text. . . ."[12]

In order to unravel this hollowness, let us begin with Chapter 22, where the text encourages us to consider the substitqte key as a metaphor for the regained humanness of the protagonist. His optimism seems to be reinforced by the opening of the house of study, where the warm hearth attracts a number of people who join the protagonist in his studies. It is then that he addresses the reader with the following monologue:

> Dear brothers, there is no time when a man is more blessed than the time he spends in his *mother's womb*, for then he is taught the entire Tora; but as soon as he comes out into the air of the world, along comes an angel and strikes him on the mouth, making him forget the entire Tora. Great is the Tora that he was taught in those days—but even so, there is no joy in the Tora unless one toils for it. It is like a man who has lost his key and then found it. (Emphasis added)[13]

No doubt this is a strange juxtaposition: In what way is the present better than earlier times? Isn't this preference based on a false assumption? Had the *old* key been recovered, there could perhaps have been some truth to this analogy; but since it was not, what is the cause of the protagonist's rejoicing? The present joy is likened to the joy of a man who has found his key, but this is really not the case here. Thus the rationalization for finding joy in the present fails to convince. What unwittingly emerges from this false analogy is the true object of the protagonist's yearning. His affirmation is granted not to the present, but to the time "before," to the safe and protected, "locked" so to speak, prenatal existence depicted in the rabbinic intertext.

In order to comprehend the full meaning of this preference we must first understand what this rabbinic homily stands for. Gershom Scholem explains that "the Midrash on the Creation of the Child relates that after its guardian angel has given it a fillip upon the nose, the new born child forgets all the infinite knowledge acquired before its birth in the celestial houses of learning . . . . truly a remarkable variant of the Platonic conception of cognition as recollection, anamnesis."[14] In other words: In the Jewish sources the Platonic "ideas" are replaced by the equally eternal Torah. If we continue with this analogy we may conclude that the study of Torah in *this* world is actually a process of "recollection," an attempt to recover or reconstruct an ideal prenatal

existence. Life, then, is viewed as a secondary reflection, a poor imitation of the original; it is only a necessary hiatus in the cyclical flow of an ideal reality which both precedes it and follows it. What renders this heavenly existence superior to life itself is its direct contact with the source—the Platonic ideas or (in the Jewish version) the Torah. Consequently, affirmation is clearly granted to the existence of pre- or after-life and this value judgment is traditionally symbolized by various images of light. In the later neo-Platonic stages of this myth light becomes the principal symbol of the process of emanation (the flow from the celestial sources down to the low world of matter). In the rabbinic version, the study of the Torah in the womb is also accompanied by the image of a burning candle which is so powerful, that it illuminates the whole universe. Similarly, in another rabbinic source (Hagigah 12a), the after-life of the righteous is marked by a unique light, a remnant of the original light of creation which had been especially stored away for this purpose (*ha'or haganuz*).

Curiously enough, the image of the burning candle is omitted by Agnon (or by his narrator) in the retelling of this myth. This omission is indeed intriguing, since it is repeated in the second recounting of the same myth, when the narrator attributes it to the thoughts (!) of a newly born baby, the one that inherits his substitute key (Ch. 76, esp. p. 460). Even more curious is the fact that candles (or other sources of light) are rekindled throughout the novel. Furthermore, *all* occurrences of studying the Torah or even contemplating its study are accompanied by a "ritual" of light. Seen from this perspective, the protagonist's endeavor is in fact an attempt to concretize the mythical image of an ideal cyclical existence which takes place not only 'before" life, but after life as well. Read this way, his visit to his hometown is more than an attempted journey to childhood. It is actually a symptom of an *escapist impulse, a latent wish to regress into the womb.* Thus translated into psychological terms, the "innocently" told homily undergoes an evaluative reversal; it is hardly conceivable that a modern reader would escape the *negative* connotations attributed to "womb" imagery in psychoanalytic teachings. Consequently, the very same wish (to recapture the prenatal existence) which is highly glorified in the myth of the pious, is interpreted in the modern consciousness as the expression of a negative impulse—*thanatos* or death wish. We could argue, then, that by tying the key motif with this specific myth Agnon actually contradicts and ironically undercuts his protagonist's restorative endeavor, earlier foregrounded by the libidinal impulse signified by the childhood key. By so doing he in fact dramatizes the conflict between the libidinal and thanatotic drives that were postulated by Freud in the early 20s but were vehemently rejected by most of his followers on both sides of the ocean.[15]

