

Intercultural Communication: The Case of Psychoanalysis

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Abstract

It is customary to separate Freud's early scientific years from his later psychoanalytic work. Considering, however, his territorializing efforts and certain discontinuous, aterritorial elements that resist and unsettle these efforts, we perceive a both hierarchically assertive and centrifugal writer from the beginning. In the intercultural and interlinguistic spaces of Freud's later psychoanalytic texts, holes of considerable depth and multivalence appear. Boundaries turn fluid there; associations spin off in seemingly senseless directions. At the same time, there is an involvement in the realities of the moment, a penchant for interlinguistic elaborations and deviations that draws on various European literatures and languages. Freud's psychoanalytic thought begins to take form in Paris in his footnotes for his 1885/86 translation of Jean-Martin Charcot's lectures at the Salpêtrière. Translational movements then permeate Freud's psychoanalytic work, such as *The Interpretation of Dreams*. In its ceaseless movement, Freud's writing affirms its singular space before and beyond particular delineations. It is the space of an imagination that draws on linguistico-cultural difference and transforms various European languages into a stream that in its force still leaves an obscurely resistant remainder— «scattered cells» (Freud 1962: 229)—intact: therefrom emanates an incessantly productive disturbance.

Key words: culture, communication, translation, psychoanalysis

Psychoanalysis from its very beginning, well before its explicit onset, seeks out uncharted spaces, and it does so in a manner that destabilizes boundaries which could define and enclose newly seen terrain. Boundaries themselves acquire primary significance, but again not in ways that would allow them to harden into borderlines around particular territories. This double movement of discovery and decentralization tends to intensify the present moment of perception, notwithstanding Sigmund Freud's pronounced fascination with the past: it *was* a *fascination* after all, a heightened perspicacity, a desire to know, and to know freshly. In the course of his intense preoccupations, Freud, more often than not, undermines and occasionally derails his train of thought: these then are moments of strangeness, crumbling pieces in the theoretical edifice, harbingers of the work's potential demise. But exactly this unruly underside of an ambitious discourse fuels further thought. A *third* element appears in the process of discovery and decentralization: that of a fruitful failure in which something — or rather nothing in particular — demands to be seen and to be considered.

Freud often leaves this task to his readers, a move that allows him to proceed with his discourse in a forward manner rather than to be subjected, irrevocably perhaps, to its undercurrents.

Discovery, centrifugal thought, and productive derailment: in these mobile circumstances it is not surprising that already the young neurologist Freud presents both significant insights and thought-provoking *asides*, side material that for the moment, at least, eludes articulation. It is customary to separate Freud's early scientific years from his later psychoanalytic work. Looking, however, at his territorializing efforts and at discontinuous, aterritorial elements that resist and unsettle these efforts, we perceive a both hierarchically assertive *and* centrifugal writer from the very beginning.

Freud's earliest scientific research, published in 1877, investigates the «tissue components» (Freud 1962: 227) of sex organs in eels. His other 1877 publication analyzes «root-fibres» (Freud 1962: 228) in fish larvae. In 1878, Freud expands on this investigation of early development in fish. His considerations to some extent resonate with Deleuze & Guattari's rhizomorphic (1980: 9-37), nomadically inclined (1980: 434-527) vocabulary that departs from a centrally organized, arborescent model. «Transitioning» — «durchziehende» (Freud 1952: 464) — fibers, Freud observes, are to be distinguished from those that are «adjoining», «angelehnte» (ibid.). The latter ones — he formulates — somewhat nomadically «merely mingle with» (Freud 1962: 229) the root elements, «Wurzelementen» (Freud 1952: 464). These elements thus appear in the immediate proximity of the adjoining fibers, but in a somewhat casual manner: for the moment, an organically organized, hierarchically structured, arborescent metaphoricity does *not* take over Freud's discourse. Arborescence itself recedes here: although in the service of structural cohesiveness, the «transitioning» fibers share a nomadic quality with their merely commingling, explicitly uncommitted counterparts.

For a moment, then, the fiber paths and oddly disaffiliated segments enter into an uncertain space between a world of roots, trees, hierarchical order and a realm of «scattered cells» (Freud 1962: 229), «versprengten Zellen» (Freud 1952: 464). These cells, whose exact location remains unknown, function as interweavements in the region of the spinal cord. The network implicit in these interweavements surfaces in the final sentence of Freud's early text, in which fibers branch out in a variety of ways, forming forks and pathways, and finally a «very fine

nerve-net». Yet once again Freud shrinks back from the radically complex course his prose is beginning to take: the scattered, irregularly distributed cells give way to distinctly organized and clearly visible roots and branches. The «very fine nerve-net», Freud observes, can be stained with «gold chloride» (Freud 1962: 229).

Throughout Freud's early scientific publications, the language of the network with its fibers and interweavements continues to appear, and so does the tension between arborescent and rhizomorphic conceptions. Clearly delineated distinctions remain the explicit target of Freud's scientific enterprise, and very intricate interweavements and resistances, much like the «scattered cells» (Freud 1962: 229), destabilize his effort at achieving such certainty.

