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The Choice of Neurosis: Charcot and Freud¹

Keywords

Sigmund Freud, Jacques Nassif, metapsychology, choice of neurosis, disposition

Abstract

The article approaches Freud's concept of the choice of neurosis (*Neurosenwahl*) through Jacques Nassif's 1968 essay "Freud and Science." In this text, Nassif focuses on the ways in which Jean-Martin Charcot influenced the development of Freud's thought, highlighting in particular Charcot's decisive gesture of isolating neurosis as a purely psychological affection. The article accordingly proceeds from the hypothesis that the repetition of the break—which Nassif identifies as the central methodological gesture of psychoanalysis—takes place here in the form of a repetition and radicalization of Charcot's "choice of neurosis." In other words, the problem of the choice of neurosis could be posed only on the basis of Charcot's prior gesture, and if Freud wished to remain faithful to this gesture, he had to articulate the choice of neurosis as a speculative, metapsychological concept. The article shows that the choice of neurosis functions as a nodal point between empiricism, psychoanalytic technique, and metapsychological speculation, and, on another level, between ontogenetic and phylogenetic approaches: a constellation that becomes particularly clear in the analysis of the initially lost and later rediscovered twelfth and final metapsychological essay, "Overview of the Transference Neuroses."

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Izbira nevroze: Charcot in Freud

Ključne besede

Sigmund Freud, Jacques Nassif, metapsihologija, izbira nevroze, dispozicija

Povzetek

Članek se v obravnavi Freudovega koncepta izbire nevroze, *Neurosenwahl*, opre na spis Jacquesa Nassifa »Freud in znanost« iz leta 1968. V njem se Nassif osredotoča na načine, kako je na razvoj Freudove misli vplival Jean-Martin Charcot, pri čemer posebej izpostavi prelomno gesto osredotočenja na nevrozo kot čisto psihološko afekcijo. Članek posledično izhaja iz hipoteze, da je ponovitev preloma, ki ga Nassif postavi kot osrednji metodološki prijem psihoanalize, v tem primeru potekala kot ponovitev in zaostroitev Charcotove »izbire nevroze«; problem izbire nevroze se je, drugače rečeno, lahko postavil zgolj na podlagi predhodne Charcotove geste, in če je Freud želel tej gesti ostati zvest, je izbiro nevroze moral oblikovati kot spekulativni, metapsihološki koncept. Prispevek pokaže, da izbira nevroze zavzame vlogo vozlišča med empirijo, psihoanalitično tehniko in metapsihološko spekulacijo, na drugi ravni pa tudi med ontogenetskim in filogenetskim pristopom, kar je še posebej razvidno iz analize sprva izgubljenega in kasneje najdenega sklepnega metapsihološkega spisa »Pregled transfernih nevroz«.



Introduction

The text by Jacques Nassif, "Freud and Science," appearing in the present issue in English for the first time, constitutes the germinal cell of the author's broader project, *Freud, l'inconscient*. There, Freud's enduring indebtedness to Jean-Martin Charcot forms part of a comprehensive reconstruction of the genesis of Freudian epistemology and of psychoanalysis as such. Psychoanalysis is a specific science; for this reason, the study of its emergence and of its concept—the logic of its constitution—requires us to identify the generative principle that brought it into existence and continues to propel it. Nassif formulates this principle as the "repetition of the break," thereby indicating that its inaugural gesture was already a repetition of earlier breaks.

In the repetition of the various breaks [. . .] psychoanalytic theory was rendered possible [. . .]. However, while it is quite remarkable that these various repetitions

could pass through the sole proper name of Freud, it is no coincidence that these “breaks” can all be designated by the names of his masters: Charcot, Jackson, Bernheim, Breuer.²

It is important to stress that this generative principle is both the condition of psychoanalysis’s founding—impelling Freud, already at a relatively mature age, to break with his previous scientific practice—and the motor of its ongoing operation after Freud, of its persistence: “every psychoanalysis,” Nassif argues, “inherently involves a (quasi-theoretical) reevaluation of all Freudian concepts, and every reading of Freud should be understood as an enactment of these concepts upon the very text they construct.”³

This inexhaustibility of psychoanalytic concepts—that is, their capacity to intervene reflexively in their own conceptual field by means of the very concepts they deploy—is, as Nassif suggests, a consequence of their mode of emergence. Psychoanalysis initially drew on a network of already existing concepts belonging, of course, to antecedent sciences; yet it did so only in order to reconfigure them into a new constellation. Nassif captures their paradoxical status with particular force when he writes:

[Psychoanalytic] concepts possess a unique scientific status, having been mostly imported from related fields—or even from the “leading science” of the time, namely thermodynamics (!)—often functioning as metaphors, their precise meaning impossible to pin down, all bearing the stamp of arbitrariness and thus, throughout the texts, shifting from one meaning to its opposite: a strange science indeed! However, we would like to show that these concepts, which are indistinguishable from those of classical psychiatry, neurology, or Herbartian psychology, nonetheless form a system, in the very precise sense that they functioned as a “sieve” that allowed Freud to sift through the science of his time and steer it towards a specific practice.⁴

The metaphor of the “sieve,” which Nassif derives from Freud and around which he constructs this text, may be usefully read in relation to the original

² Jacques Nassif, “Freud and Science,” trans. Holden M. Rasmussen, *Filozofski vestnik* 46, no. 3 (2025): 41, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.46.3.02>.

³ Nassif, 37.

⁴ Nassif, 37.

German word employed by Freud. While the English *sifting* and the French *passer au tamis* and *cribler* suggest a patient process of separating and filtering, the German *rütteln*, used by Freud,⁵ introduces into the metaphor a far less goal-directed dynamic.

