ABSTRACT. Classical culture played an important role in the work of Sigmund Freud and influenced the formation of psychoanalysis. This influence concerned several aspects of Freud’s experience: the personal one, from his adolescent identification with ancient heroes to his emotional bond with Rome and Athens; the intellectual, including his use of authors such as Aristotle and Artemidorus the elaboration of psychoanalytical theory; rhetorical and expositive in his use of classical authors such as Sophocles and Vergil, and in his strategy of identifying thinkers such as Plato and Empedocles as forerunners of his theories. The present article reconstructs the evolution of this strategy, which began in 1900, in conjunction with the definition of the basic concepts of psychoanalysis. Some specific episodes of Freud’s approach to the classics are also examined: his reception of Aristotle’s concept of catharsis, and of the interpretation of this concept given by Bernays; Freud’s interest in Vergil, highlighted by his use of verses from the Aeneid in his works; his conflictual relationship with Rome; the use of Empedocles as a predecessor of the changes that Freud made, in his last years, to the theory of pulsions.

KEYWORDS. Freud; catharsis; Aristotle; Vergil; Rome.

1. Anthony Grafton wrote, a few years ago, that «no modern scientist has shown more devotion to ancient texts and systematic reading than Sigmund Freud».1 The term ‘devotion’ suggests a long-lasting feeling, something to which a man remains faithful over the years. Grafton underlines (rightly) Freud’s singularity, but the picture he presents is not incongruent with the biographies of many scientists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, who attended schools where Latin and Greek were seriously studied and classical texts were read.

This education was common, in Europe, until a few decades ago (now things have changed), and it was at that time difficult to find a physician or a scientist who was not able to quote a phrase more or less correctly

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