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Freud's Historiography of Transcendental
Negativity

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Seikei Review of English Studies, No.23
Faculty of Humanities, Seikei University
March, 2019

成蹊英語英文学研究
第23号抜刷
2019

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It has often been argued that there are a number of self-referential features in Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* (1939). The most obvious is its archaeological and psychoanalytic exploration of the origins of the ethnic identity of Jewishness.⁽¹⁾ Rather poignant is the text's probable superimposing of the Exodus of Jewish people on the author's own life in exile from Vienna. In this sense, it is interesting to remark that London, where Freud spent his last days, might have become a second Jerusalem. Also worth adding is that the majority of Freud's disciples in London were female analysts, despite Freud's equation of psychoanalytic or oedipal intelligence with patriarchy in *Moses and Monotheism*.

The most crucial self-referential elements of *Moses and Monotheism* is Freud's possible association between the formation of Moses's strict and rigorous monotheism and Freud's own creation of psychoanalysis. It is worth trying here a comparison of *Moses and Monotheism* and *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement* (1914). *On the History of Psycho-Analytic Movement* clearly declares in its first paragraph:

No one need be surprised at the subjective character of the contribution I propose to make here to the history of the psycho-analytic movement, nor need anyone wonder at the part I play in it. For psycho-analysis is my creation; for ten years I was the only person who concerned himself with it, and all the dissatisfaction which the new phenomenon aroused in my contemporaries has been poured out in the form of criticism on my head. Although it is a long time now since I was the only psycho-analyst, I consider myself justified in maintaining that even to-day no one can know better than I do what

psycho-analysis is, how it differs from other ways of investigating the life of the mind, and precisely what should be called psycho-analysis and what would better be described by some other name. (7)

Freud thus ascribes the disciplinary authenticity of psychoanalysis exclusively to himself as the originator in such a manner as to remind us of the former text's—*Moses and Monotheism's*—way of privileging Moses as the founder of Jewish monotheism as well as Jewish ethnic and intellectual identity.

More important in this context is that, in Freud's view, what fundamentally differentiates and distinguishes Moses's monotheism from other contemporary religions—including Christianity after Paul's introduction of the concept of 'redemption'—is whether or not God is materialised or visualised. Freud is quite clear about this distinction in *Moses and Monotheism*:

Among the precepts of the Moses religion there is one that is of greater importance than appears to begin with. This is the prohibition against making an image of God—the compulsion to worship a God whom one cannot see. (112-13)

Significantly enough, this prioritisation of invisibility over visibility, like 'a name' or 'a countenance,' (113) as an object of religious worship—what Freud terms '[d]ematerialization of God' (115)—brought about 'a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality.' Hence, '[t]he new realm of intellectuality was opened up, in which ideas, memories and inferences became decisive in contrast to the lower psychical activity which had direct perceptions by the sense-organs as its content' (113). This emphasis on 'a thought-process in preference to a sense perception' enabled 'an advance in civilization' or 'a momentous step' (114) in the history of human intellectuality as well as the 'characteristic development of the Jewish nature' (115).

Of great interest here is that such 'a momentous step' could also implicitly refer to Freudian psychoanalysis—or his metapsychology in particular—which can similarly be regarded as the 'new realm' of modern psychology,

where 'ideas, memories and inferences became decisive in contrast to the lower psychical activity which had direct perceptions by the sense-organs as its content.' Worth remembering is that Freudian metapsychological concepts—most representatively 'the unconscious'—are not viewed by Freud himself as empirical, material, or visible entities or objects; without doubt, these metapsychological 'ideas' and 'inferences' cannot be reduced to 'the lower psychical activity which had direct perceptions by the sense-organs as its content.' These sorts of empirical, material, and physical phenomena apprehended by sense perceptions should of course be considered privileged research fields for psychophysics or psychophysiology. They are typical examples of positivist and materialist modern psychology in the late 19th century, from which Freudian psychoanalysis distinguishes itself and deviates, while 'dematerialising' its own theories through metapsychological 'inferences' or speculations. Indeed, I would contend, Freud could be justified in saying that this was 'a momentous step' in the history of modern psychology.⁽²⁾

