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FREUD IN AMERICA

the new translations of freud

Adam Phillips, ed., *The New Penguin Freud*, New York: Penguin Books, 2003. [Titles published so far appear in the Works Cited box below.]

Sigmund Freud. *The Interpretation of Dreams*. Joyce Crick, trans. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

IN 1982 BRUNO BETTELHEIM published *Freud and Man's Soul* as an article in the *New Yorker*. Bettelheim was unrelenting in his essay about the misperception of psychoanalysis in the English-speaking world. He argued that due to poor translations, primarily James Strachey's *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* (hereafter SE), Freud's thought has been misunderstood as more technical and esoteric than Freud meant it to

be. Bettelheim listed example after example of problems with the SE, making persuasive readings along the way that suggest that the American Freud is very different from the Viennese doctor who finished his life in London. Despite other serious criticisms of the SE, Bettelheim's book can be seen as the start of a concerted wave of inquiry into the relationship between Freud's thought and its English translation.

In some respects Bettelheim was simply engaging in a sport that psychoanalysts have refined to an art form—the assertion of special knowledge of the Master. The history of the various psychoanalytic movements is rife with attempts to assert special relationships to knowledge of what Freud really meant, of what he would have deigned to change after subsequent contributions came to light, of what he con-

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sidered to be the most important aspects of the method he invented. It was just such a struggle that led to the creation of the SE in the first place; and because of its canonical status, the SE is the focus of most of the appropriate concern that English-speaking readers have about the history of the translation of Freud into English.

Ernest Jones was a tireless proponent of the idea of a collected works, and in a letter to Freud he wrote that the completion of such a project would make him feel that his life had “been worth living” (quoted in *Freud in Exile* [FIE], 119). Even before he suggested such a grand project to Freud in 1920, Jones had already been engaged in a fight for authority and access to translating Freud. In the first two decades of the twentieth century three men were translating Freud into English: James Putnam, A.A. Brill, and Jones. It is to these men that we owe many of the terms that we recognize now as the standard English vocabulary of psychoanalysis. Ego, displacement, condensation, resistance, and instinct are all choices of translation that date from this early period, and they can be found in the translations of all three men (FIE, 182-83). Still, Jones worked hard to supplant the others, and by the middle of the 1920s work on the translations that would make up the SE had begun. (The project would not be finalized, however, until after Freud’s death.)

The collected works project was under the general editorship of James Strachey, who had been groomed as a translator from the period of his analysis with Freud in 1924, but Jones exerted a high level of control, especially in connection with the choice of possible translations for Freud’s concepts, and he spent a considerable amount of time and energy giving the SE his imprimatur. Jones was particularly interested in systematizing some of Freud’s ideas by translating them with words that had Latin and Greek roots, in other words, by making them con-

form more closely to the existing nomenclature of English scientific thought. It is likely that Freud was aware of the value to psychoanalysis of making its vocabulary seem more scientific to an English-speaking audience; and, in fact, most of the contested translations in the SE appeared during Freud’s lifetime, and so were at the very least tacitly approved by him.

Even so, as Bettelheim argues in *Freud and Man’s Soul*, many of the choices made in translation fail to communicate the sense that Freud conveyed with his German word choice. In almost every case the English translations remove Freud from the realm of the speculative, humanistic, and familiar and press him toward the scientific and biological. Perhaps the choices of “cathexis” for “Besetzung” and “parapraxis” for “Fehlleistung” are the most obvious examples of this move toward scientific language. Besetzung can mean occupation (especially in a military sense), investment, or charge, all of which contain not only their own separate metaphors but also the residues of each other. Cathexis, on the other hand, not only sounds more removed from everyday experience, it is empty of all meaning save for the psychoanalytic one: a particular type of psychic investment or connection. Similarly, parapraxis removes the “slip” from its everyday roots as a failed but strangely successful action, ironically failing to convey precisely what Freud sought to indicate: the psychopathology of everyday life. Other instances are equally contentious, for instance turning the German words “Ich, Es, Uber-Ich” into “ego, id, superego.” The German is literally translated as “I, it, and over-I,” words much more familiar and immediate than the Latinate choices of Jones and Strachey. There are many more examples of mistranslation in the SE, but one in particular deserves note, the translation of “Trieb” by the English word “instinct.” Instinct denotes something biological and fixed,



