

FREUD AND DEGENERACY:

A TURNING POINT

In the second half of the 19th century an “anthropologico-psychiatrical” doctrine proposed a conception of mental illness which remained prevalent in Europe for a long time: the doctrine of degeneracy. Modern psychiatric texts and works devoted to the history of ideas usually dismiss it with the slightly annoyed contempt of those who have long since given up such obsolete notions.¹ The doctrine is most often referred back to a purely “hereditary” concept of alienation which psychoanalysis long ago proved of no use. Now the most casual reading of the literature (whether medical or anthropological) shows that this interpretation is not only superficial but radically in error. The doctrine of degeneracy is not limited to this “hereditary” concept inasmuch as it assigns utmost importance to environmental factors such as social, educational and moral. Furthermore, the idea of heredity with which it is concerned has little to do with

Translated by Jean Ferguson.

¹ Pages from a work to be published in which we have tried to revive the profound logic of the concept (and doctrine) of alienation beyond this ill-concealed embarrassment. We have also tried to explain the ideological function of this reluctance on the part of present-day psychiatrists to reconsider this past, which we are too quick to think of as “finished.”

Freud and Degeneracy

what genetical science today is studying under this term. *Dissimilar heredity*, during the second half of the 19th century, was the motivating force which was used to account for a factor that, paradoxically, transmits not likeness but *unlikeness*. Thus, a pathology of heredity, or pathological heredity (in the sense that it is heredity itself which is “ill”), rather than hereditary pathology.²

Degeneracy is therefore that which gives an account of what heredity (physiological, that of the biologists) is powerless to explain. What remains is to designate what determines this pathology of heredity, which tends to the “progressive degradation” (Morel) of the tainted line and its eventual extinction.

² The formulas intentionally presented here must be justified by an analysis of the texts of Prosper Lucas, *Traité philosophique et physiologique de l'hérédité naturelle*, two vols., Paris, 1847; and B. A. Morel, *Traité des dégénérescences de l'espèce humaine*, Paris, 1857.

Let us attempt, however, to account for the paradox presented by the concept of dissimilar heredity: the nature of heredity is to transmit likeness. Now, it happens that in neural (and mental) pathology the forms taken by alienation down through the generations vary. *Something* is transmitted (this confirms heredity) but this something is invisible, latent, purely potential: the “degenerative factor” (Morel), the “crack” (Zola) capable of causing quite different forms of disorder but which, because of this factor, may still claim an undeniable unity. The essence of the alienation is certainly “one.” It is the manifestations which are unlike. Second idea, introduced by Morel: this transmission of dissimilar pathological states does not come about haphazardly, without order, but follows a “law of progressive degradation.” Not only is it in the nature of the alienation to *transform* itself as it *transmits* itself, but the transformations are necessarily degradations, which lead, by stages, to sterility and the extinction of the tainted (pathological) line. If then degeneracy is to be traced back to a “pathological” heredity, it is in the sense that it results in a “dissolution of the heredity” (Charles Féré, *La famille névropathique*, 1898). This is true for two reasons: one, because it transmits unlikeness (if this may be said) and two, because it results in the extinction of the generation chain. All the subtlety of the doctrine is in this unconfined paradox. Hence, the discomfiture of the alienists, avid for biological guarantees, when progress in genetics, toward the end of the century, will have taken away all credit from a concept of “dissimilar heredity,” considered by the biologists to be self-contradictory. Thus, E. Rabaud: “Heredity implies continuity and continuity in its turn implies similitude. Heredity ceases to exist when dissimilarities appear.” (“Hérédité et Dégénérescence,” *Journal de Psychologie*, 1905).

In the literary key Zola's work is of course an example of such a problematic, cf. especially the last volume of the Rougon-Macquart series: Dr. Pascal, who represents the “theory” of the entire cycle and who marks down entire pages of Prosper Lucas' treatise. A conjunction between (pretended) scientific discourse and the literary process whose fecundity no longer has to be proved, in the domain of the human sciences.

Not only did the alienists not turn their backs on this question; they considered it—contrary to what is usually claimed—the essence of the doctrine to provide an answer. Reading the literature we see that there is not a social, nutritional, climatic or moral factor that has not been brought forward. And in conjunction with all these, the immense field of sexuality, the rich causality of which was an ever-present concern of 19th-century alienists.

All at once we perceive that the view of a radical break between psychoanalysis and the psychiatry of the 19th century is an obvious retrospective illusion. Or rather, if there actually was a break, it must first of all be seen in the setting of the doctrine of degeneracy. Not a simple rejection or break, but a reinterpretation and clarification of what the doctrine revealed and concealed at the same time.