Network-related notions and formulations not only pervade, but — more formatively — underlie both Freud's early scientific and his subsequent psychoanalytic work. In the intercultural and interlinguistic spaces of his psychoanalytic enterprise, the network exhibits holes of considerable depth and multivalence. Boundaries turn fluid there, and associations spin off in seemingly senseless directions. At the same time, there is an involvement in the realities of the moment here, a penchant for interlinguistic elaborations and deviations that draws on various European literatures and languages.

It is no coincidence that Freud's specifically psychoanalytic thought begins to take form in Paris in his footnotes for his 1885/86 translation of Jean-Martin Charcot's celebrated lectures at the Salpêtrière. Translational movements then permeate Freud's psychoanalytic work, such as his breakthrough inquiry, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, *Die Traumdeutung*, published in December 1899.^[1]

In intercultural and interlinguistic spaces, Freud's prose chokes on its more assertive pronouncements, reflects its frustrations with its linear progressions, and records jagged paths of associations across different languages and civilizations.

Civilization and Its Discontents, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, is the title of his late work of cultural criticism and barely tempered despair, but in *Die Traumdeutung* European civilizations and localities form points of arrival and departure through which Freud's writing moves incessantly, with the sense of a certain vacuity always only a step away, yet held at bay for the most part.

One hot summer afternoon, a little more than a hundred years ago, for example, Freud feels frustrated with the lecture — *Vorlesung* — he has just given at the University of Vienna, something in the manner of a reading off — *Ablesen* — of material that had been there to begin with. His scholarly pronouncements on the connection between hysteria and perversions, Freud feels, had been «void», or rather «disrobed» — «entkleidet» (Freud 1942: 473) — «of all value», and in this mood he visits a «Café» (ibid.) with its *accent aigu*, a nuance worth noting in light of Didier Anzieu's observations on the appearance of French inflections at the onset of psychoanalytic thought (Anzieu 1996: 9-25). Having «choked» on his «Kipfel» (Freud 1942: 473) in this café, Freud that evening looks at Garnier's illustrations of Rabelais' *Gargantua & Pantagruel*, and reads Conrad Ferdinand Meyer's novella *Die Leiden eines Knaben* with

[1] Cf. Kudszus 2001 and 2004 for interweavements between Freud's translational, pre-psychoanalytic, and dream-related movements. The present article draws on and synthesizes my former texts.

its setting at the royal court in France. Freud's dream that night — in July or August 1898 (Grinstein 1980: 434) — involves, as he tells us in *Die Traumdeutung*, a...

...hill, and on this something like an outdoor toilet, a very long bench, at its end a large toilet hole. The edge in the very back is thickly covered with heaps of excrement of all sizes and degrees of freshness. Behind the bench some bushes. I urinate onto the bench; a long stream of urine washes it all clear, the pats of excrement detach themselves easily and drop into the opening. As if at the end there was something left. (Freud 1958: 468 f.)^[2]

At its beginning, this dream foregrounds a «large [...] hole», a reference to vacuity and evacuation that resonates at the end when the pieces fall «into the opening». Yet this streamlined view of Freud's dream account does not fall into place neatly. Freud, after all, offers a *narration* of his dream, a version after the event: «I have to tell the following dream, which every reader will note with disgust» (Freud 1958: 468), Freud formulates immediately before his brief narrative. The narratological distance thus established resounds in the dream account's final sentence: «As if at the end there was something left.» The account itself just emphasized that «all» has been washed clear. In the tension between this assertion of a complete removal and the reflective subjunctive that something might still be there after all, lies a space that is not occupied by any specific knowledge, but that nevertheless enters into a certain awareness. Every reader, Freud states, will take note of this dream, more literally: will «take it into cognition», «zur Kenntnis nehmen» (Freud 1942: 471). Such a space in which something achieves consciousness as a subjunctively inflected aside, but does not acquire a form per se, closely relates to the unruly, nomadic elements in Freud's early discoveries, the «scattered cells» (Freud 1962: 229) that demand attention, but nevertheless escape classification.

In the course of Freud's analysis of this dream — as of others — his interlingual network acquires a decentralized complexity, a rhizomorphic, unruly quality in which events do not connect conclusively, but in tentative, momentary, inexplicable ways. Even and especially in his assertions, Freud produces countermovements through which the negated, resistant residue reappears. «The fact that all the faeces disappeared so quickly under the stream», he asserts of his dream, «recalled the motto: *'Afflavit et dissipati sunt'*, which I intended one day to put at the head of a chapter upon the therapy of hysteria» (Freud 1958: 469). But at this exceedingly self-assertive moment, in the now Latinized interlinguistic network, a Freudian slip, *Fehlleistung*, occurs with the superfluous «*Af*» in «*Afflavit*», suggesting an adjoining phenomenon reminiscent of the scattered, adjacent fibers in Freud's early work. Earlier in *Die Traumdeutung*, Freud gives the correct quote with «*Flavit*», but performs — again without correction — another *Fehlleistung* that opens up a tightly structured configuration. His dream thoughts between German, French, Spanish, Latin, and English arrive at the following «chain of associations», «Assoziationsreihe»: «*Hufblattich – lattice – Salat – Salathund [...]*» (Freud 1942: 218). «*Lattice*» — «Gitterwerk» in a German equivalent of Freud's English association

[2] I modified the *Standard Edition* translation here and in the following quote, also drawing on Crick's recent rendering (Freud 1999: 306).