It was just before Freudian metapsychology began to take form in such works as 'On Narcissism: An Introduction' (1914), 'Instincts and Their Vicissitudes' (1915), or 'The Unconscious' (1915) that Freud attempted to summarise what he had so far achieved in *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement* (1914), thereby delineating his own disciplinary originality and authenticity and differentiating his metapsychological ideas from the theories of Jean-Martin Charcot, Josef Breuer, Alfred Adler, and Carl Jung. One of the key words Freud uses in characterising and privileging his metapsychological speculations is no doubt 'inference.' This is typically clear, for example, in his article 'The Unconscious,' in the first section of which—'Justification for the Concept of the Unconscious'—his argument is dependent on this concept of 'inference.' He uses the words 'inference' or 'infer' six times in this 6-page metapsychological vindication of the theoretical validity of 'the unconscious.' In order to summarise his discussion, Freud argues that 'the unconscious act we have inferred' is 'a perfectly justifiable ground for going beyond the limits of direct experience' (167); therefore, 'no physiological concept or chemical

process can give us any notion of [the unconscious's] nature' (168).

The concluding part of this section refers to Kant, where Freud suggests that our unconscious psychic processes should be regarded as a transcendental realm, something that is beyond our actual perceptions yet fundamentally determines our experiences:

Just as Kant warned us not to overlook the fact that our perceptions are subjectively conditioned and must not be regarded as identical with what is perceived though unknowable, so psycho-analysis warns us not to equate perceptions by means of consciousness with the unconscious mental processes which are their object. (171)

It is thus possible to say that the Freudian unconscious is something radically unknowable and invisible that at the very same time compels us to infer its existence from its symptomatic and empirically observable effects. We may remember the original German word for 'the unconscious': *das Unbewusste* [the unknowable]. Freud's concept of the unconscious can thus be defined as a 'dematerialisation' or 'de-physiologisation' of something psychic. Given Moses's 'prohibition against making an image of God—the compulsion to worship a God whom one cannot see," we can perceive his monotheistic 'realm of intellectuality' as something comparable to or even superimposed on the Freudian metapsychology of the unconscious.

It was immediately after the publication of *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement*—a summary of what Freud had so far explored and an endeavour to foreground his own theoretical originality compared with other 'heretical' counterparts—that Freud published a series of his metapsychological works in rapid succession. This chronology suggests the possibility of re-reading Freud's metapsychological self-cannonisation in such a way as to detect what he terms 'deferred (*nachträglich*) effects' on his language and thought. My argument is that Freud's recollection of a series of traumatic separations from—or, in his view, betrayals by—his former colleagues in *On the History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement* serves as a kind of retroactive

trigger to reinterpret these experiences in a metapsychological way. In other words, in this retroactive manner, Freud redefines these traumatic memories within the newly obtained theoretical context of metapsychology.

Of great significance is the way in which Freud attacks Breuer, one of his main targets in this work, especially because '[h]e gave preference to a theory which was still to some extent physiological' (11). As for Charcot, his former master, he is almost derided for the literality or materiality of his diagnosis: '[b]ut in this sort of case it's always a question of the genitals—always, always, always' (14). Freud adds: 'I had never heard of such a prescription, and felt inclined to shake my head over my kind friend's cynicism' (15). His point is that 'the theory of repression is a product of psycho-analytic work, a theoretical inference legitimately drawn from innumerable observations' (17). What matters here is not so much empirical observations themselves but rather something 'inferred' from them and by definition something we cannot have direct access to. This is intriguingly similar to Moses's 'discovery' of 'the mind' or 'Seele' in German—'forces, that is, which cannot be grasped by the senses (particularly by the sight) but which none the less produce undoubted and indeed extremely powerful effects' (114). Based on Ernest Jones's idea of 'rationalisation,' Freud strongly and mercilessly condemns Adler for his evasion and concealment of 'the unconscious motive' or a total reduction of it to 'the man's intention of showing himself master of the woman' (53). In other words, Freud problematises 'the biological aspect of the Adlerian theory' (56).

