

Freud's Knight

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Freud's 1909 text "*Bemerkungen über einen Fall von Zwangsneurose*" ("*Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*") must be read today as an historical document. It is no longer a text we can naively read with the idea that we are or want to be Freudian and are in a direct connection with it. This is not only because time has passed and the general culture has changed, but because the stakes that were Freud's at the time cannot be precisely ours today. If obsessional neurosis still exists nowadays—no doubt about it – the Ratman case is no longer the model we can trust as a timeless standard. Furthermore, the psychoanalytic classification of hysteria, obsession, phobia, perversion, and psychosis is as useful today as Esquirol's monomania or Bleuler's schizophrenia. I do not think that we have better naming today and I do not trust more the DSM-IV or the DSM-V. I suspect that *structures* and the theoretical field they refer to are nothing but a first step for the psychoanalytic clinical field, a step that deserves to be surpassed if we want to consider...transference. As long as the analyst is a *clinician*, s/he is bound to refer to structures and nosographic categories (Le Gaufey, 2007) and in remaining in that clinical stance throughout the treatment, transference will be out of reach or it will turn into another piece of clinical knowledge which leaves the analyst out of the process and conscious only of what s/he calls "countertransference," a term that assumes that the analyst is merely answering the patient's transference. I will try to make clear that Freud's own transference with the Ratman is not just a mode of reply to his patient but is undoubtedly the starting point of the case.

To establish such a point, I will refer to four different texts. First, there is Freud's "Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis" but equally the famous "Journal" which was published partially and then later in English under the title *Addendum: Original Record of the Case* in a Strachey translation (Freud, 1907-08). I will refer to the complete French and bilingual publication by Elza Ribeiro Hawelka in 1974. Moreover, I will use two other texts which I recommend if you want to know more about the Ratman and diversify points of view on the case. The first is the text that gives us all of the information about the case itself and the true civil name of the Ratman, Ernst Lanzer, as well as the family history and historical details including some that were unavailable to Freud at the time of the treatment. This is a precious

book published by Patrick Mahony in 1986 called *Freud and the Ratman*. Finally, there is Lacan's "The Neurotic's Individual Myth," which is a talk given in Paris in 1952 at the Collège Philosophique. Thanks to these very different and coherent readings, we will be in a position to *return to Freud* because we will be able to assess how far from us Freud is now regarding his technique, and how close to us he is regarding transference. As Freud himself says in the middle of his twenty-seventh lecture, "On Transference," and after speaking for pages and pages without uttering only once the word "transference," he says, in a very theatrical style, "*Und nun, die Tatsachen* ("And now for the facts"). Let's do the same now.

On October 1st, 1907 –it was then a Tuesday afternoon—the aforementioned Ernst Lanzer comes into Freud's office for the first time. I can only guess that within minutes Freud already knew that before him was what was later named in American analysts' offices during the sixties and seventies as a *YAVIS* syndrome. I have been told that this acronym has all but disappeared, but it seems to me very appropriate as a description of this first encounter. *YAVIS* means "young, attractive, verbally fluent, intelligent and sophisticated." Ernst Lanzer was all that to Freud who was waiting for this kind of patient for a rather long time. We are going to learn for how long exactly.

In order not to rush into the Ratman case as the paradigm it has become for a century, it is worth considering in what circumstances it took place for Freud. At the beginning of 1894, Freud, who wrote at least weekly to his friend Wilhelm Fliess, sent him what he called "Manuscript K" that dealt with "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence"—with a humoristic subtitle, "A Christmas Fairy Tale". He revealed here in detail his fiery ideas about obsessional neurosis, hysteria, and paranoia. He then wrote, "The course of events in obsessional neurosis is what is clearest to me, because I have come to know it best" (Masson 1985, 164).

