

3. 'Where had she walked thus and whither was she going?':

Freud, Ferrante and Feet in Jensen's *Gradiva*

Shahidha Bari

In May 1938, on the eve of Freud's expulsion from Vienna and flight to London, his colleague August Aichhorn, with one eye on posterity, persuaded photographer, Edmund Engelman, to record the contents of the original consulting rooms at Berggasse 19 (Joel Sanders Architect, 2015). Engelman's images capture the cluttered office, the familiar couch draped with oriental rugs and piled with cushions, the dark walls unevenly clad with pictures, engravings and artefacts - among them, the image of Gradiva. Gradiva hangs adjacent to and above the couch, regal in a bas-relief plaster cast and browned with age. Her upright Roman figure is carved in profile, her hair pinned low and head bent forward as she hurries, pacing everlastingly onward. The speed of her movement is suggested in the folds of her gown which are thick and numerous, cumbersomely swirling around her eager stride. Her skirt is gathered in one hand, drawn up to clear the ankles and to expose her feet: one pressed flat, the other arched in motion, toes pushing off from the ground beneath her.

But Gradiva holds an important place in Freud's thinking, as well as in his consulting room. In his 1906 essay, 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*' (Freud, 2001a), a brief and focused study of Wilhelm Jensen's short novel of 1903, *Gradiva: Ein Pompejanisches Phantasiestück*, (Jensen, 2003), Freud reads the story of

Gradiva as an elaboration of the writer's psyche. The scholarship around the essay has often attended to it as a persuasive example of the interconnection of psychoanalysis and fiction, recognising the novel as an exercise in male fantasy. But Freud's effusive account of it also reveals how easily fantasy can marginalise female experience. In this way, the figure of *Gradiva* poses a challenge to psychoanalysis, both presenting an emblem of Freud and marking the elision of femininity. This essay examines the place of *Gradiva* in Freud's thinking and argues that while *Gradiva*'s story invites Freud's analysis of male fantasy, it also betrays his anxieties about the waywardness of women and the ability of psychoanalysis to contain them through the instruments of interpretation and diagnosis. Finally, the essay updates Freud's reading of Jensen's novel by looking to the work of Elena Ferrante - a contemporary writer with acknowledged interests in psychoanalysis - counterpoising the fictional account of male desire with an alternative expression of female will.

The image of *Gradiva* is important to Freudian psychoanalysis. Ernest Jones noted how fervent analysts, eager to follow in Freud's footsteps, would emblazon their consulting rooms with replicas of the engraving, the girl easily transformed into the cipher of their intellectual affiliation (Jones, 1953-7, p. 342). Today, at 20 Maresfield Gardens, Freud's *Gradiva* hangs over the entrance to the study, but at Berggasse 19, the plaster cast was positioned at the foot of the couch, her profile turned to the patient, as though she were striding inexorably toward them, her head bent in assenting acknowledgement. In the 1937 film of Freud at home, commissioned by Marie Bonaparte and narrated by Anna Freud, the camera's unsteady lens darts around the room, swooping down on the analyst's accoutrements - the sphinx, the Egyptian plough, the family photographs - resting only momentarily on *Gradiva*'s bas-relief,

strangely vigorous in the stillness of the empty analytical setting. 'Gradiva' intones Anna Freud gravely - but Gradiva is unmistakable. Freud himself had not mistaken her when he spotted her sculpted form in the Vatican museum in September 1907, a year after his essay was published. Writing home to his wife, he observed that he had recognised there a 'dear familiar face' (Freud, 1992, p. 267).

In Jensen's story, an ardent young architect by the name of Norbert Hanold grows infatuated with an engraving displayed in a museum in Rome that depicts a woman walking vigorously. He names her Gradiva after Mars Gradivus, the Roman god of war who strides into battle. Later, acquiring a plaster cast of the image, Norbert displays it on the wall of his study, contemplating it daily, until the figure penetrates his dreams, becoming the stuff of fantasy. One night, dreaming of Gradiva amidst the ruins of Pompeii, Norbert determines to travel there, convinced he will encounter her spectre on the site of the lost city. True to his dream, he does, indeed, encounter a woman walking vigorously - only she reveals herself not as an apparition of Gradiva, but instead the now adult form of Norbert's childhood playmate, Zoë Bertgang. Over the course of the novel, Zoë, quietly and calmly, awakens the archaeologist from his dreams and delusions, gradually reconciling him to his real life. Unsurprisingly, Freud latched onto the story eagerly, perceiving it as a model of psychoanalytically sympathetic fiction. In Jensen, he had found a novelist to revere: creative writers, he observed, could be 'valuable allies' for psychoanalysis, providing in their fictions evidence that 'is to be prized highly, for they are apt to know a whole host of things between heaven and earth of which our philosophy has not yet let us dream' (Freud, 2001a, p. 8).