Rütteln, which in German refers less to sifting than to shaking and jolting, on the one hand distances psychoanalysis from a standard scientific posture; yet at the same time it brings it closer to its experimental core. This is especially so when the material in question is human psychology, infected by the unconscious, and for which one must first find a way of inducing its manifestation, without it being possible to determine in advance when, or in what form, such a manifestation will occur. It is precisely here that Freud comes closest to Charcot.

In the initial phase, Charcot's role, as every reader of Freud is well aware, was singular. His influence did not primarily stem from theoretical innovation, but rather from a clinical and pedagogical practice that embodied his fundamental methodological orientation more forcefully than any fully systematised theory could. As Freud wrote after Charcot's death, "each of his lectures was a little work of art in construction and composition"; they were "perfect in form and made such an impression that, for the rest of the day, one could not get the sound of what he had said out of one's ears, or the thought of what he had demonstrated out of one's mind."⁶

Freud's fascination with this perfection, however, should not be misunderstood. What impressed him was not merely the finished form of Charcot's lectures, nor the completeness of their overall effect, but the fact that this apparent perfection rested on a sustained exposure to imperfection. More precisely, it rested on a clinical practice that did not merely tolerate the imperfect, the irregular, or the unresolved, but actively produced and forced such moments in order to let the empirical material appear as an enigma. This was most clearly the case in Charcot's *leçons du mardi*, where clinical demonstration suspended ready-made

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Charcot," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 3:23; Sigmund Freud, "Charcot," in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Anna Freud et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1952), 1:35.

⁶ Freud, "Charcot," 3:17.

explanations and allowed the empirical to show itself precisely in its resistance to conceptual closure.

In fact, Charcot, too—and this was what fascinated Freud most—was someone who, in his scientific practice, first and foremost worked by agitating his material (or letting it agitate itself), in the literal sense of *rütteln*, of shaking and jolting it, until the human material that appeared to medicine as old and ready to be subsumed under existing categories suddenly revealed itself as something new. This is precisely the moment emphasized by Nassif. After first citing a passage from Freud's text on Charcot, in which Freud describes this dynamic, Nassif writes:

This text is of capital importance to us inasmuch as it establishes, through an intermediary, that which constitutes the central axis of what could without exaggeration be called Freud's "*ars inveniendi*." One can indeed argue that the entirety of psychoanalytic method lies in this inversion of medical method, which aims only to provide the physician with the ability to "see what he has already learned to see," thereby sparing him any surprise when confronted with any symptom. Conversely, one could define all psychoanalysis as a systematic repetition of "the old"—induced by the surprise encountered with the "new" that is the symptom—in order to render possible this "vision" of which Freud speaks.⁷

Charcot's influence, however, does not end at the level of general methodological orientation. It can also be traced to a point that is decisive for psychoanalysis itself, namely in the construction of a new, properly psychoanalytic concept: the choice of neurosis, a concept which marks psychoanalysis' central question concerning the genesis of neurosis. It is here, too, that Freud can be said to repeat Charcot's break. In contrast to his contemporaries, Charcot, with his distinction between homologous and dissimilar heredity, does not go so far as to reduce psychic pathology completely to a deterministic hereditary sequence. In Charcot,

traumatic etiology is nevertheless recognized and it is precisely about building a bridge between it and hereditary etiology; one could even say that the famous Freudian problem of the "choice of neurosis" is thus prefigured, since, from the same "neuropathic tendency," one can say after the fact that there was "dissimilar

⁷ Nassif, "Freud and Science," 44.

heredity” or “homologous heredity,” depending on the moment or the nature of the traumatic event which must then be considered as an *agent provocateur*. It is very precisely at this point that Freud takes up the matter, attempting to think together this dual etiology and obliged by his practice to gradually abandon the hereditary aspect to focus more and more attentively on what presents itself under this concept of “trauma” as a “provoking agent.”⁸

In what follows, I will address three issues: first, what precisely Charcot’s preliminary gesture was that opened up, for Freud and for psychoanalysis, the very field in which the *problem* of the choice of neurosis (*Neurosenwahl*) could emerge; second, how this problem comes to be articulated as a *concept* and how the concept of the choice of neurosis may be understood as a paradigm of the metapsychological concept as such; and third, how this concept persisted, functioning at once as a boundary between observation-based theory and speculation, and as a hinge—within Freud’s work—between ontogeny and phylogeny.

Charcot and the Neurosis-Event

The choice of neurosis, *Neurosenwahl*, is a central yet subterranean, largely unarticulated issue in the history of psychoanalysis. In Freud, it first appears as a clinical puzzle: Why does psychic conflict crystallize as hysteria, obsessional neurosis, or paranoia? From the outset, however, the phrase carried a profound ambiguity. Does it mean the choice *of* a neurosis, as if the subject chooses their illness? Or does it mean the choice *by* neurosis, as if a structure chooses the subject in advance? This conceptual and grammatical uncertainty is not confined to its first articulation, but extends to the very configuration of psychic life. For such a life is marked by the same ambiguity: We are “spoken” by language and “driven” by drives, and yet, in contingent circumstances, we can perform proper acts of choice. This multiplicity of senses also opens a further register of *Neurosenwahl*: not only the choice *of* a neurosis, and the choice *by* neurosis, but also the choices of neuroses made within psychoanalytic history itself. Different authors have privileged different affections as their point of departure. Freud began with hysteria, though he felt most at home on the terrain of obsessional neurosis; Jung turned to schizophrenia, and Freud himself ventured into that terrain to open the previously inaccessible problem of narcissism; Lacan,

⁸ Nassif, 56.

throughout, more or less explicitly, privileged psychosis, the affection that is precisely not a neurosis, and in which the subject “chooses” foreclosure of the symbolic. Yet the entire endeavour also turns on an earlier epistemological decision. Charcot had, quite literally, chosen neurosis: not a particular neurosis, but neurosis as such, understood as a psychological affection in the strict sense.

