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Is Psychoanalysis Really Outmoded? Apropos the 150th Anniversary of Freud's Birth

Summary:

*As a way of responding to the ongoing, pervasive critiques of Freudian theory that issue forth from the neuro- and cognitive sciences, the author revisits excerpts from *The Interpretation of Dreams* to insist, to the contrary, on the undying relevance of Freud. He makes the case that, in a hedonistic and permissive society such as our own, the value of psychoanalysis lies precisely in its emphasis on the notion of limit: on the fact that pleasure can ultimately and authentically only be secured through acts of transgression and disobedience that defy a prohibition. Moreover, in exploring famed dreams like that of Irma's injection, he argues against a simplistic understanding of wish-fulfillment by contrasting elements of the Real with others pertaining to external or social "reality". This exercise allows him to conclude: "what appears in the guise of dreaming... is sometimes the hidden truth on whose repression social reality itself is founded."*

In recent years, there is a new wave of the triumphalist acclamation that psychoanalysis is dead: with the new advances in brain sciences, it is finally put where it belonged all the time, to the lumber-room of pre-scientific obscurantist search for hidden meanings, alongside religious confessors and dream-readers. As Todd Dufresne put it, no figure in the history of human thought was more wrong about all its fundamentals than Freud—with the exception of Marx, some would add. And, effectively and predictably, in 2005, the infamous *The Black Book of Communism*, listing all the Communist crimes, was followed by *The Black Book of Psychoanalysis*, listing all the theoretical mistakes and clinical frauds of psychoanalysis. In this negative way, at least, the profound solidarity of Marxism and psychoanalysis is now displayed for all to see. There is something to this funeral oratory. A century ago, Freud located psychoanalysis within the series of three successive humiliations of man, the three "narcissistic illnesses," as he called them. First, Copernicus demonstrated that Earth turns around the Sun and thus deprived us, humans, of the central place in the universe. Then, Darwin demonstrated our origin from blind evolution, thereby depriving us of the privileged place among living beings. Finally, when Freud himself rendered visible the predominant role of the unconscious in psychic processes, it became clear that our ego is not even a master in its own house. Today, more than one hundred years later, a different picture is emerging: the latest scientific breakthroughs seem to add a whole series of further humiliations to the narcissistic image of man: our mind itself is merely a computing machine for data-processing, our sense of freedom and autonomy is merely the "user's illusion" of this machine... Consequently, with regard to today's brain sciences, psychoanalysis itself, far from being subversive, rather seems to belong to the traditional humanist field threatened by the latest humiliations. Is, then, psychoanalysis today really outdated? It seems that it is, on three interconnected levels: (1) that of scientific knowledge, where the cognitivist-neurobiologist model of the human mind appears to supersede the Freudian model; (2) that of the psychiatric clinic, where psychoanalytic treatment is rapidly losing ground against chemotherapy and behavioral therapy; (3) that of the social context, where the image of society, of

social norms, which repress the individual's sexual drives, no longer appears valid given today's predominant hedonistic permissiveness. Nonetheless, in the case of psychoanalysis, the memorial service is perhaps a bit too hasty, commemorating a patient who still has a long life ahead. In contrast to the "evident" truths of the critics of Freud, one should insist that it is only today that the time of psychoanalysis has arrived and that Freud's key insights gain their full value.

One of the standard topics of today's conservative cultural critique is that, in our permissive era, children lack firm limits or prohibitions. This lack frustrates them, driving them from one to another excess. It is only a firm limit set up by some symbolic authority that can guarantee not only stability, but even satisfaction itself—satisfaction brought about by way of violating the prohibition, of transgressing the limit. In order to render clear the way denegation functions in the unconscious, Freud evoked a reaction of one of his patients to a dream centered around an unknown woman: "Whoever this woman in my dream is, I know it is not my mother." A clear negative proof, for Freud, that the woman was his mother. What better way to characterize today's typical patient than to imagine his opposite reaction to the same dream: »Whoever this woman in my dream was, I am sure it has something to do with my mother!«

Traditionally, psychoanalysis was expected to allow the patient to overcome the obstacles which prevented him/her the access to normal sexual satisfaction: if you are not able to "get it," go to the analyst, he will enable you to get rid of your inhibitions... Today, however, when we are bombarded from all sides by the different versions of the injunction "Enjoy!", from direct enjoyment in sexual performance to enjoyment in professional achievement or in spiritual awakening, one should move to a more radical level: psychoanalysis is today the only discourse in which you are allowed not to enjoy—not "not allowed to enjoy," i.e., prohibited to enjoy, but just relieved of the pressure to enjoy.