something animal-like. Trieb, more appropriately translated as drive, is much more variable, denoting in Freud's thought something like the moment at which animality becomes humanity. It is not that the sense of instinct is not present, but that precisely to the extent that it is present it is already modified by the psyche into that which shapes and limits our humanity. It is a central concept in Freudian thought, and "drive" renders it in English much more accurately than does instinct.

The overall tone of a translation may be much more important to our understanding of a work on the whole than any specific vocabulary. It is in this respect that the SE has been most criticized, and this concern with tone lies behind many of the specific objections to the Greek cognates that Strachey has canonized. The danger is twofold. Not only do the neologisms fail to adequately capture the nuances and metaphors inherent in the German, but the use of technical language removes Freud's concepts from their grounding in everyday lived experience. In the first case, subtle ideas in Freud's thought are flattened in a way common in translation when different languages lack exact substitutes. But scientific language also bleeds the meaning from more common German words. Not only is the idea made strange and alien when translated into scientific prose, it also loses the relationship to lived experience that rounds out the concept as a description of everyday life. Freud's different idioms were diverse and well employed; he moved between different registers, and even different genres, across and within his books. The Freud of the SE, on the other hand, is, well, standardized. Strachey's translation, because of his word choice, but also because he spent time shortening many of Freud's sentences, making clauses into new sentences, and removing equivocal formulations, becomes more uniform and less specu-

lative, less personal and more univocal than Freud's writing.

The vicissitudes of translation affect the way in which psychoanalysis has been received and practiced in the English-speaking world, particularly in America. Even when Freud was alive, the American Psychoanalytic Association sought to prohibit all but medical doctors from practicing psychoanalysis. This directly contradicted Freud's own belief that lay analysts were important and could be fully qualified. Freud was so adamant in his view that he published *The Question of Lay Analysis* in 1926 arguing his position. The same year, lobbying by medical analysts, lead by A.A. Brill, in New York State resulted in the passage of legislation preventing the practice of psychoanalysis by anyone without a medical degree. While it has been suggested that this exclusion of lay analysts was the result of a desire on the part of doctors to control the field of psychoanalysis, Wallerstein (1998) has argued that the move was motivated as much by a desire to assure the scientific status of the emerging treatment. This impulse is strikingly similar to Jones's attempt to render Freud's writing into scientific terminology, and even beyond the political considerations that that engendered, much American psychoanalytic writing is both technical and obscure, a far cry from the inviting richness of Freud's work. In contrast to the breadth of Freud's concerns, a major American theorist like Otto Kernberg writes only about the technical aspects of psychoanalytic treatment and theory. It is difficult to imagine any lay reader being seduced by Kernberg as many have been seduced by the varied humanism present in Freud's best work.

The New Penguin Freud, under the general editorship of Adam Phillips, presents a different Freud to English readers. Each volume is translated by an accomplished Germanist and accompanied by a separate introduction that situates the work in Freud's

oeuvre and thought. Each volume, too, has a translator's preface that delimits some of the concerns peculiar to it. In all, the volumes that have appeared are impressive and presented handsomely. The texts Phillips has chosen for translation highlight the most accessible aspects of Freud's thought, while displaying not only its breadth, but also the depth of Freud's understanding and the strength of his ideas. Taken as a whole the volumes that have been translated to date provide a fabulous introduction to Freud, and with the addition of Joyce Crick's previous new translation of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1999), offer us an essential library of Freud's writings.