This latent negative motivation, however, is not overtly acknowledged by the text. The omission of the burning candle from the two retellings of the myth may be an attempt to repress the metaphoric matrix from which the text is generated. In a way, this omission functions as a defense mechanism (a "disguise" or even a "denial") intended to prevent the death wish from surfacing to consciousness (and to the surface of the text). Predictably, this process of denial or repression is only partially successful, because, to use the formulation of literary semiotician Michael Riffaterre, "As the matrix is repressed, the displacement produces variants all through the text, just as suppressed symptoms break out somewhere else in the body."[16]

This failure notwithstanding, the Freudianism of the womb imagery is a far cry from the manifest Freudianism of the key and lock symbolism of the earlier passage. In contrast to the manifest reiteration of the libidinal thrust of childhood, of the desire for mastery and control, the regressive death wish of the disillusioned and discouraged adult is only obliquely expressed. Reasons for this emptying out of the life instinct are abundant in the plot; the presence of death is evidenced everywhere in this desolate town. Yet one cannot ignore the fact that throughout his stay in the town the narrator is out of touch with his wife and family and that his libidinal drives toward the young but engaged Rachel are greatly held in check. We should not be surprised that his failure to open the hotel door is expressed in precisely the same verb used in the description of his childhood wishes: "I *thrust* the key in the lock, but it did not open" (p. 245); "the master," it seems, "does not know how to open," as summarized by the chambermaid.

We cannot follow here all the adventures of the negative key, the locker. Suffice it to say that it accompanies the narrator's process of withdrawal and soul searching. As we near the end of the novel, the key loses its referential and functional significance and becomes a personal token. In one of the last visits to the house of study the key motif disappears altogether and only a verbal memento is gleaned from the double negation describing the desolation: "For months the prayer-book had *not* been *opened* and no prayer had risen from it, and the doors of the Ark had *not* been *opened* . . ." (p. 439). The added comment, "except by the dead who come to the Beit Midrash," attests to the fact that the "pre-life" wish of the narrator (the regression to fetal existence) nearly materializes here in the "post-life" existence of the house of study.

This journey to the brink of death leads the narrator to face himself (Ch. 72: "Between me and myself"). He finds out that the process of locking and being locked out is not reversible—neither on the national-collective level nor on the personal level. Furthermore, escaping this process is just as impossible; the holiness and wholeness of the mythical

world is not recapturable and no key is going to open it again. The key (the "opener") is replaced now by the key-hole (in Hebrew: *ḥor-haman'ul*, "the *lock*-hole"), and desire is appropriately replaced by voyeurism: "I stood in front of the door of the Beit Midrash and looked through the key-hole. The space of the Beit Midrash shrank within the ball of this man's eye, and a glowing, clarifying light shone from it" (p. 463). This shining light—the prenatal candle or the stored light of after-life—is an out-of-reach ideal, a locked-up existence (or perhaps a state of mind), one that could only be observed from the outside.

There is only one more illusion left, for the narrator as well as for the reader: Perhaps this wished-for existence is locked up just because the authentic key has been lost; but once this key is found. . . . Well, this very key does turn up in the Land of Israel, but its last adventure seems to cap the key irony of the novel. The narrator puts it in a box which he then locks up. Only if we remember the "box" that the narrator-as-child longed so much to open will we fully appreciate the final irony: "I went into my house, hid the key away in the box and *locked the box* on the outside . . ." (p. 476). Nevertheless, Agnon does not allow his protagonist to express his despair freely. The tragic sense of finality which in fact underlies the last episode in the key subplot is muted by the allusion to the myth that "the synagogues and houses of study of the diaspora are destined to be established in Erets Yisrael" (p. 471, cf. pp. 472, 476). It is the reiteration of this homily that prompts a "hopeful" critical reading of the closure of the novel, as, for example, in Arnold Band's statement that "the life of the Torah, as represented by the Beit Midrash and its ponderous key, is no longer viable in Shibush [his European hometown], but only in Erets Yisrael."[17] This reading is further reinforced by the birth of a baby (the only one in the story) toward the end of the novel, and particularly by the fact that he now "holds" the key to the house of study (Ch. 76).

Unfortunately, this optimism is not borne out by a careful textual perusal. Agnon does *not* resolve the indeterminant air of his novel to the very end. He heralds the future in the figure of the newborn baby but equips him with a substitute key (a "locker," rather than an "opener"); he miraculously produces the authentic key in the land of the future, then prudently stores it away because "the early craftsmen used to make their keys too big and heavy for the measure of our hearts" (p. 472). Thus authenticity is locked up by a *third* key, which is twice removed from the original, a pale reflection of its "brass and iron" forefather. Yet this is the only one the protagonist is capable of bearing, for the authentic one "was too heavy for my heart to bear." This is a rather dubious affirmation of the value of this symbol, whatever content one endows it with. What is clear, though, is that by ending the novel on a note of "locking," Agnon is brazenly playing with the notion

of negation, while prudently relegating the option of reopening to the unknown extra-literary future.