If there is a certain modesty here in the casting of psychoanalysis as the handmaiden to the profundity of writers, it is undercut by the confidence with which Freud construes Jensen's novel as a pre-eminently psychoanalytical enterprise. Lis Møller asserts that Freud reads the novel purposefully, 'with the intention of pronouncing *Gradiva* the ally of psychoanalysis' and positioning it 'as one long defence of the dream theory' (Møller, 1991, p. 31). But there are aspects of Jensen's novel that enable this alliance too. The parallels are striking and obvious: Norbert, for instance, dreams of Pompeii, just as Freud too invokes the image of a ruined city in *Civilisation and its Discontents*. For Freud, the wreckage of Ancient Rome, buried deep underground, contrasts to the retentive terrain of mental life where 'nothing which has once been formed can ever perish' (Freud, 2001b, p. 69). But Jensen's story exemplifies this too: the return of the lost childhood friend is evidence of the irrepressible past. Gradiva is the manifestation of an infantile libidinal attachment that lastingly shapes adult desire. Incarnated as Zoë, she is also proof of the efficacy of the psychoanalytic method, walking Norbert out of fantasies of ruin and leading him safely back into the present. When he hails Gradiva in Latin, Zoë patiently insists he address her in modern German.

A gratified Jensen himself addressed Freud in the spring of 1907, writing congenially 'I can agree without reservation that your paper has completely divined and done justice to the intentions of my little book'. In an intriguing exchange of letters, Jensen airily attributed his 'depiction of psychical developments' to 'poetic intuition' rather than deliberate intention, but Freud replying eagerly probed further, seeking out the origin of Jensen's story and the object of Norbert's dream (Fletcher, 2013, p. 1001). He issued a stream of personal questions: 'Where is your own person hiding in the story and how far back does the material reach into your life?' (Ibid., p. 1004). Curiously, nothing in

the information provided by Jensen seemed to signal the diagnosis to which Freud nonetheless proceeded when he theorised that the figure of Gradiva derived from the author's forgotten memory of a dead sister (Ibid., p. 1002). Why, then, did Freud read Jensen's *Gradiva* so determinedly against any authorial evidence?

Erica Davies offers one answer when she notes that 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*', constituted the 'the first full length application of psycho-analysis to a literary text' (Davies, 1998, p. 69). The stakes were high. Jensen's story triumphantly affirms Freudian thought when Norbert's fantasies are proved to be not the 'capricious products of his imagination but determined, without him knowing it, by the store of childhood impressions which he has forgotten, but which were still at work in him' (Freud, 2001a, p. 31). And yet more than this, the story extends beyond metaphors of archaeological ruins and models of infant memory, insofar as it stages the psychoanalytic method itself. The treatment for neurotic obsession is the therapy that Zoë offers up. She deploys a talking cure that induces the hero out of his delusion. In this respect, she is cast as the surrogate analyst, entrusted with the task of transforming pathological desire into civilised love. Joan Copjec acknowledges the radicalism of this gesture, noting that Gradiva's place at the foot of the couch also betrays the secret truth of the scene of analysis: a woman is 'clearly the end of the analytic search', she asserts (Copjec, 1984, p. 85). And this positing of the female analyst is no small accident here, Copjec suggests, since 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*' follows in the wake of the case of Dora published in 1905. Gradiva's triumph comes in the aftermath of Dora's failed analysis, and so Norbert's recovery under Zoë's care reaffirms the efficacy of a talking cure. She, unlike Dora, claims an active part in the patient's restoration. She is, in fact, writes Copjec, 'the agent of the cure, the analyst herself', and as such, she

returns to Freud the analyst's lost credibility (Ibid., p. 87). Zoë's triumph remediates Freud's failure of Dora.