There are many reasons for such a belief. Contrary to the main idea that Freud began mostly with hysteria because of "Studies on Hysteria," he was more interested in the treatment of obsession. His colleagues of that time recognised that they failed to cure patients of their obsessions and anxiety, whereas with hysteria they could think of themselves as being as successful as Freud while using different modes of therapy. A therapeutic success with obsessional neurosis would have functioned as a proof of the correctness of Freud's general theory regarding psychic organisation. The key point, already present in his text, "Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence" (1896), is the separation between affect and idea –representation or *Vorstellung*. In the second part of this text, "Nature and Mechanism of Obsessional Neurosis," Freud unveils the nature of obsessional neurosis as follows:

The nature of obsessional neurosis can be expressed in a simple formula. *Obsessional ideas* are invariably transformed *self-reproaches* which have re-emerged from *repression* and which always relate to some *sexual* act that was performed with pleasure in *childhood*. (Freud 1896, 169, italics in original).

Because repression has separated affect from idea regarding the active and pleasant sexual act in early childhood, contrary to hysteria where the seduction is supposed to have been passive, the repressed idea will reappear consciously most of the time as something absurd—because it is disconnected from its original affect—while the original affect itself will appear as shame, or hypochondriac anxiety, or social or religious angst, or even observation mania, all of which are a group of *obsessional affects*. What was central in the explanation of obsessional ideas for Freud's colleagues working in this therapeutic field, including Breuer and many others, is moral consciousness. This moral consciousness was no longer at stake for Freud in his new understanding of the *psychic mechanism* which produces obsessional states.

Into this Viennese battlefield of the mid-1890s came the case of Mr. E. who appeared in Freud's correspondence with Wilhelm Fliess. Mr. E. first appeared in a letter on November 4, 1895 and repeatedly over five years which was a long treatment according to Freud's standards in this matter at that time. We get some information from time-to-time about him in these correspondences. In a letter dated December 21, 1899, which was close to the end of the treatment, Freud eventually gave Fliess a lengthy explanation:

You are familiar with my dream which obstinately promises the end of E's treatment (among the absurd dreams), and you can well imagine how important this one persistent patient has become to me. It now appears that the dream will be fulfilled. I cautiously say "appears", but I am really quite certain. Buried deep beneath all his fantasies, we found a scene from his primal period (before twenty-two months) which meets all the requirements and in which all the remaining puzzles converge. It is everything at the same time—sexual, innocent, natural, and the rest. I scarcely dare believe it yet. It is as if Schliemann had once more excavated Troy, which had hitherto been deemed a fable. At the same time the fellow is doing outrageously well. He demonstrated the reality of my theory in my own case, providing me a surprising reversal with the solution, which I had overlooked, to my former railroad phobia. For this piece of work, I even made him the present of a picture of Œdipus and the Sphinx. (Masson 1985, 391-392)

Six months later and after five years of treatment, there eventually came the last day of E.'s treatment on April 16, 1900, and Freud wrote:

E. at last concluded his career as a patient by coming to dinner at my house. His riddle is almost completely solved, he is in excellent shape, his personality entirely changed. At present, a remnant of the symptoms is left. I am beginning to understand that the apparent endlessness of the treatment is something that occurs regularly and is connected with transference. [...] In any case, I shall keep an eye on the man. Since he had to suffer through all my technical and theoretical errors, I actually think that a future case could be solved in half the time. May the Lord now send this next one. (Masson 1985, 409)¹

Seven and a half years later, both this last wish and humoristic entreaty were fulfilled when on October 1, 1907, Ernst Lanzer made his entrance into Freud's office. We know that Freud had great expectations regarding his own need to perfect his conception of obsessional neurosis. Fliess had by then disappeared as *the publicum* he had been for ten years but from 1902 the Wednesday Society—a group of those whom Freud later called with a certain disdain “my Viennese”—used to meet with him every Wednesday. From 1906, these meetings sometimes included visitors who were passing through such as Jung, Abraham, or Ferenczi. This group was the addressee of the construction Freud built from the very first of Lanzer's sessions. I will mention only two facts that are very revealing about Freud's attitude to this most welcome case.