Crick's rendering of *The Interpretation of Dreams* (IOD) is valuable as a clear, beautiful translation, and because it represents an English translation of the first edition of the work that Freud thought to be his greatest contribution. In 1932 Freud wrote in the preface to the third edition of the book in English that, "It contains, even according to my present-day judgment, the most valuable of all the discoveries it has been my good fortune to make" (SE iv, p. xxiii). Indeed, Freud's book, published in November of 1899 and post-dated to 1900, ushered in the twentieth century. Part of Freud's contribution was his explicit rejection of generic dream analysis in favor of the specificity of the process of psychoanalysis. "For my procedure is not so easy to practice as the popular decoding method, which translates the given dream-content according to a fixed key; rather, I expect to find that with different people and in different contexts the identical dream-content might well conceal a quite different meaning" (IOD, 83). With this passage Freud introduces what is arguably the most fascinating part of his book, its autobiographical nature.

After demonstrating that he cannot use the dreams of patients or dreams randomly related to him, Freud suggests that the only material left are his

own dreams. "So I have to rely on my own dreams, resorting to them as an abundant and convenient fund of material coming from a more-or-less normal person..." (IOD, 83). This "more-or-less normal" is one of the instances that makes Freud such an engaging writer, both informal and intimate. We often have the feeling, especially in the earlier writing more concerned with everyday life, that we are making discoveries with Freud, not simply from him. "At any rate, we can try to see how far self-analysis will take us in the interpretation of dreams" (IOD, 83). Freud follows this introduction with the recitation and analysis of "The Dream of Irma's Injection." Not only are we presented with Freud's own dream here, but a host of autobiographical details that surround it: his life and circle, his concerns, and even his rivalries.

Crick's new translation shines here, as it does with most of the dreams, which Freud presented in the present tense, but which Strachey rendered in the past tense. Crick preserves the present tense, and with it a sense of immediacy that is lacking in Strachey's translation. Combined with Freud's personal revelations and his candor during the analysis of the dream itself, the presentation of the dreams in the present tense contributes to a feeling of extraordinary intimacy in the writing. What we have in the *Dreambook* is a doubly intimate encounter with Freud. The book is a portrait of Freud developing his theory, working it out on the page, in language that he is inventing as he goes. It also shows Freud dreaming and analyzing his own dreams. These two intimacies make the book much more than a simple theoretical treatise.

It is appropriate that Crick is also the translator of *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* in the Penguin series. The two books, along with *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, are part of what might be seen as the trilogy of the everyday that introduces



so many of Freud's central ideas. In all three, examples from life are used to illustrate the workings of the unconscious, and their elucidation is used to show how psychoanalysis works. All three are also strikingly autobiographical, as Freud relies on examples from his own life for illustration. In the case of the *Jokebook*, Freud's collection of jokes and witticisms provides the backbone for the theoretical endeavor. But, as Crick makes clear in her introduction, the text presents huge problems for the translator. Not only are the differences between the theoretical register of exegesis and the informality of the joke extreme, the witticisms themselves often turn on subtle and untranslatable word play. Crick admirably negotiates these pitfalls, and her version of the *Jokebook* is a delight to read. Particularly, it must be confessed, the first section, the Analytic Part, which provides a kind of taxonomy of jokes, is heavy on examples. The section reads like a *Commonplace book*, and just that feeling of reading Freud's own selections gives us a sense of the man we would not otherwise have. This is reinforced by the later sections, which convincingly demonstrate how personal is the process of creating, telling, and laughing at jokes.

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (PEL), published the year after *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in 1901, is the third text in Freud's early trilogy of lived daily experience. He sums up his argument on the first page, where he writes: "the person concerned [in a slip] does not merely forget, but remembers incorrectly" (PEL, 5). Freud's contention is that actions are not mistakes, that they can only be viewed as mistakes if one fails to take into account his theories of the unconscious and psychodynamics. But to fail to account for the unconscious is to reduce your explanation to something unworthy of the name. These three books all bring their various joys, but reading *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, as its name suggests, comes with the greatest shock of rec-

ognition. Here are things that occur to everyone: slips of the tongue, inadvertent actions, the forgetting of names, and the never-random choosing of numbers.