Up to this point, I have placed the emphasis on the way Charcot influenced Freud through his general methodological stance. This is a stance that has less to do with conceptual capture than with a dynamic of loosening and overcoming conceptual rigidity in light of empiria and the practice of observation, and which coalesces into a guiding principle that Freud was never able to shake off: “*La théorie, c’est bon, mais ça n’empêche pas d’exister*” (“Theory is good, but that does not prevent existence”). What Nassif brings sharply into focus, by contrast, is Charcot’s conceptual innovation. Or, more precisely, the delimitation of the very concept of neurosis “in all its generality”⁹ (and note well: not merely hysteria, as is usually the case). As Nassif emphasizes, Charcot himself, as the agent of the first break, was unable to follow through on his own gesture and thus found himself “in regression relative to the ‘break’ he was led to introduce”;¹⁰ nevertheless, the decision he made at the moment when he declared his work in pathological anatomy complete—namely, the decision to devote himself to the neuroses—was of inestimable importance for the history of psychoanalysis. Freud himself remained marked by the expectation that a definitive biological account would one day be forthcoming, a point endlessly repeated in the literature, and not always to the benefit of understanding what is at stake in his work. While he never closed the door to such a possibility, the effective core of his undertaking remained aligned with Charcot’s gesture: the wager on testing the limits of psychology as a science on an object that is, by its very essence, a purely psychological object.

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In his text, Nassif clearly shows that tracing Freud’s early fidelity to Charcot’s neurosis-event must necessarily include both the emphases Freud develops in connection with hysteria—already recognised as a “neurosis in the strictest sense,” that is, a pathology in which no perceptible traces can be discovered either by present anatomical techniques or by any future, as yet undiscovered

⁹ Nassif, 48.

¹⁰ Nassif, 51.

ones—and the insights concerning neurasthenia, which would become a neurosis only once Freud reconfigured it into obsessional neurosis. Neurasthenia, too, Freud states in a passage cited by Nassif, is not “a clinical picture in the sense of textbooks based too exclusively on pathological anatomy; it should rather be described as a mode of reaction of the nervous system.”¹¹

Once this perspective is introduced—this purely psychological perspective—we obtain not only a (presumably) correct insight into the nature of psychological affections, but also, more generally, a different object of scientific inquiry. The system we observe— i.e., the psychical apparatus, which, of course, does not exist as a fully autonomous entity and is in this respect open—can nevertheless now appear to us precisely as a closed, inwardly folded system, one for which, from a certain point onward (and this point is precisely the moment of *Neurosenwahl*), its internal dynamics come to prevail over external determinations.

At the same time, the very introduction of such a closed system fundamentally transforms the problem of intervention. Once constituted in this way, a particular psychical apparatus becomes a genuinely *other* system, one that is in principle resistant to external influence, especially including resistance to standard forms of therapeutic guidance or advice. Any intervention now has to reckon with the fact that it cannot simply be applied from the outside, but must find a way of operating from within the system’s own logic. The generalization of neurosis is, in this sense, a precondition for any psychoanalytic treatment of any psychical apparatus whatsoever, whether neurotic or non-neurotic—the latter understood either as normal, non-pathological functioning or as psychotically structured.

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At this point it is worth recalling “Draft K,” appended to Freud’s letter to Fliess on New Year’s Day 1896, in which Freud distinguishes four types of defensive neuroses as “pathological aberrations of normal psychic affective states: of *conflict* (hysteria), of *self-reproach* (obsessional neurosis), of *mortification* (paranoia), of *mourning* (acute hallucinatory dementia).” While these four types differ from one another in the same way that the four affects differ, the moment of neurosis common to all of them is defined by the fact that “they differ from these affects in that they do not lead to anything’s being settled, but to permanent

¹¹ Nassif, 49.

damage to the ego.”¹² The infinity of these processes—that is, the fact that they do not appear as a temporary sequence but instead determine the totality of functioning, thus becoming the operative principle of each system—can be understood only through the implicit economic-topical emphasis that Freud introduces here. These pathological processes, Freud writes, *führen zu keiner Erledigung*:¹³ they do not result in the state being expelled outward in the form of a disposal, but instead turn inward, permanently occupying and preoccupying the ego, and thereby transforming it.

It is precisely a system capable of closing in on itself that is, in the same gesture, a system that determines itself, producing its own disposition—so to speak, its own “metapsychology.” *Neurosenwahl*, which for Freud will always remain—already in “Draft K”—at once a question of the general conditions of the passage into pathology and of the emergence of neurosis (with heredity still invoked as a factor of gradation between the normal and the extreme case), and a question of the choice of a particular neurosis (for which heredity already plays no determining role in this text). Yet *Neurosenwahl* is more than this: as a concept, it cuts into the very core of the problem of metapsychology as a method.