Nowhere is this paradoxical role of psychoanalytic interpretation clearer than in the case of dreams. If we ask an average intellectual today to tell us in a nutshell what Freud's theory of dreams is about, he will probably say: for Freud, a dream is the fantasmatic realization of some censored unconscious desire of the dreamer, which is as a rule of sexual nature. Now, let us turn, with this definition in mind, to the very beginning of Interpretation of Dreams, where Freud provides a detailed interpretation of his own dream about "Irma's injection"—it is reasonable to suppose that Freud knew what he was doing and was careful to choose an appropriate example to introduce his theory of dreams. However, it is here that we encounter the first big surprise: Freud's interpretation of this dream cannot but remind us of the old Soviet joke on radio Erevan ("Did Rabinovitch win a new car on the state lottery?" "In principle, yes—he did. Only it was not the car but a bicycle, it was not new but old, and he did not win it, it was stolen from him!"): Is a dream the realization of the dreamer's unconscious sexual desire? In principle, yes. Only the desire in the dream Freud has chosen to demonstrate his theory of dreams is neither sexual nor unconscious, and, on the top of it, it's not his own...

The dream begins with a conversation between Freud and his patient Irma about the failure of her treatment due to an infected injection; in the course of the conversation, Freud gets closer to her, approaches her face and looks deep into her mouth, confronting the horrible sight of vivid red flesh. At this point of unbearable horror, the tonality of the dream changes, and the horror suddenly turns into comedy: three doctors, Freud's friends, appear, who, in ridiculous pseudo-professional jargon, enumerate multiple (and mutually exclusive) reasons why Irma's poisoning by the infected injection was nobody's fault (there was no injection, the injection was clean...). So the desire of the dream, the "latent thought" articulated in it, is neither sexual nor unconscious, but Freud's (fully conscious) wish to obliterate his responsibility for the failure of his treatment of Irma. How, then, does this fit with the thesis on the sexual and unconscious nature of the desire expressed in dreams?

It is here that the crucial distinction should be introduced: the unconscious desire of the dream is NOT the dream's latent thought which is displaced/translated into the explicit texture of the dream, but the unconscious desire which inscribes itself through the very distortion of the latent thought into the dream's explicit texture. Therein resides the paradox of the Traumarbeit: we want to get rid of a certain pressing but disturbing thought of which we are fully conscious, so we distort it, translating it into the hieroglyph of the dream. But, it is through the very distortion of the dream-thought that ANOTHER, much more fundamental, desire inscribes itself into the dream, and THIS desire is unconscious and sexual.

So what is this dream's ultimate meaning? As we have just seen, Freud himself focuses on the dream-thought, on his "superficial" (fully conscious) wish to obliterate his responsibility for the failure of his treatment of Irma; in Lacanian terms, this wish clearly belongs to the domain of the Imaginary. Furthermore, Freud provides some hints about the Real in this dream: the unconscious desire of the dream is that of Freud himself as the "primordial father" who wants to possess all the three women appearing in the dream. However, there is yet another enigma in the dream: WHOSE desire does the dream effectively realize? Some recently published documents clearly establish that the true focus of this dream was the desire to save Fliess (Freud's close friend and collaborator who, at that point, was for him the "subject supposed to know," the object of his transference) from his responsibility and guilt: it was Fliess who botched up Irma's nose operation, and the dream's desire is not to exculpate the dreamer (Freud himself), but the dreamer's big Other, i.e. to demonstrate that the Other wasn't responsible for the medical failure, that he wasn't lacking in his knowledge—in short, that the emperor wasn't naked. So, yes, the dream does realize Freud's desire—but only insofar as his desire is already the Other's (Fliess's) desire. In short, the desire realized in the dream is a transferential one.