Again, there is a sense of intimacy with Freud throughout this work, as so many of the examples come from his own life. And one of the joys here is a latent comedy in many of Freud's illustrations. Just as we are skeptical when he ends his analysis of his dream of Irma's injection by resolving that his wish was to avoid blame for a misdiagnosis, the image of Freud trying to think of a woman's name for a case history while standing at the podium is very amusing. His struggle to come up with another female name on the spot, and at the same time "not set a bad example to my psychoanalytically trained colleagues" (PEL, 231) by using the name of another woman in the room, is both funny and strange. Part of the joke is that by this point in the book we too are a bit "trained."

With PEL, one of Freud's greatest contributions comes into sharp focus: everything is over-determined. Psychoanalysis shows the extent to which our thoughts, our words, and our actions constitute the perceptible strata of much deeper structures; or, if you like, Freud demonstrates that the psychic pressures that make us human are determining our choices even when they seem not to be. Events that appear random, choices that seem based only upon conscious considerations, prove to be motivated behaviors for which we may not know the motivations. These three early books, focused as they are on the ephemera of lived experience, demonstrate this in a strikingly personal and convincing manner.

The case histories chosen for this series are certainly the gems of Freud's literary production. They combine the exigencies of plot, with the added layer of Freud's speculation and recitation. They feel familiar, stories of the genre to which Conrad's *Heart*

of Darkness belongs, in which the narrator is passing on a received tale and asking us to share in his amazement. But, these are not novellas, they are the working documents of psychoanalysis, and the real drama here is the development of the treatment and the cure. From the case histories we get a sense of how Freud approached cases, what he considered important, how he interacted with patients, and above all, how his theory grew from his practice. It is as if we had a chance to read and understand Andrew Wiles's notes on the solving of Fermat's "last theorem"; not simply to read the proof, but to follow the strands of thought that he teased out, over thirteen years, in his quest for it.

The Schreber Case (SE) is one of the strangest works that Freud ever published, the analysis of a memoir written by a psychotic former judge who had twice been confined to a mental hospital. Judge Schreber was cured after his first illness and returned to work and to public life, only to suffer another breakdown thirteen years later from which he only partially recovered. His *Memoirs* were published in 1903 after this second hospitalization (they were recently reissued in English in the *New York Review of Books Classics* series) and were popular with psychiatrists of the time, who were interested in reading the experiences of the educated and successful jurist. The case is a curious one in Freud's oeuvre for several reasons. Freud had never worked psychoanalytically with psychotic patients, something that he readily admits in his introduction to the work. Freud also makes it clear in his introduction that he feels that psychosis presents a limit for his method, a country that cannot really be explored, and certainly not charted, by psychoanalysis. He is quite clear about the reason: psychoanalysis depends upon speech, and psychotic speech is unreliable. "[P]aranoiacs cannot be forced to overcome their inner resistances and in any case only say what they

wish to say" (SC, 3). This objection might at first seem strange, especially when read next to his admonition to the "Ratman": "to tell me everything that came into his mind" (*The "Wolfman" and Other Cases* [WM], 129). But it is the difference between these two statements that makes the Schreber case so interesting, for in that difference Freud indicates that he understands psychotic speech to be motivated and organized. It may appear strangely undirected, may seem to betray no plan or design, but it is a far cry from free association. It is, in fact, too highly organized to admit to analysis. Freud's only chance is to use the written record, made by the psychotic, for the analysis.

The Schreber Case is slim, a mix of Freud's analysis and interpolations from Schreber's *Memoirs*: on the one hand, the reasoned conjectures of an analyst, on the other, the ravings of a paranoiac. Freud does an admirable job of balancing the two, but the real contribution is the discussion of paranoia at the close of the book. We may disagree that latent homosexuality accounts for Schreber's illness, or indeed for paranoia in general, but reading the beginnings of Freud's thought about narcissism and the drives, both of which would be taken up in major papers over the next few years, is fascinating.

