

ON THE OBJECT OF PSYCHOANALYSIS: A QUESTION OF TRANSLATION

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“If a later transcript is lacking, the excitation is dealt with in accordance with the psychological laws in force in the earlier psychic period and along the paths open at that time. Thus an anachronism persists: in a particular province, *fueros* are still in force; we are in the presence of ‘survivals’. A failure of translation — this is what is known clinically as ‘repression’.”

Sigmund Freud²

The book to which I refer today with great pleasure deals with the object of psychoanalysis. I must admit that, five years ago, when I was studying the texts of Charcot and Bernheim, some of Freud’s pre-analytical writings and Jerusalem’s book on the Function of Judgement this was not as clear to me as it is today.³ Still, it was no coincidence that I started questioning the origin of psychoanalysis on the basis of Lacan’s seminar on the Ethics of psychoanalysis, in which, through his reading of Freud’s *Project* and with reference to Heidegger’s *Das Ding* his concept of the *object little a* is foreshadowed.⁴

Indeed, it was Jacques Lacan who, in my opinion, was most concerned about the status of psychoanalysis in his ‘translation’ of the Freudian discovery. In other words, it was Jacques Lacan who, more than anyone else, was driven and guided by an epistemological questioning throughout his entire writings and seminars.

In the broad fields of psychology, clinical psychology, psychotherapy, and even psychoanalysis, such an epistemological questioning is certainly not a matter of course.⁵ However, no one will deny that the questions of the object and the scientific status of psychoanalysis were put forward and elaborated especially by Lacan and his School. This was also done in a very Freudian manner. At least, this is what I try to argue in my book, by adopting a historiographical approach.

Indeed, in my opinion, a return to the so-called pre-analytical Freud may shed more light on the fact that Freud himself was constantly concerned with the epistemological status of his new discipline.

This fact need not surprise us, as the founding of a new science obviously requires an appropriate circumscription of its object.⁶ For example, today, no one will argue that physics can be defined as the scientific discipline concerning energy, matter and the interactions between them. And no one will deny that the substitution of the concept of energy to the concept of force inaugurated a revolution and the advent of modern physics. Is the constitution of a scientific discipline therefore a matter of words or concepts? I believe that, to a certain degree, it is, even in the domain of physics. Is it not all the more so then in the domain of psychology?

At this point I would like to quote the first paragraph of Freud’s text entitled *Instincts and their Vicissitudes* (1915), in which he follows a similar reasoning:

“We have often heard it maintained that sciences should be built up on clear and sharply defined basic concepts. In actual fact no science, not even the most exact,

begins with such definitions. The true *beginning* of scientific activity consists rather in *describing phenomena* and then in proceeding to group, classify and correlate them. Even at the stage of description it is not possible to avoid *applying certain abstract ideas* to the material in hand, ideas *derived from somewhere or other but certainly not from the new observations alone*. Such ideas - which will later become the basic concepts of the science - are still more indispensable as the material is further worked over. They must at first necessarily possess some degree of indefiniteness; there can be no question of any clear delimitation of their content. So long as they remain in this condition, we come to an understanding about their meaning *by making repeated references to the material of observation* from which they appear to have been derived, but upon which, in fact they have been imposed. Thus, strictly speaking, they are in the nature of conventions - although everything depends on their not being arbitrarily chosen but determined by their having significant relations to the empirical material, relations that we seem to sense before we can clearly recognise and demonstrate them. It is only after more thorough investigation of the field of observation that we are able to formulate its basic scientific concepts with increased precision, and progressively so to modify them that they become serviceable and consistent over a wide area. Then, indeed, the time may have come to confine them in definitions. The advance of knowledge, however, does not tolerate any rigidity even in definitions. Physics furnishes an excellent illustration of the way in which even 'basic concepts' that have been established in the form of definitions are constantly being altered in their content."⁷

If we trace the roots of psychoanalytic theory and praxis, it becomes clear that the constitution of psychoanalysis as an independent scientific discipline⁸ was the result of such an epistemological operation.

Without wishing to claim that, in 1895, Freud's Project for a Scientific Psychology had already achieved this scientific constitution of psychoanalysis - indeed, in my opinion, it still has not been achieved - I would like to argue that in this text some of its preconditions were created and some of its fundamental concepts were defined, albeit in a primitive or preliminary way.

