

Reminiscences of an Impossible History

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The call to a particular kind of work that goes by the name of psychoanalysis came relatively late in my life, a call which I can't completely disentangle from the phone call some 15 odd years ago by Leonardo to join the students embarking on a four-year program of study in psychoanalysis. This call came at a propitious moment in my life, when I was newly receptive to the intellectual and political currents circulating at the time, and in particular to the ideas of a cluster of French intellectuals, amongst whom there were two whose somewhat antithetical theorisations about the human subject were to become the framework for my doctoral thesis in history, namely Michel Foucault and Jacques Lacan.

With Foucault I was taken to the field of the social and to its structuring relations of power as exhaustively determinative of subjectivity, the field I came to understand as that of the possible; but as we know if everything is possible then nothing can be. Lacan on the other hand took me quite somewhere else, back to Freud and through him to the ways in which the field of the symbolic, although also structurally determinative of subjectivity, failed to account for it exhaustively. I was taken in other words to the field of the impossible, and to what it and it alone could make possible.

What fascinated me above all from the very beginning of my studies of Freud and Lacan was the knowledge that it is only on the basis of this necessary failure of the Symbolic's capture of the subject that the ethical project, which Freud inaugurated under the name of psychoanalysis, became possible. A project or rather a praxis which, in contrast to the therapeutic goods now so prolifically on offer, refuses to have as its purpose the making good of this failure, the healing of the rent in the subject that is the effect of this failure. But on the contrary, psychoanalysis works towards the assumption by each subject of that very impossibility as their truth, in the unique form in which it presents itself to them in their history and in their current life.

So, in recognition of the 150th anniversary of the birth of Sigmund Freud and the field of experience his lifelong work enabled to be opened up for us, I want to now speak about a topic of research which my own encounter with Freud made possible. And I title my short paper a reminiscence to underscore the impossible to remember that I felt to be particularly pertinent to the life stories of children of Jewish Holocaust survivors I was recording at the beginning of my work with psychoanalysis.

Freud spoke in his essay "Constructions in Analysis" about the failure often experienced in analysis of bringing a patient to recapture as a memory in the present what he/she has experienced in the past. Yet in response to a construction by the analyst, he goes on to say, an "ultra-clear" recollection of related details may be produced in a hallucinatory form, in which we can find "a fragment of *historical*" not *material truth*."

In an earlier work, *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, Freud wrote:

“It is in my view wrong to call the feeling of having experienced something before [this is the experience of *déjà vu*] an illusion. It is rather that at such moments something is really touched on which we have already experienced once before, only we cannot consciously remember it because it has never been conscious. To put it briefly, the feeling of ‘*déjà vu*’ corresponds to the recollection of an unconscious phantasy.” (SE 6, 266).

Thus Freud was led in one of his last works to state something that he had already proposed at the very beginning of his work; that subjects, whether neurotic or psychotic, suffer from their own reminiscences. They suffer in other words from a “kernel of truth” that remains traumatic for them because of its propensity to return to them not as memory, which can be grasped, but as a reminiscence, as something that may be uncannily recognised as belonging to or implicating them as subjects without them knowing how and why it does.

Lacan will later illustrate this insight of Freud’s with his own little story of a recognition, of having one morning upon opening his eyes recognised the profile of a marquis in the fringe of the bedroom curtain in his country house, commenting: “If I didn’t have a certain number of fantasies on the subject of what [it] represents, I wouldn’t have recognised it...” (*Seminar 1*, 35) And he goes on to theorise this experience as the “imaginary echo which arises as a response to a point of reality that belongs to the limit where it has been excised from the symbolic.” (Lacan 1988.) (*Ecrits*, 326)

To illustrate something of this imaginary echo, and the limit of possibility that it belongs to, I will conclude my little paper with a reminiscence, one that was obviously more traumatic than Lacan’s was for him, of a woman who talked with me about growing up with parents who had lived through the Holocaust.

Holidaying in China, a young woman encounters a scene from which she flees in panic and horror – a scene of chickens waiting patiently in their cages to be slaughtered, a sight she chances upon after going to the back of a restaurant in search of a toilet. And she is overwhelmed by the idea that there was blood everywhere, that the whole of human existence was based on blood. From that moment on she cannot bear to and refuses to eat meat and finds herself unaccountably rescuing animals in distress.

By chance, as it were, my subject had encountered a scene which she recognised, and although she was able to link this scene of chickens waiting to be devoured to her mother’s guilt-laden experience of waiting patiently in a cage the night that she and her mother arrived in Auschwitz, she was unable to remember what gave the reminiscence its traumatic force. These were her own unconscious fantasies of murder and devouring in relation to her mother, fantasies which touched on “the limit where it has been excised from the symbolic” and which had predisposed her to register the experience in China as traumatic.

It is to this history which touches on the real, an impossible history, to which I want to conclude by saying I was led to it by Freud.

References

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