And yet the triumph claimed for Zoë can only ever be considered partial and qualified. Zoë is the analyst that lives up to her ancient Greek name: she is the Zoë (ζωή) that means 'life' and she serves to revive the delusional Norbert. But what she also restores to Norbert is the primacy of his sexuality at the expense of her own. In Freud's analysis of Jensen's novel, it is Norbert's identity to which Zoë tends, and it is his desire of which she is only the final expression. It is his pathology that she represents and his recovery that she aids. Accordingly, Mary Jacobus cites the case of Gradiva in her interrogative essay 'Is there a woman in this text?' (Jacobus, 1982). Jacobus concedes that Norbert's awakening to life provides Freud with an analogy for the awakening of 'strict psychiatry' to the existence of the unconscious, but Gradiva's role in this consigns her to victimhood (Ibid., p. 122). She joins the ranks of women who are the 'the mute sacrifice on which theory itself may be founded; the woman [who] is silenced so that the theorist can make the truth come out of her mouth' (Ibid., p. 118). Freud, Jacobus acknowledges, is not oblivious to his own implication in the interpretation of Jensen's novella, alert to the possibility that in reading the story in the light of his own theories, he might also read his theories *into* it, recovering from Jensen's fantasy only that which he sought to recover. But if the woman in the text is 'there,' Jacobus argues, then she is also 'not there', not its object, not its author, not even its primary concern (Ibid., p. 139). She serves to secure Norbert's recovery and confirm Freud's credibility and so she is the constitutor and guarantor of masculine identity, both within and beyond the frames of the text. Jensen's story takes her name but never accounts for her

experience, construing her as only ever the object and exposition of a man's desire. She is, at once, over-determined and under-written.

And yet if, in the analytic scenario, the analyst claims for themselves an interpretive mastery, it is precisely the fantasy of this mastery that the figure of *Gradiva* punctures. As Sarah Kofman eloquently expresses it, 'le psychoanalyste ne détient ni la clef de l'oeuvre ni la vérité: Il n'est past Zoé' (Kofman, 1974, p. 125). The psychoanalyst holds neither the key to the work nor the truth: he is not Zoë. Neither is he the life her name signals. Marilyn Manners argues that for both Jensen and Freud, the key concern of 'Delusions and Dreams in Jensen's *Gradiva*' is not the life of Zoë so much as the revival of the repressed Norbert (Manners, 1998). He is, Manners suggests, a strange inversion – the archaeologist buried deep in his fantasy and Zoë, the statue he admires, is tasked with his excavation. And yet what of her own unexcavated desire? *Gradiva* never tells, and neither Jensen nor Freud consider it. Lacan issues this critique of Freud for whom 'there is no libido other than masculine. Meaning what? Other than that the whole field, which is hardly negligible, is thereby ignored. This is the field of all those beings who take on the status of the woman ...' (Lacan, 1985, p. 151). The asymmetric account of libido haunts Freudian scholarship and the literature with which it has engaged. Jacqueline Rose, taking up T.S. Eliot's query over the 'objective correlative' apparently lacking in *Hamlet*, points to the figure of Gertrude, the female sexuality that is the obscured cause, the play's 'inexpressible and inscrutable context' (Rose, 1996, p. 127). Jensen's novel and Freud's analysis similarly obscure Zoë's sexuality – they insistently turn her into stone. But it could just as easily be ash. In *Archive Fever*, Derrida, contra Freud, reads *Gradiva* not as the story of the delusion of men, but of the deletion of women, their footprints cast in the white hot ash of Vesuvius, an impression preserved

for an archive that will not keep them (Derrida, 1986). Gradiva is a woman only imagined by men, but what remains of her, after Jensen plays out his fantasy in the ruins of Pompeii, is a sense of the hazard her sexuality poses and the power she possesses to provoke an ungovernable desire that is seemingly restrained only by analysis and in fiction.

This critical scholarship around Freud's essay exposes the force of his reading, the ways that it disfigures and deletes female experience. There is more to Zoë than Jensen's novel and Freud's analysis allows. In the story, she is the Roman girl in the gown who presents as a mystery awaiting decipherment. In Freud's essay though, she is the key that opens up the psyche – only not her own. On the wall of the consulting room, she is the constant companion to Freud's thinking. There, in stone, Gradiva's flowing gown is, ironically, made heavy and lined, impossibly unwieldy with its innumerable folds and furrows. There is something curious about this translation of cloth into stone that mirrors Freud's own distorted reading of female selfhood as male sexuality. How strange not to identify the fold with femininity, suggestive as it is of women's sexual organs? But Gradiva presents the opposite of the phallus and Freud overlooks it, determinedly seeing instead only the delusions and the dreams of the men who desire her. The girl in the dress is the object of Freud and Jensen's projection and this fictional representation of a woman is never permitted to give an account of herself. Instead, the story that bears her name is only a pathway into the pathology of others. But, she is, herself, the walker of paths, placing one foot after another, dauntless and unerring.