I have therefore read Freud's *Project* as his first metapsychological text, i.e. as the first text in which he - to use his own words - "applied an abstract idea" to the empirical material he had at his disposal at the time. In other words, Freud's *Project* was his theoretical answer to the riddles he was confronted with in his practice of the 'talking cure'. Therefore, in my view, the *Project* can not be considered as a 'regression' to neurology.

To support this argument, the first part of my book traces the path which led him to the *Project*, thereby focusing on four of his so-called pre-analytical writings.

The first of these writings is Charcot's Clinical Lectures on the Diseases of the Nervous System, which was translated by Freud as early as 1886, and which allows us to understand what Freud meant when he said that it was Charcot who initiated his epistemological shift from neurology to psychology. In the clinical demonstrations which he attended at the Salpêtrière and through his translation of Charcot's work, Freud was confronted with the epistemological limits of medical knowledge with respect to hysteria and psychopathology in general. The clinical 'tableau' or unity of hysteria which Charcot postulated, could definitely not be explained by either neuro-anatomical laws or neuro-physiological mechanisms. Still, there was nothing mysterious about the hysterical symptoms displayed at the Salpêtrière, however

spectacular they sometimes seemed. Although the *Clinical Lectures* contain some elements of the psychology which was necessary for an adequate explanation of hysteria, one cannot deny that Charcot was nonetheless a rather blind '*visuel*'. This is borne out by the famous picture of Charcot with one of his favourite hysterics who displays one of the stages of the 'genuine' Charcotian hysterical attack. According to this picture, the patient's posture is the result of the psychological mechanisms of suggestion and identification, i.e., the materialising of his Master's Voice.

Secondly, I focused on Freud's translation of Bernheim's Suggestive Therapeutics, in which direct suggestion and hypnosis are presented as mere therapeutic instruments. Apart from the fact that Freud was soon to recognise the very limited therapeutic value of direct suggestion, there is no doubt about the "efficacité symbolique" which reigned in Bernheim's clinic and which was supported by what he called the climate of suggestibility.

Thirdly, I dealt with Freud's co-operation with Josef Breuer, which led to their joint publication of the Studies on Hysteria. In my view, this work, published only a few months before Freud wrote his 'Project', contains the empirical material that urgently required a proper theory. That theory is not provided in the *Studies*. On the contrary, a closer reading reveals that the theoretical chapter, written by Breuer as a physiological explanation of hysteria, is at odds with the empirical evidence for the mechanism of *repression* and the *unwillingness to know* which appear in the case studies.

In my opinion it is at this point that Freud began theorising his clinic of the "excessively intense idea" out of dissatisfaction with the epistemological status of Breuer's theory. This does not mean that Freud, one of the most outstanding neurologists of his days, frivolously substituted a neurological language with a psychological language.

Commenting on Freud's monograph *On Aphasia*, I would like to point out that he did not initiate his epistemological shift until he had carefully determined the limits of neurological science. He commenced this study with a criticism of the far-reaching claims of localisation theory, as this science, based on the observations of neuropathological cases, seemed to suggest the possibility of precisely locating every psychical function in well-defined regions of the cerebral cortex. Freud refuted these far-reaching claims by pitting Wernicke and Lichtheim's theoretical schemata against the descriptions of aphasic patients which featured in neurological literature. Moreover, he put forward an alternative speech apparatus in order to explain the symptomatology of aphasics. As a matter of fact, this move foreshadows the psychical apparatus he was later to elaborate in the *Project*. His theoretical model was inspired by the Anglo-Saxon analytical philosophy of J.S. Mill and reflected a dynamic conception of the psychical functions of memory and speech.

All in all, his study produced two results: 1) it highlighted the limited explanatory potential of the existing neurological theories; 2) it made the linguistic theory Freud was to use in his future career as psychoanalyst more explicit.

This ought not to surprise us, since the neurotic and hysterical patients he treated all suffered from a disorder affecting their speech. Their speech was characterised by an excessive affect, or as Freud himself put it, it was "excessively intense". Hence, the therapy developed by Freud distinguished itself by virtue of the fact that it was a clinic of the word and of affect.