Strong and Weak Metapsychological Concepts

The *choice of neurosis* is, beyond any doubt, a speculative concept. Speculative in the strict sense of metapsychological speculation, which emerges in Freud almost involuntarily, against his own declared intentions, out of a necessity paradoxically imposed by his uncompromising insistence on empiricism. Borrowing the language of more recent French theory, it is a concept that captures the singular universality and the universalizable singularity of the central object of metapsychology, namely the psychical apparatus. The perennial question of Freudian metapsychology, understood as the strictly speculative supplement to psychoanalytic theory, can thus be formulated as follows: How is one to think a lawfulness that, on the one hand, grasps the minimal common denominator of every manifest form of the psychical apparatus and, on the other, extends to

¹² Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 162.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Briefe an Wilhelm Fliess 1887–1904: Ungekürzte Ausgabe*, ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1986), 169.

the extreme limit of manifestation of any concrete psychical apparatus that actually exists?

A fetish, a delusion, or an obsessional idea are—strictly speaking—not metapsychological concepts, insofar as they apply only to particular configurations of the psychical apparatus and do not appear in others. *The unconscious*, by contrast, is a universally applicable concept and also satisfies the second criterion, namely that of reaching the limit of possible manifestations. Yet it is, one might say, a *weak* metapsychological concept precisely because it is, in a certain sense, too strong, almost too universal. “The unconscious” can be applied to virtually any activity, gesture, or phenomenon, and, in the extreme case, even to consciousness itself, to its supposed opposite (in this, to be sure, it gains a certain dialectical weight, though that is a slightly different story). The more fully this universal applicability is recognized, the more the concept risks losing its metapsychological edge. Paradoxically, one could say that it was stronger at the moment when its scope was still narrower, when it had not yet been fully absorbed into psychoanalytic theory as a general explanatory resource.

Once incorporated into psychoanalytic theory, the concept of the unconscious becomes absolutely indispensable and, in a broader theoretical sense, inexhaustible. Yet if we consider it once again in the strict sense of Freudian metapsychological speculation—that is, speculation that emerges only at the point where empirically grounded theory reaches its limit and is left momentarily without words—we must also say that, over time, the concept of the unconscious does not gain in this specific respect. If nothing else, both theoretical elaboration and clinical practice suggest that, over time, it has tended to congeal rather than to intensify.

This brings us, I would say, to the following point: In metapsychology, what is essential is the moment of insight—the speculative act—which remains valid in its meaning but whose immediate impact diminishes once a new insight emerges within the same field. The unconscious, for instance, has a greater impact before it is supplemented by the second topography; repression has a greater impact before it is later supplemented by further theoretical elaborations. This, once again, does not mean that repression becomes a less valid or less useful concept; the point, rather, is that if such supplements are ignored or not taken

seriously, there is a danger of sliding into an unproductive or even false abstraction.

To put this more concretely with regard to the question addressed in this text: At a certain point, the concept of repression received its essential speculative supplement. While Freud for a long time operated only with the pair ‘repression and the return of the repressed,’ it was in the metapsychological essay “Repression” that he added to this series the moment of *primal repression* (which, strictly speaking, amounts to the incorporation of the point of fixation that had already appeared in the proto-metapsychological third section of the Schreber analysis).¹⁴ What follows from this is not that repression loses its validity or its clinical relevance, but that its speculative weight is displaced. The conceptual cut that once traversed repression now passes through the concept of primal repression. Repression remains indispensable and fully operative within psychoanalytic theory, but the moment of speculative insight—the moment at which theory is forced beyond itself—has been transferred elsewhere. Once the supplement is articulated, it thus functions, on the one hand, as an amplifier of the original concept and, on the other, as an opening toward its possible reduction.

The choice of neurosis, by contrast, escapes the dynamic I have just described. Even though Freud eventually abandoned the concept—or, perhaps more accurately, allowed it to recede—replacing it largely with the basic ideas of primal repression and fixation, each time he returns to it, the concept appears in the same peculiar way: equally potent, equally enigmatic, and equally inexhaustible in its speculative core.

I am therefore tempted to say that, of all the concepts Freud ever introduced, *Neurosenwahl* comes closest to the very concept of metapsychology, at least as it functions in Freud himself. Metapsychology would later become, at times, a rather domesticated and domesticable term. In Freud, however, it names less a doctrine than a certain aspiration, and one that arises from the necessity of the material itself once we decide, in principle, to observe it from a single perspective.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Repression,” in *Standard Edition*, 14:148; Sigmund Freud, “Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides),” in *Standard Edition*, 12:67.

What do I mean by this? Metapsychology, as the name of Freud's ultimate aspiration, emerged precisely in connection with his wager on a purely psychological perspective. On the practical level of treatment, this wager produced the analytic situation as a platform in which psychic reality becomes material, tangible, malleable, and transformable. On the theoretical level, it produced metapsychology itself, because psychology—at the moment when it dared to approach its own limit and to persist in its relative helplessness and disorientation without seeking immediate support from neurology, chemistry, or moral philosophy—was almost compelled to generate an excess beyond itself.

If we look for a comparable configuration in Freud's work, we may turn to a passage from Nassif's essay that strikingly converges with a line of thought I have developed elsewhere and prior to my encounter with his text. The passage concerns what might be called—by analogy with the *Grundregel*—a fundamental formula of psychoanalysis. Addressing the question of dreams, Nassif writes:

There is, of course, the distinction between “latent content” and “manifest content,” the theory of the “dream as guardian of sleep” (which can be said to have been retrospectively confirmed by electroencephalography), the concepts of “condensation” and “displacement,” perhaps also that of “regression”—all of which belong to the corpus of scientific achievements that no “scholar” could seriously dispute; yet the very heart of Freudian theory, namely the thesis that “the dream is the fulfillment of a wish,” remains a theoretical assertion impossible to register within a science whose knowledge would be structured according to a cumulative model.¹⁵

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What this passage brings into sharp relief is the peculiar strength of such Freudian concepts and propositions. Their force lies precisely in the fact that they are theoretical gestures in which Freud persists by suspending “better knowledge,” resisting premature renunciation, and—almost obstinately—maintaining the absoluteness of an idea that, from the standpoint of common sense, appears valid only within a narrow range and otherwise seems implausible, even manifestly false. It is in this persistence that the object of the assertion itself is continually transformed, and with it the very conditions of truth. In turn, psychoanalysis becomes a science in which things are not simply verified or

¹⁵ Nassif, “Freud and Science,” 39.

falsified but rendered true in a different mode. There are moments, Freud seems to suggest, when understanding too quickly is precisely what blocks a theoretical breakthrough. Premature comprehension neutralises the productive tension of the problem. This, too, is something Freud learned from Charcot.