Tellingly, it is the gait, not the girl that preoccupies Norbert in the novel - something that he miraculously deduces from her stilled image alone. But how is it that a man could fall in love with a woman's walk? Freud has an answer to this when he configures a fetish as 'an effect of some sexual impression, received as a rule in childhood' (Freud, 2001c, p. 155). The foot, he explains is 'an age-old sexual symbol' (Freud, 2001c, p. 155). In an additional *footnote* of 1910, he further clarifies its phallic association: 'the foot represents a woman's penis, the absence of which is deeply felt' (Ibid., footnote 2). Jensen cannot resist the fantasies formed at a woman's feet. He launches into an account of Gradiva's 'maidenly grace' with an unimpeded imaginative license:

With her head bent forward a little, she held slightly raised in her left hand, so that her sandaled feet became visible, her garment which fell in exceedingly voluminous folds from her throat to her ankles. The left foot had advanced, and the right, about to follow, touched the ground only lightly with the tips of the toes, while the sole and heel were raised almost vertically. This movement produced a double impression of exceptional agility and of confident composure, and the flight like poise, combined with a firm step, lent her the peculiar grace. Where had she walked thus and whither was she going? (Jensen, 2003, pp. 8-9)

When Norbert follows in the footsteps of the woman he adores, he tracks her movements and so betrays the impulse for surveillance beneath the supplication. This is revealing. To worship a woman is to demand to know her whereabouts, where she has

come from and where she will go. Freud's analysis devolves into an investigation of Norbert's desire, but he is unable to register something more opaque and disquieting at the heart of the story. The mystery here is not just what women want (that old question that so famously foxes Freud), but where they go. Where is it that a woman might walk and where a man may not follow? Norbert's fantasy is predicated on the memory of a woman who has travelled freely beyond the purview of the man who desires her, leaving him frustrated and feverish. In Jensen's story, that freedom is imaginatively curbed with Zoë's return, but Freud too supplies an answer to the question of how you prevent a woman from straying beyond the tightly circumscribed limits of a fantasy. He turns her into stone and makes her a cipher for analysis itself. But at Gradiva's feet there is another story - about female desire, direction, ambition and volition – the depths of which not even Freud can begin to plumb.

So much of Jensen's novel and Freud's analysis is concerned with Gradiva's feet, that it is worth noting that in the consulting room plaster cast, she is depicted with the thinnest sandals, her soles neat and low. Gradiva strides forward, even though the history of women's footwear has been underpinned by an impulse to immobilise. This is most apparent in the aristocratic traditions of Chinese foot binding which begin in the eleventh century, but it is betrayed too in the narrowed vamp and badly distributed weight of modern heels (Bossan, 2004, p. 164). Free movement is not a prerequisite of women's footwear. And if the formulation of freedom as a literal right to come and go as you please might seem simple, it is also acute, since mobility is central to the language of woman's emancipation - the glass ceilings through which they break, the homes in which they are no longer expected to stay, the children they leave behind, the career ladders they struggle to climb. How women move matters. Mobility is both a

feminist question and a metaphor too that reveals an anxiety about the waywardness of female desire. Freud asks what does woman want, but he might also ask where does a woman go, who could she love and what could she choose to leave behind?

Perhaps the answers to those questions are best provided by women themselves. If psychoanalysis is to make sense of the will of women, as well as the desire of men, its challenge is to extend its corpus to better incorporate the life (*zoë*) of women as it is told by women. Jensen seeks Gradiva in Pompeii and finds Zoë in modern Rome, but it is Naples, sprawling and unmanageable, that Elena Ferrante's two protagonists navigate in her novel, *My Brilliant Friend*. In this first novel of the tetralogy, Lila Cerullo and Elena (Lenu) Greco are the two children who venture into the basement of the local neighbourhood ogre, Don Achilles, in search of their lost dolls. The opening vignette poses what the entire series explores, precisely this question of where women are permitted to go and what they might dare to do there. As the paths of their lives fork, Ferrante examines the choices of which the women avail themselves and the obligations that entrap them nonetheless. Lila, the daughter of the shoemaker, finds that her life stalls as her friend, Lenu, ascends social heights, a glittering, metropolitan and cultured world opening up before her. Lila is forced to find a different route out of the violent historic familial fractions of her small community. She imagines opening a shoe factory:

‘A shoe factory?’

‘Yes.’