At the Wednesday meeting of November 6, 1907, less than one month after the first encounter and after only a few sessions, Freud spoke of the patient already named “the Ratman” to his Viennese audience (Minutes, 246). Let's not forget that the Wednesday meetings took place until 1910 in Freud's apartment and that as a rule, it was required that every participant spoke at least a few words. Silence was prohibited. Captain Freud was adamant on this point.

Moreover, during the Salzburg congress on April 27, 1908, while the Ratman was still on the couch—his analysis lasted for eleven months, according to Freud—Freud spoke for four hours without a break about the Ratman in front of forty-two people. When he stopped, the audience, which included Jung, Abraham, Ferenczi, and Jones urged him to go further. He agreed and continued for another hour (Jones 1961, 44). Five hours were thus solely dedicated to the Ratman –between two sessions with him, of course. In addition, Freud had spoken on four occasions about the Ratman at the Wednesday meetings: on November 20, January 22,

¹ In German, it is *Der Herr send nun diesen nächsten* (Masson 1986, 449).

March 4 and April 8 and each time he added new pieces to the case. He was clearly ready for his performance at the end of April in Salzburg.

Why was there such conspicuousness from the very beginning to the final writing of the case? The first pages of the case are very clear on that topic:

It was a complete obsessional neurosis, wanting in no essential element, at once the nucleus and the prototype of the later disorder—an elementary organism, as it were, the study of which could alone enable us to obtain a grasp of the complicated organization of his subsequent illness. (Freud 1909, 162)

And what are we supposed to find out in this “prototype”? A few lines later, Freud explains this when he enumerates three different couples of antagonistic terms:

We find, accordingly: an erotic instinct and a revolt against it; a wish which has not yet become compulsive and, struggling against it, a fear which is already compulsive; a distressing affect and an impulsion towards the performance of defensive acts. The inventory of the neurosis has reached its full muster [das Inventar der Neurose ist vollzählig]. (Freud 1909, 163)

This is really the marvel Freud had waited for since April 16, 1900. Should we ourselves still be trapped by such a persuasive rhetoric? That is the point we must shed some light on. If we want to be positively critical, we first need to properly establish why Freud is so satisfied by the case itself.

I will not meander into the many labyrinthine aspects of the case because to make them comprehensible would take too long and submit us to a non-critical attitude because we would spend all of our time quoting Freud's text or, worse, summing it up. One indispensable approach is a close reading—or a *re-reading*—of the case and, if possible, a linked reading of the “Journal” or the less complete English version “Record of the Case.” Both are good pieces of literature. The “Journal” is the daily report of the first sessions, and it is enthralling.

I would prefer to stress something that is trickier to perceive through the many events, names, thoughts, and other considerations, theoretical and practical. According to the previous quotation, the nucleus of obsessional neurosis is composed of strong oppositions between terms that are constitutively conflictual: an instinct—according to Strachey, but in fact, *eine*

erotischer Trieb (an erotic drive)—and a revolt (*Auflehnung*) against it; a wish (*ein Wunsch*) and a fear (*eine Befürchtung*); a distressing affect and an “impulsion”—in fact, *ein Drang*, a term belonging already to the vocabulary of drive “pressure”—towards defence.

But what kind of conflict is at stake in those pairings? On the one hand, a first indication comes from a lexicographic reading. The word “ambivalence” is mentioned only once, in a note and in reference to Bleuler (Freud 1909, 255). Freud does not use this term which is so frequently used in the Freudian world for lazy explanations about too many things. On the other hand, the word *conflict* is used here in the Ratman case twenty-six times and *struggle* twelve times. This is approximately thirty-six occurrences of a conflict through which the psychic apparatus is structured. Thus, in the same way hysteria functioned as a proof of the existence of deferred action and the decisive play of fantasy, obsessional neurosis could be perceived as pursued by Freud as proof of the conflictual nature of psychic life that he is so attached to.