A Second Choice?

Back to the choice of neurosis: If the core of metapsychology is bound to the decision to test the potential of psychology at—and beyond—its own limits, then the concept of *Neurosenwahl* captures this very same moment with particular precision. Once we abandon, in the aetiology of psychological affections, the idea of degeneration—while at the same time refusing to relinquish the moments of determination, inertia, fixation, and irreversibility that are, if only we know how to look, unmistakable features of human psychology—we are compelled to ask where the qualitative leap occurs that shapes individuals into psychic constitutions from which they cannot rid themselves: not through psychiatric intervention, and not even through psychoanalysis. How is it possible that, within the psyche—and within a psyche bound to language—a structure is formed that is, in principle, unchangeable? How can there occur, within the psychical, a process analogous to coagulation: not only in the sense that basic structures are formed—consciousness, ego, superego, and so on—but also in the sense that the very modes through which these structures come into being themselves become ossified? Why does one subject become hysterical, another obsessional, and a third paranoid? Is this differentiation merely the effect of inherited constitution, the history of the Symbolic coagulated in our genes? Is there, on the contrary, an irreducible space of accident and contingency that gives rise to a specific necessity, a space that must appear if the psychical apparatus is to begin functioning at all, to calibrate itself at the outset? What, then, decides? Is it the moment of the trauma's occurrence? Is it the quantity of psychical investment mobilised in response to trauma, which—failing to find discharge—folds back upon itself and begins to repeat internally, only thereby assuming the function of a traumatic core? And, if quantity is at stake here, what kind of quantity are we dealing with? Does it concern a trauma originating in material reality at all?

As already noted, the expression *Neurosenwahl* lends itself to multiple readings. Most immediately, it articulates a tension between the choice *of* a neurosis and the choice *by* neurosis. Who chooses? Is it the subject who chooses, or does the

structure choose the subject? Is it rather the case that it is precisely in this moment that both the subject and the structure are constituted together? This is the point identified by Alenka Zupančič in *Ethics of the Real*, where she links the psychoanalytic notion of the choice of neurosis to a decisive Kantian thesis concerning freedom:

[T]he most important Kantian thesis concerning this issue is that the *Gesinnung*, the fundamental disposition of the subject, is itself something chosen. We could in fact link this point to what psychoanalysis indicates with the notion of the *Neurosenwahl*, the “choice of neurosis.” The subject is at one and the same time “subject to” her unconscious and the one who, in the last resort, as “subject of” the unconscious, has to be considered to have chosen it. This claim that the subject, so to speak, chooses her unconscious—which might be called the “psychoanalytic postulate of freedom”—is the very condition of possibility of psychoanalysis. The change of perspective that constitutes the end of analysis, or the (Lacanian) *la passe*, can occur only against the background of this postulate. This initial choice can be repeated: analysis reaches its conclusion when it brings the subject to the threshold of another choice, that is, when the subject once again finds the possibility of choice.¹⁶

When I myself took up, some years ago, the question of the substrate that makes this second choice possible—asking how the analytic situation itself shapes the conditions under which one can intervene in a choice that not only appears irreversible but in fact is so—I relied, among other things, on a passage from Freud’s *Introductory Lectures*. There Freud describes the analytic situation as a platform on which the distinction between the conscious/preconscious and the unconscious is suspended. In this respect, quite materially, analysis is not simply a matter of translating the unconscious into the conscious. It is true that unconscious contents break through to the surface and become strikingly present; yet this, in itself, is not sufficient to say that they have become conscious in the ordinary sense.

Freud writes:

¹⁶ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 35.

[T]he dissension is between two powers, one of which has made its way to the stage of what is preconscious or conscious while the other has been held back at the stage of the unconscious. For that reason the conflict cannot be brought to an issue; the disputants can no more come to grips than, in the familiar simile, a polar bear and a whale. A true decision can only be reached when they both meet on the same ground. To make this possible is, I think, the sole task of our therapy.¹⁷

If we take Freud's image seriously, analysis succeeds only when the polar bear and the whale encounter one another on common terrain: that is, when an intersection is established that makes their encounter possible. Let us say that consciousness is the bear and the unconscious the whale. Where, then, can they meet?

This passage is usually understood—and Freud himself often reads it this way—within the framework of translating the unconscious into the conscious. Taken literally, however, this would mean that the whale would have to come onto land—and we know what happens then. The only meeting ground that can at least provisionally endure is therefore one in which the polar bear approaches the water and enters it. Why can the whale not step onto land? Why can the unconscious not directly become conscious? The whale, of course, was once a terrestrial animal, and Darwin—no insignificant figure for Freud—speculated in the first edition of *On the Origin of Species* that whales might have evolved from a bear-like ancestor.¹⁸ But once such an animal became fully adapted to an aquatic environment, it lost the possibility of returning to land. It cannot simply decide to feel at home on land again; such a return would be possible only through another turn of evolution, like the emergence of a mutation that would make such a transformation viable.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," in *Standard Edition*, 16:433.