Understandably, this kind of criticism of any misunderstanding or distortion of 'the unconscious' or any theoretical dilution of its 'original, undisguised meaning' (59) is most severe and ruthless when directed at Carl Jung, whose 'intention' is—in Freud's opinion—'to eliminate what is objectionable in the family-complexes, so as not to find it again in religion and ethics,' thereby 'pick[ing] out a few cultural overtones from the symphony of life and hav[ing] once more failed to hear the mighty and primordial melody of the instincts' (62). Interesting here is Freud's ironical reference to Jung's failure to understand the metapsychological ontology of the unconscious. Freud draws our attention to Jung's totally mistaken observation: 'the incest-complex is

merely “symbolic” and, that after all it has no “real” existence.’ Freud’s retort to Jung is brilliant from the viewpoint of transcendental metapsychological ontology: “symbolic” and “without real existence” simply mean something which, in virtue of its manifestations and pathologic effects, is described by psycho-analysis as “existing unconsciously” (64). Freud’s implication is quite clear: the unconscious does exist even without any material existence.

Jung and Adler’s inability to appreciate or grasp this sort of negative ontology of the unconscious as well as their avoidance and resulting materialisation of it are cynically termed by Freud ‘a new message of salvation which is to begin a new epoch for psycho-analysis’ (60). Hence, Jung and Adler are ‘the Messiah’ (59); implied here is that Freud is to Moses what Jung and Adler are to Christ. The latter can be characterised as evading the really traumatic meaning of the unconscious as well as its negative mode of existence. Jungian and Adlerian psychology can thus be compared to Christian repression of Moses’s negative theological rigour and strictness. Worth mentioning in this vein is Freud’s description of Paul’s theological dilution of the patricidal trauma—‘the unnamable crime’—with ‘the hypothesis of what must be described as a shadowy “original sin”.’ This is similar to Freudian dreamwork, a ‘distortion’ (135) or ‘disguise’ of the latent, unconscious, and traumatic content:

In this formula the killing of God was of course not mentioned, but a crime that had to be atoned by the sacrifice of a victim could only have been a murder. And the intermediate step between the delusion and the historical truth was provided by the assurance that the victim of the sacrifice had been God’s son.[...] The blissful sense of being chosen was replaced by the liberating sense of redemption. (135)

Paul’s introduction of the idea of ‘redemption’ acquires not just religious connotations but also strongly Oedipal ones: ‘Christianity, having arisen out of a father-religion, became a son-religion. It has not escaped the fate of having to get rid of the father’ (136). Freud’s implication is that the repression of

patricidal trauma and its unconscious guilt itself operates as a patricide.

This Jungian and Christian patricidal oblivion of their own patricide is what Freud terms 'distortion' or 'disguise,' which can only manifest itself as traces or symptoms in the midst of the manifest content of history. Freud considers it 'the formation of symptoms,' which 'may justly be described as the "return of the repressed"' (127). If so, something Freudian and Mosaic—even after its totemistic and genocidal patricide—may enjoy the posthumous life of the Derridian 'specter,' recurring and haunting as something ungraspable but invisibly constitutive of history after the murder of one's own as its 'real' base structure.⁽³⁾ This is one possible mode of the melancholic and negative existence of the Freudian Primal Father, killed by his heretical and jealous sons.

Notes

- * A significant part of this discussion was presented at a workshop, 'Discussing *Moses and Monotheism* with Professor Jean-Michel Rabaté,' which took place at Seikei University Tokyo on 9 May 2017.
- (1) Arguably the most brilliant and important discussion on this theme is the dialogue between Edward Said and Jacqueline Rose in *Freud and the Non-European* (Verso, 2014).
- (2) For a brilliant historiography of the ways in which Freud cites, edits, and deviates from the foregoing positivist medical discourses such as psychophysics or psychophysiology, see George Makari, *Revolution in Mind: The Creation of Psychoanalysis* (Harper, 2008).
- (3) For this kind of haunted ontology of 'specters,' of course, see Jacques Derrida, *The Specters of Marx*, trans. Pogany Kamuf (Routledge, 1994).

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