Is *conflict* so central a notion in psychoanalysis? For now, I worry about the importance we are supposed to give to it because of Freud's insistence. It is obvious that there are local conflicts between different elements, different agencies, different wishes, and anywhere in psychic life a conflict can emerge. But is it truly fundamental? Such a question is enough to begin to foresee something which is in fact so frequent, so natural, so obvious throughout Freud's texts that we do not pay enough attention to it: his deep dualism.

I do not forget that the first and second topics are composed of three terms—Ucs/Pcs/Cs (ego, id, superego) but the relationships between their different elements are exclusively dualistic and conflictual, especially in the second topic. And I do not forget a little fact: Freud was invited in May 1910 by the great and famous physicist Wilhelm Ostwald (the 1909 Nobel prize winner, no less) to write a paper that would be published in the *Annalen der Naturphilosophie*, a journal openly in favour of energetism. This energetism was in fact a monism which considered that at the bottom of the physical world only energy exists. Freud, honoured by the invitation, wrote to Jung saying that after reflection he would say “yes”, only to then discard it and not write anything, refusing to take psychoanalysis in the direction of monism, and returning to his natural dualism. This dualism that was to prevail in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) with the life drive and death drive.

To shed more light on this point, I will refer briefly to a discovery made by the American historian of sciences, Gerald Holton. He observed that frequently a central idea in the building of a scientific theory will be omitted in the final index. Why? Because this idea occurs

throughout the text as something so obvious, so natural, so inescapable that it is beyond any kind of definition or experimentation. For instance, what is behind the apparent complexity of phenomena, and what is primal in physical reality; is it order or disorder? In classical physics, for Kepler, Galileo and Newton, order was primal and thanks to Kepler's laws, it was possible to approach, behind the apparent disorder of the movements of the planets, a perfect regularity of the real world. At the level, ontologically, not epistemologically, was order. By contrast, around 1850 when thermodynamics was central to physics, it was thought the ultimate reality behind the apparent calm of gas in a bottle was the ceaseless Brownian movement of molecules. At the basis was disorder. Then in 1905, Einstein demonstrated that this movement of molecules could be described in a classical way and once again, at the basis was order (Holton 1978, 3-24)

It is the same with quantum physics. Is the statistical disorder of particles the true and ultimate truth? Werner Heisenberg and Niels Bohr thought so. Einstein, however, forced to recognise the experimental validity and success of this quantum physics, thought that later with new technical means “variables that are still hidden” will be discovered and will prove that what is behind all that mess is nothing but order and regularity—“The Lord does not play dice”. Holton proposed to name these basic convictions “themata” with this subsequent definition, “a prototype of explanation that is a thematic commitment. It is not an experimental or a logical necessity” (Holton 1978, 20).

Freud's dualism, as such, is to be considered as a themata and, in this perspective, the Ratman as his knight. He ceaselessly clashes with any and all ideas, struggles against any and all affects, combats any and all transferences. With him, everything is potentially a fight, and all of that was exhausting, so it is no surprise that on October 1, 1907, in front of Freud, Ernst Lanzer is worn-out.

Is this a reason to be dubious about Freud's conception of obsessional neurosis or about Freudian psychoanalysis in general? No, I do not think so. By stressing Freud's dualism as a themata, I want to introduce the idea that when the word *nature* is used as an argument—and let us recall that Freud said, “the *nature* of obsessional neurosis can be expressed...” (as above, Freud 1896, 169)—something which is not so *natural* was previously and necessarily introduced. This is a *themata commitment*. We must be attentive to what this achieves, this silent and omnipresent commitment without which the writer would have been incapable of constructing and construing anything.

I am therefore in favour of a comparative approach to the case which allows me to turn to Lacan, since I am in the position of an old Lacanian. “Le mythe individuel du névrosé,” (“The Neurotic's Individual Myth”) was a talk given by Lacan in 1952 and includes a commentary on Freud's Ratman text, followed by one on Goethe's *Poetry and Truth*. In his seminars, Lacan did speak from time to time about the Ratman, but it was mostly a reiteration of what he said in this talk which came just before he began his teaching.