¹⁸ "In North America the black bear was seen by Hearne swimming for hours with widely open mouth, thus catching, like a whale, insects in the water. Even in so extreme a case as this, if the supply of insects were constant, and if better adapted competitors did not already exist in the country, I can see no difficulty in a race of bears being rendered, by natural selection, more and more aquatic in their structure and habits, with larger and larger mouths, till a creature was produced as monstrous as a whale." Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859), 184.

It is true, however, that the whale's adaptation to the marine environment was never complete—just as the repressed unconscious never becomes unconscious in the sense of sinking into the depths of a mental ocean and disappearing from the radar once and for all. The whale may behave as if it had always been a marine animal, yet it remains existentially dependent on pulmonary respiration, a vestige of its former, terrestrial mode of existence. As external observers, we perceive these moments as symptoms—as spurts of water, as intrusions of the depths of the unconscious onto the surface. Alternatively, however, they can be understood as *breathing*: as returns to consciousness, as the intake of elements of the conscious, without which the repressed unconscious could not survive at all.

The polar bear, by contrast, manages remarkably well in and around the water. It can enter it, swim in it, and remain operative there, even if it typically hunts from the platform of sea ice. Our conscious life, too, is largely adapted to the unconscious; at times we know very well how to make use of our unconscious impulses—whether as an excuse or as a means of manipulation—so long as a secure platform has been established. Psychoanalysis, it seems, must precisely activate this already existing capacity. Since consciousness is already capable of, and accustomed to, excursions into the unconscious, analysis need only extend these excursions beyond their usual measure—and crucially, without the goal of hunting seals or scavenging stranded prey along the shore.

In analysis—and this is also where its impossibility, when it occurs as such, becomes apparent—the unconscious and consciousness must indeed find themselves on the same ground, a ground that is neither simply proper to the one nor the other. Rather, it is a repetition, within the analytic situation, of an originary, undifferentiated state from which both consciousness and the (repressed) unconscious have emerged. What is at stake here is not a return to an origin, but a provisional regression to a point prior to their differentiation, a point at which their opposition has not yet been instituted. In this sense, one could speak of a kind of collective regression to a common origin: just as the whale and the polar bear can encounter one another only by recognizing, in a strictly formal sense, their shared aquatic ancestry.

Put briefly, what is at stake here is a reversal of the standard reading: it is not simply a matter of making the unconscious conscious, but, in principle, of the

reverse process—of *deconsciousing* what is conscious, of provisionally adopting another logic or another currency, of conducting business in the currency of the unconscious, to use yet another of Freud's metaphors.

Freud's Phylogenetic Fantasy

As we have seen, one of the ways in which Freud addresses the problem of the choice of neurosis is, so to speak, by introducing speculation directly into the clinic and into psychoanalytic technique. In the choice of neurosis there is just enough choice, just enough freedom, to make it possible to choose one's neurosis—or, more precisely, one's disposition—a second time. The emphasis on the accidental moment was, for Freud, practically essential insofar as it opened a space, at least, for a certain form of subjective fatalism, understood as the minimal change offered by psychoanalysis: a subjective affirmation that acquires objective force through the analytic relation, affirming the fact that, once a disposition has been chosen, it can no longer be fundamentally altered. At a certain point, Freud himself became aware that psychoanalysis could not bring about any radical remaking of one's personality. However this may present itself, many conceptions of the end of analysis hinge less on voluntaristic transformation than on a recognition of what cannot be changed (a proximity to Stoicism that is often regarded with suspicion, though not without reasons internal to psychoanalysis itself).

But there was, clearly, something else at stake for Freud as well. Almost as a mission of psychoanalysis, he understood it as necessary—within the general consensus about the importance of heredity and of innate constitution, and despite his own agreement with this consensus—to put in a word for the significance of the accidental, to direct toward it, provisionally and precisely as psychology, an exclusive focus. And chance would have it that perhaps the most far-reaching attempt to foreground the acquired element in the formation of psychological disposition was articulated in a text that appeared to have been lost and was re-discovered almost miraculously only in 1983: the draft of what was numbered as the last—the twelfth—metapsychological paper, "Overview of the Transference Neuroses."¹⁹

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Overview of the Transference Neuroses," trans. Axel Hoffer and Peter T. Hoffer, in *The Revised Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund*

While, as noted, in the *Introductory Lectures*, written in roughly the same period, the choice of neurosis appears primarily as a condition of possibility of analytic technique, in this text it becomes the point of departure for a full-blown speculative fantasy, and one so imposing that it gave its name to what until recently was the only English edition of the text: *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*,²⁰ borrowing Freud's expression from the letter to Ferenczi. This essay would, in its own right, deserve a comprehensive treatment; in the context of the present discussion, however, it may be more appropriate to highlight only a few of its structural features.

Freud begins by setting himself a very ambitious yet seemingly precise and delimited—almost technical—task: to cross the three types of transference neuroses—anxiety hysteria, conversion hysteria, and obsessional neurosis—with six factors, six *Momente*, that participate in the formation of a transference neurosis: repression, anticathexis, substitutive and symptom formation, relation to the sexual function, regression, and disposition/fixation.²¹

Freud carries out the first four steps of this crossing procedure almost automatically; the differences in the way these moments assert themselves in the individual types of transference neuroses practically exhaust, taken all together, the phenomenal scope of these concepts. In the fifth step, however—when regression is at issue, that “most interesting factor and drive vicissitude”²²—Freud already encounters, within this schema, a certain degree of epistemic inertia. This occurs when, with regard to anxiety neurosis, Freud notes: “No occasion to divine it from anxiety hysteria. Could say that [it] does not come into consideration here, perhaps because every later anxiety hysteria so clearly regresses to an infantile one [...] and this latter one appears so early in life.”²³

The fact, then, is that regression does play a role here as well; yet because it is almost *too* pure and produces no material residues, a gap opens up in its relation to the other two types, which are, by contrast, described as the “most

Freud, ed. Mark Solms (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 14:235–54.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses*, ed. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987).