The unresolved ambivalence toward the contest between the manifest life drive and the latent death drive that animates this narrative neatly corresponds to the debate over Freud's "Nirvana Principle" that in those years tore asunder the psychoanalytic camp. It is perhaps instructive that the publication of this novel in 1939 coincided with the beginning of Lacan's return to Freud, a return that was to emphasize precisely those thanatotic elements rejected by American ego-psychology. Even more relevant may be the unstable and conflictual status accorded thanatos by the "para-Marxists" associated with the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Committed as these scholars were to the study and promotion of social change, they found Freud's pessimism too difficult to digest. Characteristically, it was only in the late thirties, with the onset of the war, that their studied optimism began to give way, and the concept of the death drive gained a new, albeit qualified, validity.[18] There is no doubt that their difficulties with Freud's later theorizing were not unlike those afflicting Agnon's narrative. And it is perhaps this unexpected common ground that may serve as a starting point for the investigation of the ambivalent attitude to Freudianism found in Agnon as well as in Hebrew culture in general. Indeed, such an inquiry may show that just as in other respects, Agnon's fiction marks the high point of a certain tension that has existed in Hebrew literature almost since its earliest encounter with Freudianism: that between the positivist, forward looking Zionist aspirations and the more sober estimation, often substantiated by psychoanalytic findings, of the inadequacy and recalcitrance of human nature.

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NOTES

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1. See, for example, Gershon Shaked's Freudian reading of "Betrothed" in this issue. Cf. the lack of similar suggestions in any of the earlier interpretations he cites.

2. This issue is explored in detail in my forthcoming study, "Freudianism and Its Discontents in Hebrew Culture, 1920–1940."

3. On the use of the psychoanalytic metaphor in contemporary Hebrew literature, see my "Zionism on Trial in Contemporary Israeli Fiction," *Herzl Yearbook 1987*, eds. David Sidorsky and Ruth Kozodoy (New York, 1987; in press), and "Zionism—Neurosis or Cure? The Drama of Y. Sobol," to appear in *Prooftexts*.

4. Robert Con Davis, "Lacan, Poe and Narrative Repression," in *Lacan and Narration: The Psychoanalytic Difference in Narrative Theory*, ed. Robert Con Davis (Baltimore, 1983), pp. 983–1005.

5. For a detailed discussion of the general transition from earlier critical uses of the psychoanalytic model to the recent literary use of the psychoanalytic process, see Meredith Anne Skura, *The Literary Use of the Psychoanalytic Process* (New Haven, 1981).

6. See Yael S. Feldman, "How Does a Convention Mean? A Semiotic Reading of Agnon's Bilingual Key-Irony in *A Guest for the Night*," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 56 (1985): 251–69.

7. All page references are to *A Guest for the Night*, trans. Misha Louvish, eds. Naftali C. Brandwein and Allen Mandelbaum (New York, 1968). When the English rendering is too free for the purposes of my analysis, my own emendations are provided.

8. "Every dream has at least one point at which it is unfathomable; a central point, as it were, connecting it with the unknown," notes Freud while reporting his analysis of his own dreams. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, ch. 2. *The Basic Writings of Sigmund Freud*, trans. A. A. Brill (New York, 1938), p. 199.

9. *A Guest for the night*, p. 92. My translation.

10. *The Interpretation of Dreams*, p. 372.

11. Davis, p. 984.

12. Ibid., p. 992.

13. *A Guest for the Night*, p. 108.

14. Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York, 1941), p. 92. The talmudic source of this midrash is Niddah 30b; a later, more elaborate version is related in Tanhuma, *Pequdei*, 3.

15. See Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 1920. For a review of the ensuing debate, see Ernest Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud* (New York, 1953–57), Vol. 3, p. 266.

16. Michael Riffaterre, *Semiotics of Poetry* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1978), p. 19.

17. Arnold Band, *Nostalgia and Nightmare* (Los Angeles, 1968), p. 308.

18. See Paul Robinson, *The Freudian Left* (New York, 1969) and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston and Toronto, 1973) esp. Ch. 3. For an extreme objection to Freud's death drive see Erich Fromm, *Fear of Freedom* (London, 1942), p. 157 et passim. The public "defence" of the concept came only later, and in a rather "free" interpretation, in Herbert Marcuse's influential *Eros and Civilization* (Boston, 1955).