Once again, I offer a lexicographic remark: if you peruse Lacan's text about the case itself, you will encounter only three mentions of the word *conflit*. The last mention, which is of no value to us, is “assumer les fruits de son travail *sans conflit*” (Lacan 1952, 32).² This poses no problem. The concept of *conflit* is not at work here. Then there is “le conflit femme riche/femme pauvre” (Lacan 1952, 23).³ This is only a reminder to us of Freud's own expression and Lacan is stressing the repetition from the father to his son Ernst regarding whom he is to be married to. In the third and final occurrence, Lacan writes “une espèce de conflit anxieux, si caractéristique du vécu des obsessionnels” (1952, 26).⁴ I'll leave it to you to appreciate the fact that in this sentence the key word is not “conflict” but the idea of “scenario.”

In fact, this quasi absence of the notion of conflict in Lacan's text is not surprising. The next year after making these remarks, he launched in 1953 his “thériaque” (an ancient medicine) made of many different elements belonging to *three* different orders: mineral, vegetal, and animal), meaning his three basic concepts of symbolic, imaginary and real, which were to escort him up to the Borromean knots and his last seminars. Similar to Charles Sanders Peirce, Lacan is someone who begins by counting three, at first. Like in the Christian Trinity, the unity comes after having put together a primal and immediate triplicity into which each term is as powerful as the two others. I won't go further into this matter of theoretical consistency in Lacan's teaching, but I introduce this perspective to understand why his commentary about the Ratman follows scrupulously some pieces of the narration of events given by Freud, and yet develops such a different sense of it. This is not really a matter of analytical concepts as at this time Lacan had not formulated his special concept of *subject*, nor *object a*, and even the notion of *signifier* is far from being clear. This latter will only appear for the first time at the end of December 1961, at the beginning of the seminar on *Identification*. It is a question of basic themata, and Lacan is in no way following a dualistic pattern or in a

² Translation: “to accept the fruits of his work without conflict” (Le Gaufey).

³ Translation: “the conflict between the rich and the poor woman” (Le Gaufey).

⁴ Translation” “One of these conflicts is so characteristic of obsessionals experience” (Le Gaufey).

conflictual universe, so his clinical perspective is subtly and constantly different from Freud's. That means that an event or transference is understood and described by Lacan as an articulated sequence—a *scenario* as in *The Purloined Letter*—whereas Freud stresses an antagonistic opposition as soon as it is rationally available.

The funny thing is that, in this text, and even more in his commentary on Goethe, Lacan is in favour of a symbolic *quatuor* (a quartet). After having uttered that “the whole schema of Œdipus is to be criticized⁵,” he proposed introducing a fourth element in the Œdipus triangulation: death. But he never proposed any kind of dualism and his Ratman is a sort of champion of the symbolic order, with his debt as impossible to cancel as was the one his father had failed to pay back: this is pure repetition in the symbolic chain. The point which Lacan insists on most often is the moment when the Ratman opens the door at night to his dead father before he (the Ratman) masturbates. This obsession is precious to Lacan because he is then trying to establish his own concept of “symbolic phallus,” “big phi,” an interpretation you would search in vain for in Freud, but which has a valuable role in considering the big Other's desire in obsessional ideas and repetitive acts.

Where am I going with these remarks? I am trying to make clear that the word *clinic*, as paramount as it is in our practice, deserves to be considered cautiously. I am struck, for instance, by the success recently encountered by the expression, “In my clinic, I...” in English as in French. I do not understand this possessive adjective. I can say *my practice* because it is something private, but *clinic* cannot be *mine* so easily. It is what I try to partially establish when I work with colleagues, with texts I read or write. It is a construction that I build from my practice with patients, my *themas*, my own neurosis, and some other ingredients. It is never something *natural*.

The Ratman is perfect for this kind of exercise: to build a little piece of clinic from the different texts at our disposal, from our clinical experience, our theoretical preferences, our present convictions about what psychoanalysis must be, and so on. You notice that I said “our.” I mean that it is difficult to conceive of *clinic* as a solitary work. In my opinion, one of the most decisive inventions Lacan made when he founded the *École Freudienne de Paris* was the *cartel*. More than three and less than seven people—more than the Graces, less than the Muses—gathered for a while in an uncertain chemistry, without hierarchy, speaking freely around a commonly chosen theme.