²¹ Freud, “Overview,” 14:239.

²² Freud, 14:243.

²³ Freud, 14:243.

beautiful examples of regression.”²⁴ This gap will have to be filled somewhere. Regression, as such, proves to be an auxiliary concept: the very fact that it so emphatically introduces the question of temporality—of a movement backwards in time—calls for a conceptual supplement that would represent the progredient moment, the other, less obvious side of *Nachträglichkeit*. This supplement is provided by the concept of disposition and/or fixation: “Behind regression are hidden the problems of fixation and disposition.”²⁵

If the fifth section of the text merely *indicates* a structural shift, the sixth section, devoted to disposition, completely overturns the dramaturgy of the essay. As if everything up to that point had served merely as preparation, Freud here completely changes his language, and the text unexpectedly comes to life. Freud, who here recognises himself in his task—“Because no-one is inclined to dispute constitutional factors, it devolves upon psychoanalysis to defend equally forcefully the claims of early infantile acquisitions”—proceeds, on the one hand, to return once again to an idea he had already introduced in his letter to Fliess of May 30, 1896,²⁶ and later revived in “The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis,”²⁷ namely the idea that the differences between the types not only of transference neuroses, but of psychoneuroses as a whole (that is, including the narcissistic neuroses, which later psychoanalysis would term psychoses), can be traced along two broadly mirrored temporal lines:

Here there exists a series to which one can attach various far-reaching ideas. It begins with an arrangement of psychoneuroses (not the transference neuroses alone) according to the point in time at which they customarily appear in the life of the individual. [. . .] The series is thus: anxiety hysteria—conversion hysteria—obsessional neurosis—dementia praecox—paranoia—melancholia-mania. The dispositional fixations of these disorders also appear to form a series, but one which runs in the opposite direction, especially when libidinal dispositions are considered. The upshot would thus be that the later the neurosis appears, the earlier the phase of the libido to which it must regress.²⁸

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²⁴ Freud, 14:243.

²⁵ Freud, 14:244.

²⁶ Freud, “Complete Letters,” 187–88.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 12:318.

²⁸ Freud, “Overview,” 14:246–47.

This mirroring, Freud notes, is not perfect; “this only holds true in general terms.” The first glitch appears in the relation between paranoia and dementia praecox: “dementia unquestionably appears earlier than paranoia, although its libidinal disposition extends further back,” while melancholia–mania (what we would today call manic-depressive illness) “permit[s] no definite ranking with respect to time.” The second point indicates the internal insufficiency of this otherwise productive construction and suggests that, alongside libidinal development, *something else* is at work, something which concerns the difference in the definitiveness of dispositions: “with advancing age hysteria or obsessional neurosis can turn into dementia; the opposite never occurs.”²⁹

Prompted by the internal inconsistency of this already old schema of his, and under the influence of Ferenczi’s metabiological ideas, Freud at this point opts for a leap into the field of phylogeny, linking the timeline of the emergence of the psychoneuroses to a speculative narrative that begins with the event of glaciation as the inauguration of general anxiety and gradually shifts onto the familiar terrain of the myth of the primal horde. The preliminary stage of this progression, which introduces “another[,] phylogenetic series,” *eine andere, phylogenetische Reihe*, “which is really concurrent with the temporal sequence of the neuroses,” *die wirklich mit der Zeitreihe der Neurosen gleichläufig ist*, is the postulated communal existence of the “primal human animal” in a “thoroughly rich milieu that satisfied all needs.”³⁰ Into this preliminary stage—in which libido could consequently free itself from the constraints of periodicity characteristic of non-human mammals—the Ice Age then intervened. External reality, which had previously provided libido merely with an external framework, now appeared as threatening: “it is conceivable that the ego, whose existence was threatened, to some extent abandoned object cathexis, retained the libido in the ego, and thus transformed into realistic anxiety what had previously been object libido.”³¹ In this way, Freud continues, a model was formed in which real anxiety once produced is repeated and reproduced in childhood by a certain portion of contemporary individuals—namely precisely those who go on to develop anxiety neurosis: “a portion of children bring the anxiousness of the

²⁹ Freud, 14:247.

³⁰ Freud, 14:247; Sigmund Freud, “Übersicht der Übertragungsneurosen,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, Nachtragsband, 643.

³¹ Freud, “Overview,” 14:248.

beginning of the Ice Age along with them and are presently induced by it to treat unsatisfied libido as an external danger. The relative excess of libido would result from the same precondition [*Anlage*], however, and thus make possible new acquisition of anxious disposition. Still, consideration of anxiety hysteria would support the preponderance of phylogenetic disposition over all other factors.”³²