She spoke with great conviction, as she knew how to do, with sentences, in Italian, that depicted before my eyes the factory sign, Cerullo; the brand name stamped on the uppers, Cerullo; and then the Cerullo shoes, all

splendid, all elegant, as in her drawings, shoes that once you put them on, she said, are so beautiful and so comfortable that at night you go to sleep without taking them off. (Ferrante, 2011, pp. 117-18)

As Lenu takes up Latin, Lila's fingers grow yellow and callused, stitching, gluing and laboring over the perfect prototype shoe with which to launch her business. Making shoes is not only a business, it is a form of invention here. The shoes that Lila imagines promise to generate revenue and elevate her standing, but they also feed her hungered imagination, fueling her with a dream of freedom that might come of social mobility. The shoes that Lila dreams of making promise to lift her from her straitened, circumscribed life, taking her places other than home, forging pathways into a new world and new life. Revealing some of her drawings to Lenu, the latter is taken aback by the boldness and ingenuity of the designs, but also the limitless imagination they represent:

They were beautiful designs, drawn on graph paper, rich in precisely colored details, as if she had had a chance to examine shoes like that close up in some world parallel to ours and then had fixed them on paper. In reality she had invented them in their entirety and in every part, as she had done in elementary school when she drew princesses, so that, although they were normal shoes, they didn't resemble any that were seen in the neighborhood, or even those of the actresses in the photo novels (Ibid., p. 116).

What Lenu discerns from these drawings are Lila's utterly original dreams, and she is awed both by their extraordinary ambition and frightened by their ingenuity. The shoes outwardly intimate an inner life carefully concealed and yet so rich and brilliant that Lenu is cowed by it. But Lila's opportunities are repeatedly curtailed, and at the end of the last novel, she is struck a final bitter blow when her young daughter is mysteriously lost. In the final few pages, Lila too goes astray. When Lenu returns to the village to seek her, she walks through the places of their childhood alone and consoles herself with an idea that Lila had 'broken her confines, and finally travelled the world' (Ferrante, 2014, p. 473). The lost dolls of their childhood are mysteriously returned to her, as though to suggest the completeness of a full circle, but they also repeat, in miniature, that larger question of where women go and how far they are ever able to leave the places from which they start. Ferrante's writing seeks to track this. She understands too that the question is not only one of where women go and what prevents them, but also how far they are permitted to tell their inward journeys at all. Ferrante has us follow the two women, tracking the complex circling and path crossing by which their bond is tightly woven, intimating how friendship is in the meeting and parting of ways, a constant recalibration of one to the other, but she also compels us to acknowledge a point beyond which we cannot venture. When Lila disappears, Ferrante allows her a final privacy that even she cannot penetrate.

Here, the limits of fiction are not unlike the limits of psychoanalysis – a discourse that Ferrante deeply respects. 'I love Freud', she writes 'and I've read a fair amount of him: it seems to me that he knew better than his followers that psychoanalysis is the lexicon of the precipice' (Ferrante, 2017, p. 122). But beyond the edge of the precipice, the writer and the analyst cannot go. 'Psychoanalysis' she concedes, 'is a powerful stimulus

for those who want to dig inside, it can't be disregarded, it conditions us even when we reject it, it's the map for any treasure hunt amid the shadows of our body. A map, however, is only a map....' (Ibid., p. 124). Lila's final disappearance takes her off-grid. She is, at the last, curiously untrackable, as Ferrante herself sought to be in her insistent evasion of authorial identification. Pressed on the question of her identity, Ferrante cites the passage in *Totem and Taboo* where 'Freud tells of a woman who had forced herself not to write her own name anymore. She was afraid that someone would use it to take possession of her personality. The woman began by refusing to write her own name and then, by extension, she stopped writing, completely...' (Ibid., p. 84). To give one's name is to hazard a kind of dispossession, to risk the trespass of others, an experience from which we might not ever be returned to ourselves unmarked.

Ferrante's familiarity with Freud reveals the same sympathy between fiction and psychoanalysis that Freud himself identifies in his fervent reading of Jensen's *Gradiva*. The Neapolitan novels present a counterpoint to Jensen's Pompeiian one, delineating a more complex portrait of women, but Ferrante writes with a certain wariness too, as if knowing how easily women's stories can be deleted and disfigured. *Gradiva* is proof of that. Zoë is turned 'Gradiva' and returned to 'Zoë' once more – but she is also 'Jensen' and 'Freud'. When she coaxes Norbert out of his delusion, it is an attempt at self-determination, an insistence that he register the particularity of the person she is, the language she speaks and the name she possesses. Freud's reading of the story registers this even as it overwrites it. In his essay 'Femininity', Freud remarks how a young woman 'often frightens us by her psychological rigidity and unchangeability. Her libido has taken up final positions and seems incapable of exchanging them for others. There are no paths open to further development; it is as though the whole process had already run

its course...’, but the figure of Gradiva is always poised mid-step, her destination yet to be determined (Freud, 2001d, p. 167). Footprints record the places where we once were, the routes taken and paths forged. They are only the barest trace of the life that leaves them behind. In Freud’s consulting room, Gradiva is suspended in stone, always on the cusp of making her mark. ‘Where had she walked thus and whither was she going?’ asks Jensen, but where Gradiva treads, analysis cannot follow.