⁵ Jacques Lacan, « Le Mythe individuel du névrosé », Paris, Seuil, 2007, p. 44.

That is for me the true laboratory from which elements of the clinic can emerge.

That is why I will turn now to Mahony's book. It is precious, especially to English readers, because he introduces some critical commentaries about Strachey's translation, using the German text. These commentaries allow us to take some distance from the English text. They allow us to conceive that an idea was primarily put in another way, with another semantic context, often this is the first step in freeing the signified from the signifiers. For instance, in Freud's narrations (of dreams, of scenes, of obsessional ideas), Strachey systematically puts the verbs in the past tense, whereas Freud keeps the present time, and the enunciation is therefore quite different. Where Freud writes *our* patient, Strachey puts *the* patient. These slight differences eventually are very important when you care about the analyst's transference, which is precisely what we should do.

But Mahony offers us more in including a detailed explanation about why Freud was so dissatisfied with this text. He was clearly overwhelmed by the abundance of data that Ernst Lanzer threw at him ceaselessly. This is indicated in his passing from “*Remarks*” to “*Notes*” and even to “*Aphorisms* about a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” thus admitting to not being able to frame it. He felt forced to let the different threads go their way, with each conflict deserving its own description, with no possibility of reducing all of it to a single psychical mechanism. That is also why Freud's text is so difficult to grasp, so open to different types of commentaries and theoretical perspectives. Although the Ratman has been presented from the very beginning as a *nucleus*, a *prototype*, a sort of paradigm, the text itself keeps offering an abundance of divergent data to each reader. This abundance partly explains why Freud was so talkative each time he spoke about the case. It also explains why Freud's text is at the same time stunning and disappointing—this last term being far from being negative in my mind. I do agree with Mahony's final words regarding Freud's style as “magnificence in failure” (Mahoney 1986, 243).

I will conclude with this term *failure*. This is not to magnify the failure itself but to find in it the mark of true humanity. No, that sounds too Christian to me. I just want to shed some light on the analytical treatment of obsessional neurosis. It is well known that these kinds of treatment are reputed to be interminable and therefore especially boring. On this point, I tell you an anecdote related by Wilfred Bion. He received for a long time a man he considered to be a serious obsessional. This patient was so boring to Bion that at each afternoon session, he was very close to falling asleep. One day, he asked himself “But how does he manage to bore me so much?” and out of the blue, with this single question, this patient became very

interesting. The boredom was momentarily suspended, and the treatment went on differently. I unfortunately do not know more about the continuation of that treatment, but thanks to this kind of story we can appreciate Lacan's assertion that the analyst is half of the patient's symptom when this symptom has taken on its transference value.

Let us now return to Freud's failure, according to Mahony. If it is to be understood as a mark of incompleteness, pointing to the fact that Freud repetitively struggled to *close* his narration, we must therefore consider this point as decisive regarding the consistency of the clinic we are trying to learn about and construct. With the term *closing*, I mean a conclusion that would bring together the main threads of the narration, offering the reader a capacity of memorisation that comes from a feeling of unity. With this, the various data scattered throughout the text supposedly converge in an imaginary form, very often suspended to a few words, thus providing a unity of meaning generally considered as a definition. This is something we first aim at in a clinical elaboration: to get a *picture* of the *case*. But if we stop at such a point, we seriously miss our position of analyst and become forgetful of transference.

In reading not the *case* but the *writing of the case*, we can see how Freud is constantly torn between his aspirations towards the definitive *nucleus* he promises, and the intricate net of events, remembrances, transferences, obsessional ideas that the *Journal/Record* is full of. This split in Freud's research is our chance not to be trapped in a purely imaginary approach to *THE* obsessional as has happened throughout history, culture, and analytical schools.

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