One should add a further complication here: why do we dream at all? Freud's answer is deceptively simple: the ultimate function of the dream is to enable the dreamer to prolong his sleep. This is usually interpreted as bearing upon the dreams we have just before awakening, when some external disturbance (noise) threatens to awaken us. In such a situation, the sleeper quickly imagines (in the guise of a dream) a situation which incorporates this external stimulus and thus succeeds in prolonging the sleep for a while; when the external signal becomes too strong, he finally awakens... However, are things really so straightforward? In another dream from *The Interpretation of Dreams* having to do with awakening, a tired father who was spending the night watching over the coffin of his young son, falls asleep and dreams that his son is approaching him all in flames, addressing him with this horrifying reproach: "Father, can't you see I am burning?" Soon afterwards, father awakens and discovers that, due to an overturned candle, the cloth of his dead son's shroud actually had caught fire! The smoke that he smelled while asleep was incorporated into the dream of the burning son to prolong his sleep. So was it that father awoke when the external stimulus (smoke) became too strong to be contained within the dream-scenario? Or was it not rather the obverse? Namely, that father first constructed the dream in order to prolong his sleep (i.e. to avoid the unpleasant awakening); but what the father encountered in the dream—literally, the burning question, the creepy specter of his reproachful son—was much more unbearable than external reality, so that he awakened and escaped into external reality. Why? To continue to dream, to avoid the unbearable trauma of his own guilt for his son's painful death. In order to get the full weight of this paradox, one should compare this dream with the one about Irma's injection. In both dreams, there is a traumatic encounter (the sight of the raw flesh of Irma's throat; the vision of the burning son); however, in the second dream, the dreamer awakens at this point, while in the first dream, the horror is replaced by the inane spectacle of professional excuses. This parallel gives us the ultimate key to Freud's theory of dreams: the awakening in the second dream (father awakens into reality in order to escape the horror of the dream) has the same function as the sudden shift into comedy in the first dream (with the exchange between three ridiculous doctors). In other words, our ordinary reality has precisely the structure of such an inane exchange which enables us to avoid the encounter of true trauma. It was already Adorno who said that the well-known Nazi motto "Deutschland, erwache!" actually meant its exact opposite: namely, the promise that, if you join this call, you will be allowed to continue to sleep and dream (i.e. to avoid the encounter with the real of social antagonism). The trauma that we encounter in the dream is thus in a way more real than (external, social) reality itself. There is a well-known poem by Primo Levi which recounts the fate of the traumatic remembrance from the concentration-camp life. In the first stanza, he is in the camp, asleep, dreaming intense dreams about returning home, eating, narrating his experience to his relatives when, all of a sudden, he is awakened by the cruel shout of the Polish kapo "Wstawac!" ("Rise! Get up!"). In the second stanza, he is at home, after the war and liberation; sitting at the table, well-fed, he tells his story to his family, when, all of a sudden, the call violently emerges in his mind "Wstawac!"...

What's crucial here, of course, is the reversal of the relationship between dream and reality in the two stanzas: their content is formally the same – the pleasurable scene of sitting at home, eating and retelling one's experience is interrupted by the intrusion of the injunction "Get up!"; however, in the first stanza, the sweet dream is cruelly interrupted by the reality of the call to get up, while in the second one, the pleasant

social reality is interrupted by the hallucinated (or, rather, imagined) brutal call. This reversal renders the enigma of the *Wiederholungszwang*: why does the subject continue to be haunted by the obscene and brutal call “*Wstawac!*”? why does this injunction insist and repeat itself? If, the first time, we had the simple intrusion of external reality which disturbs the dream, in the second case, we have the intrusion of the traumatic Real which disturbs the smooth functioning of social reality itself. In the slightly changed scenario of Freud’s second dream, one can easily imagine it as the holocaust-survivor’s dream whose son, whom father was unable to save from the crematorium, haunts him after his death, reproaching him with the words “*Vater, siehst du nicht dass ich verbrenne?*”

We thus discover here a Freud who is far from the proverbial Victorian caught in his repressive vision of sexuality, a Freud whose moment is, perhaps, arriving only today, in our “society of spectacle,” when what we experience as everyday reality is more and more of an incarnated lie. Suffice it to recall the cyberspace interactive games some of us compulsively play, games in which, as is usually the case, a neurotic weakling imagines himself as (or, rather, adopts the screen persona of) an aggressive macho, beating up other men and violently enjoying women. It is all too easy to say that this weakling takes refuge in cyberspace daydreaming in order to escape from his dull impotent real life. What if the games we are playing in cyberspace are more serious than we tend to assume? What if I articulate in them the aggressive perverse core of my personality that, due to ethico-social constraints, I am not able to act out in my real-life exchanges with others? Is it not that, in such a case, what I stage in my cyberspace daydreaming is in a way “more real than reality,” closer to the true core of my personality than the role that I assume in my contact with real-life partners? It is precisely because I am aware that cyberspace is “just a game,” that I can act out in it what I would never be able to admit in my “real” intersubjective contacts. In this precise sense, as Jacques Lacan put it, the Truth has the structure of a fiction: what appears in the guise of dreaming or even daydreaming, is sometimes the hidden truth on whose repression social reality itself is founded. Therein resides the ultimate lesson of Freud’s *Interpretation of Dreams*: reality is for those who cannot sustain the dream.