The other volume of case histories that Adam Phillips has selected for *The New Penguin Freud, The "Wolfman" and Other Cases*, contains that work as well as the cases of "Little Hans" and "The Ratman." These cases present a different aspect from Schreber. Here we see Freud working with patients and we read his descriptions of their treatments. It is in this volume that one of the most far reaching, but subtle, corrections from these new translations is evident. Although Freud wrote in the present tense when he was relating much of this clinical material, Strachey chose to render the German into the past tense as he translated. The new translations preserve the imme-



diacy of Freud's text, and with it the rhetorical illusion that we also occupy his consulting room. In IOD this has the effect of bringing the related dreams much closer to the experience of dreaming, with its compressed and insistent sense of time. In the case studies the present tense helps to give the sense of a discipline in its infancy at the same time that it conveys some of the urgency of patients seeking treatment for pressing psychic pain. Furthermore, and especially in a case like "The Ratman," Freud travels back and forth between the past and present tense throughout the writing, and his changes help to anchor the different registers of his writing: recitation of his experience with the patient, quotations from the patient, speculations about the case. Using the past tense throughout flattens these distinctions and makes the whole more dry than Freud intended.

The cases here present the most complex reading experience. Freud is conveying the experiences related to him by patients, and then his own thoughts about the cases as they develop. The reader oscillates between occupying Freud's role and the role of the patient. In the case of "Little Hans," the fact that the bulk of the clinical material is provided by Hans's father through letters and diaries makes this more complex. Here we witness Freud supervising an analysis, and as readers we can also occupy the position of Hans's father, the analyst under supervision. But throughout these three cases what proves the most interesting is the clear sense that Freud's theory stems from his clinical work. This is often lost in introductions to Freud that present his theory without Freud's own wealth of examples. It is much more difficult to understand why Freud insists on the power of the unconscious, or of the Oedipus complex, if one has not read the clinical examples that fueled his certainty.

Perhaps the most welcome result of the new Freud translations is that they constitute an invitation to read Freud again. While these translations lack the scholarly apparatus that would be required to supplant the SE, they present a fresh look at Freud for which we should be thankful. As with any thinker whose theories and observations have been taken up into popular discourse, Freud always surprises. His thought is always just different enough from the image of it in general currency that one is left slightly off balance while reading his papers. Not only are the beauties of Freud's writing absent from second- and third-hand discussions of the unconscious and the Oedipus complex, his ideas themselves are flattened and tamed in their reception. Freud's characterization of the unconscious wishes, in chapter 7 of IOD, lets us feel how alien and strange the unconscious is meant to be. "These wishes of our Unconscious, ever stirring, never dying-immortal, one might say-remind us of the legendary Titans whose shoulders from time immemorial bore the mountain-masses laden upon them by the victorious gods, which even now still quake from time to time with the convulsion of their limbs" (IOD, 363).

Similarly, Freud's case studies convey the sense of narrative arc that Freud clearly saw as central to the analytic telling of a life and the pursuit of a cure.

This last idea is of crucial importance to current debates internal to the various clinical disciplines that seek to provide relief from the symptoms of psychic distress. Freud's theories are seen by some as too focused on the negative aspects of life and development, as unable to capture the richness of life, and hence, psychodynamic therapy is seen as inadequate to the task of developing positive outcomes for patients struggling to re-imagine their lives free from symptoms and suffering. The case histories demonstrate the poverty of this reading of Freud, and these

literary translations do an admirable job of focusing our attention on Freud's use of narrative structure, among other literary devices. By adding depth to these histories, by treating them in their fullness rather than reducing them to overly specific case reports, these new translations can help us to see some-

thing that Freud surely intended all along: the telling of a life is itself a kind of living, and it helps to provide the structure and sense of sweep that symptoms in their relentless particularity can do such a good job of disrupting. ■