In addition, the speech of his patients seemed to be determined. Charcot's teachings had already familiarised him with the notion of the "forceful representation" and the "dissociation of the ego". Furthermore, Freud's reading of Bernheim informed him of the effect of a forceful, direct, verbally expressed suggestion and of the determinant influence of certain events, or more accurately, certain scenes that took place in the past of neurotics. In his discussion of the case study of Anna O., Breuer also referred to a hypnoid state of consciousness that was sealed and inaccessible to her normal state of consciousness.

From his own experience with hysterical patients, Freud could glean that the subject was principally driven by the passion of the unwillingness to know. It is precisely because of his attempt to put this empirical phenomenon into words that Freud came up with the notion of repression. Psychopathology cannot be seen to be the result of a physiological mechanism, as Charcot argued. It can only be coherently established as stemming from the psychological mechanism of repression.

So far, we have seen that Freud extracted precious information from his empirical observations, yet he still had to crystallise the substance of this into a theory.

In this theory he had to 1) allocate a place to the excessively intense speech of his patients; 2) account for the effects of the talking-cure. In other words, Freud had to elaborate a theoretical model, which could allot a place to the affect (that is the quantitative element) as well as to the 'elsewhere', which appeared to determine the speech and the symptomatology of his patients.

A psychological theory of this kind was not yet available. Therefore, one ought not to be surprised by the fact that when Freud wrote the *Project*, that is to say 1895, he resorted to neurological and biological frames of reference; in other words he drew upon the frames of reference with which he was familiar.

However, the fact remains that Freud never lost sight of his actual object of study, i.e. the psyche and the mechanisms operating in it.

It was in his efforts to grasp this enigmatic object that he resorted to an epistemological operation.

In my book, I attempt to demonstrate that this operation was inspired by the work of the neo-Kantian philosopher Wilhelm Jerusalem, who wrote The Function of Judgement. In Jerusalem's opinion, Man can only attain a certain grasp on the exterior world by passing judgements. Passing a judgement on an object allows one to distinguish between an enigmatic residue (*Ding*) and an "attribute".

This is precisely what Freud does in the *Project*, for in order to grasp the enigmatic object of the psyche, he goes over to passing a judgement on it, i.e. he breaks it down to Neurone *N*, a precursor of the unconscious, and Quantity *Q*, a precursor of the drive.

ENDNOTES:

¹ This paper was read in London, February 28th on the occasion of the publication of his book on Freud's Project: On the Roots of Psychoanalysis, London, Rebus Press, 1997.

² S. Freud, The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, (1985 [1887-1904]), Translated and Edited by J.M Masson, The Belknap Press, London, Letter from December 6, 1896, p. 208.

³ H. Bernheim, Suggestive Therapeutics, A Treatise on the Nature and Uses of Hypnotism, (1887), Translated from the second and revised French Edition by Christian A. Herter, 11 ed., Putnam's Sons, New York/London, 1899, 420 pp.; J.M. Charcot, Clinical Lectures on the Diseases of the Nervous System, (1887), English translation by T. Savill, London, Routledge, 1991, 433 pp.; W. Jerusalem, Die Urteilsfunction. Eine psychologische und erkenntniskritische Untersuchung, Vienna and Leipzig, Wilhelm Braumüllerr, 1895, 269 pp.

⁴ J. Lacan, The Seminar, Book VII, The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, (1959-1960), Edited by J.-A. Miller, Translated with notes by Dennis Porter, London, Routledge, 1992, p. 342

⁵ If, for instance, one searches for it in the well-known Anglo-Saxon CD-ROM, *Psychlit*, one will come across only 387 papers published between 1974 and 1996, which deal with epistemology and psychology. This is a surprisingly low figure.

⁶ I. Stengers, La volonté de faire science. À propos de la psychanalyse, Paris, Delagrangé, 1992.

⁷ S. Freud, *Instincts and their Vicissitudes*, (1915c), S.E., Vol. XIV, p. 117.

⁸ It was definitely Freud's ambition to constitute a new science. I do not claim that he achieved this in a way that was acceptable to the scientific world. We all know that the scientific status of psychoanalysis has always been criticized. Lacan, for his part, sometimes argues in favour of such an aspiration, whereas on other occasions he argues against it. However, the reference to science is never absent in his work.