Following this pattern, Freud proceeds to summarise the formation of the remaining five phylogenetic dispositions. The real impossibility of unlimited procreation due to the scarcity of resources found its social solution—replacing the killing of surplus offspring—in perverse regressions to the pregenital zones, thus forming the disposition to conversion hysteria. This phase then opened the path for a transfer of libido to intellectual activity, which constitutes the core of obsessional neurosis. The primal father of the horde, “who after the end of the Ice Age assumes its role, continues it as it were,”³³ is, first, the one who “does not allow full scope” to the sons and “robs them of their manhood, after which they are able to stay in the horde as harmless labourers;”³⁴ the retreat into auto-erotism here creates the generative core of dementia praecox. The sons who manage to escape form a community that “could have been built upon homosexual satisfaction,” and with this, Freud holds, there is given, on the one hand, a general disposition to homosexuality—the starting point of the sublimatory development of culture—but also, on the other hand, the specific disposition to paranoia as a model of an (unsuccessful) “attempt to ward off homosexuality.”³⁵ Finally—and again as a partial disruption of the linear temporal sequence—Freud, in a sixth step, also constructs the disposition to melancholia–mania, which condenses temporality into the alternation of triumph and remorse experienced by the sons after the killing of the primal father.³⁶

As noted, I will not at this point go into the details of Freud’s derivation; Freud himself—and here he deserves some credit—develops it precisely in order to prevent it from remaining a bare abstract fantasy, one that would, contrary to its very motivating premise, tip the balance decisively toward innate constitution at the expense of acquired character. Freud’s intrinsic motivation for this

³² Freud, 14:248.

³³ Freud, 14:252.

³⁴ Freud, 14:250–51.

³⁵ Freud, 14:251–52.

³⁶ Freud, 14:252.

phylogenetic construction lies precisely in the unresolved (and unresolvable) question of the predominant factor in the origin of fixation or disposition:

The possibility also exists that such fixation is brought along in pure form and also that it is produced by early impressions and, in the end, that both factors work together. All the more since it can be claimed that both elements are actually ubiquitous, insofar as [on the one hand] all dispositions are constitutionally present in the child and, on the other hand, the operative impressions are allotted to large numbers of children in like manner. It is thus a case of more or less, and of effective combination.³⁷

Freud, who, when confronted with the riddle of determining this “effective combination”—that is, the moment at which *wirksames Zusammentreffen*, the convergence of the two factors that produces a proper concept of disposition distinct from constitution, takes place—tended to emphasize accidental moments in childhood, here opts for a different direction. The defense of the acquired moment here proceeds as a deconstruction of heredity itself, as the attribution of an acquired core to the supposedly innate factor:

When the constitutional factor of fixation comes into consideration, acquisition is not thereby eliminated; it merely retreats into still earlier prehistory, since it can be justifiably claimed that the inherited dispositions are residues of ancestral acquisitions. We hereby come upon the problem of the phylogenetic disposition behind the individual or ontogenetic one, and should find no contradiction in the fact that the individual adds new dispositions from his own experience to his inherited disposition, passed down on the basis of earlier experience. Why should the process that creates disposition on the basis of experience cease precisely with the individual whose neurosis one is investigating? Or why should this individual create disposition for his progeny but not be able to acquire it for himself?³⁸

The generalization of the acquired moment must therefore be read precisely as such, even if we may be tempted to read Freud’s phylogenetic fantasy as a

³⁷ Freud, 14:244.

³⁸ Freud, 14:244–45. This same idea was given and made public in his twenty-third lecture: “The constitutional dispositions are certainly also the after-effects of the experiences of earlier ancestors; they too were once acquired; without such acquisition there would be no heredity.” Freud, “Introductory Lectures,” 16:361.

defense of the innate immutability of our fixations, disguised in the form of an impenetrable myth. Freud himself confirms this in the very conclusion, when he emphasizes that it is not the case that “archaic constitutions return in new individuals according to a predetermined ratio, and push them into neurosis through conflict with current demands. Room remains for new acquisitions and for influences with which we are not acquainted.”³⁹

This reservation is crucial. Although, on the one hand, Freud follows the idea that the development of civilization has provided phylogenetic models from which we choose when we choose a neurosis, he nevertheless opens up the possibility that these seemingly immutable models of the functioning of the psychical apparatus are themselves bound to historicity, and can be reconfigured into novel dispositions: first ontogenetically and then also phylogenetically. The choice of neurosis, in which, as Freud explicitly emphasizes here as well, the question of disposition is “the most decisive factor, the one that mediates the decision,” thus clearly forms a bridge between ontogeny and phylogeny in this text.

Structurally, however, and even with regard to the composition of the text itself, it stands on the boundary between the first section, “based on very careful and arduous observation,” and the second section, which offers yet another example of a moment when “criticism occasionally gives way to phantasy,” in which “unconfirmed things are presented, merely because they are stimulating and open up remote vistas.”⁴⁰

Once Freud had chosen neurosis—once he had followed Charcot’s break and placed his bet on a purely psychological object, a psychological system capable of closing in upon itself and generating its own determination—this threshold, from which a leap into speculation is at times necessary, became part of his own theoretical disposition. It may not be superfluous to recall that this essay, in which a discursive turn occurs at its very center, is not just any essay, but precisely the twelfth, the final text of his never-completed project of a great book on metapsychology. It is not only this essay that breaks here but the entire project, and so from this moment on becomes something else; yet the metapsychological

³⁹ Freud, “Overview,” 14:254.

⁴⁰ Freud, 14:245.

aspiration condensed in the enigma of the choice of neurosis has nevertheless not disappeared. The productive moments in Freud's later work are admittedly harder to discern and may indeed be rarer; yet even there Freud persists—in his treatment of myth no less than elsewhere—in insisting on the event-like character of the object of investigation, whether this object be the psychical apparatus, the group, or civilization itself: *Im Anfang war die Tat*. In closing, and thus returning to Nassif, only if there is an act at the beginning can there be a break in the proper psychoanalytic sense: a rupture that is not merely undergone, but one that can be repeated, and repeated again.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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