— appears erroneously instead of «lettuce» — «*Salat*» — here, presenting a richly allusive, patterned opening in lieu of the dog's specific nutrition.

Against the grain of his explicit argumentation, Freud's writing reflects incongruities and perforations through which his associative stream turns increasingly complex and error-laden, and insistently so: «*Huflattich*», Freud translates, means «*pisse-en-lit*», but this rendering may be erroneous. Whether «I translated [...] rightly or wrongly I could not tell», Freud comments on his translation (Freud 1953: 213), whereupon his associative gates open widely: «The French word for 'dog' — '*chien*' — reminded me of the major function ('*chier*' in French, compared with '*pisser*' for the minor one). Soon, I thought, I should have collected examples of impropriety in all three states of matter», Freud observes on his way toward further interlingual connections. In Zola's *Germinal* he spots «a very peculiar sort of competition — for the production of a gaseous excretion known by the name of '*flatus*'» (ibid.).

Above the footnote, Freud's consciousness registers ever more expansive evacuations across borderline terrain. The «path leading to *flatus*», he specifies, includes the «Armada which sailed against *England*», commemorated in the medallion bearing the inscription «'*Flavit et dissipati sunt*', since the storm-blast had scattered the Spanish fleet» (Freud 1953: 213 f.).

If the «scattered cells» (Freud 1962: 229) of Freud's neurological writing associate here^[3] with the movements of the defeated Spanish fleet, we are reminded that at the same time this fleet now has a diffusely evocative presence in which it is not merely defeated, but associated with a realm of error in which much else, something different, something oddly extraordinary appears to be possible. With the Armada thus appears the most cherished project of Freud's early psychoanalytic years: those «words» («*Flavit et dissipati sunt*»), Freud formulates at the end of his associative chain, «I had thought [...] of using» «half seriously [...] as the heading to the chapter on 'Therapy', if ever I got so far as producing a detailed account of my theory and treatment of hysteria» (Freud 1953: 214). Such an account of «Therapy», then, proceeding from a demi-jest, can be expected to yield in-between tones, serious statements in close conjunction with quick-footed irreverence.

Once again, Freud strikes a half-note here in intimate connection with the pleasures of interlinguistic transfer. Could a therapy that proceeds under a not-so-serious heading result in substantial benefits? The lack of a reliable exchange value that is thus implied resonates with that other zone in which cells move about nomadically here and there, seen, but unforeseeably. If notions of substance remain elusive in this scenario, Freud's writing begins to surpass its own agenda. Unsettled between various European languages, his prose casts its net widely; its points of convergence, the words from here and there, are splendidly present, but only for a moment: a dynamic of translation, of *Übersetzung*, registers before words harden into seemingly solid terms.

Notably at stake in this particular case is Freud's literary persona itself. Dr. Freud in *Die Traumdeutung* recalls a certain episode from a railway journey. He is dissatisfied with his expensive compartment and afraid that during the night he might not have a toilet at his dis-

[3] In German, «versprengten» (Freud 1952: 464) and «zerstreut» (Freud 1942: 219) associate more loosely.

posal. When the conductor fails to accommodate him, Freud suggests that the former «should at all events have a hole made in the floor of the compartment to meet the possible needs of passengers» (Freud 1953: 209) — *his* needs. In the topography of this anecdote, which serves as the preamble to Freud's account of his dream of Count Thun, this hole — suggested in jest, as was the title of the hysteria study — marks the impact of the doctor's desire to be taken as seriously as the government official who has received a more functional compartment at half the price, a «half-compartment», «Halbcoupé» (Freud 1942: 215). With his jest, however, Freud is already on his way out through the hole in the floor. Freud's Coupé will not be his final station: his dream that night propels him into Count Thun's pronouncements about the *Huflattich* with its English, French, and Spanish spinoffs. Cutting short the possibility that any of these associations might harden into a statement of substance, Freud's writing in its interlinguistic, scattered process now performs its own activity of cutting beyond the measured confines of the *Halbcoupé*.

In its incessant movement, Freud's writing here — and time and again throughout his work — cuts out its own vacuities, and in doing so affirms its singular space before and beyond more particular delineations. It is the space of an imagination that draws on linguistic as well as cultural difference and transforms various European languages and ideas into a stream that in washing everything clear still leaves a remainder intact — and very much so: from this remainder emanates an incessantly productive disturbance. Intercultural communication in this context calls for a certain absence of comprehensibility.

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