* * *

We therefore propose here the illumination (a little out of the ordinary) of a particularly essential episode in the history of mental medicine, one which sees the vascillation between the reigning doctrine of the second half of the 19th century and the advent of psychoanalysis. This illumination does not *refute* others nor does it replace them. Perhaps it may only abolish a few shadows.

Two successive movements: first, to confront the precise and admitted rapport which Freud has with the doctrine of degeneracy and dissimilar heredity, that is, a relative compliance, a standing-off attitude, a reinterpretation. On the whole, a comfortable and well-marked road. Since Freud, after all, was conversant with the literature of the alienists of his day and lent himself to their problematics—even when it was to point out his reticences—we need only place him among them in order to measure the convergences and take note of the disagreements and transpositions.

It is the second movement which presents some risks: to find in Freud the intuitions—elevated to the rank of concepts, to hypotheses expressed as theory—outlined in the doctrine of degeneracy, but whose sources are not explicitly indicated by Freud. Nor is there a reconsideration, a clarification or reinterpretation—only radical reformulation and change.

Freud and Degeneracy

Then, we fear, the course to follow will be less simple. If in the beginning it is limited to finding in Freud new statements of the imperfectly-expressed intuitions of the alienists' texts, we realize that, inversely, it will soon lead to the proposal of a *second reading* of the alienists, with the Freudian theory as a *point of departure*. If psychoanalysis considers itself a science of interpretation, how can the movement be evaded which would lead to the interpretation, in Freud's name, of preceding texts, which, in a way, made things possible for him. A course all the more imperative to follow since the doctrines of degeneracy and dissimilar heredity propose a theory of *origin*, of *descent*, and since psychoanalysis in turn considers itself the discipline which takes into account the fantasies of origin, the myths of descent, and even finds in these fantasies and myths the outline of a psychical theory of life. Thus, for the psychoanalyst, the works of Prosper Lucas, Morel and Charles Féré are something like "dream books": they *demand* interpretation. Fallen into disuse, scientifically speaking, they are a witness, in their way, to the truth of the fantasmatic unconscious unveiled by Freud.

FIRST MOVEMENT: THE EXPLICIT DISPUTE

Freud did not have to provoke it. He had been in the middle of it from the time of his first reflections on the cause of neuroses. Manuscript A,³ addressed to Wilhelm Fliess (the presumed date is late in 1892) poses, in a very abridged form, a series of "problems." Questions four and five are:

"4. Does an innate neurasthenia with innate or not sexual weakness exist; is it always acquired during childhood (through nursemaids, onanism)?

5. Is heredity something other than a multiplier?"

The first text on the causes of neuroses⁴ and the article of 1895 taken from it⁵ are connected with the question of neu-

³ These manuscripts, unpublished during Freud's lifetime, have been re-grouped along with Freud's letters to Fliess of the same period in a volume entitled *La naissance de la psychoanalyse*, P.U.F., 1956. Manuscript A, p. 59.

⁴ Manuscript B, *ibid.* p. 61, dated February 8, 1893. It is the first draft of this text which gives birth to the following note:

⁵ "Qu'il est justifié de séparer de la neutasthénie un certain complexe symp-

rasthenia, whose theoretic importance has been seen in the idea of the "neuropathic family." If Freud concedes an acquired neurosis here (the only kind which really interested him) as had Dejerine or Charcot, he also sees the source of a destructive heredity:

"In the absence of any possible solution, society seems condemned to becoming the victim of incurable neuroses which reduce the joy of life to a minimum, destroying conjugal relations and bringing about, *through heredity*, the ruin of the entire succeeding generation."⁶

However, that was not the real problem for Freud. In "L'hérédité et l'étiologie des névroses"⁷ of 1896, what he endeavored to theorize was what links this hereditary factor to the "specific" causes of this or that syndrome. Even though these causes have "a pathogenic power [which] is only accessory to that of heredity," the therapeutic hopes which could bring about their knowledge justify their study. His keeping at a distance with regard to genetics was thus not doctrinal, at first, but practical. He did not oppose that "in the pathogenesis of the great neuroses heredity plays a powerful role, in all cases, and an indispensable one in most cases."⁸ As for its rapport with the "specific factor" from this text Freud's position is very clear and very rigorous: a difference of status between similar and dissimilar heredity, a fundamental question of the "choice" of the neurosis. The following page merits quotation in its entirety:

In neural pathology there are *similar heredity* and that called *dissimilar*.⁹ There is nothing new to say about the former: it is however remarkable that in the ailments which depend on similar heredity (Thomsen's disease, Friedreich's disease, myopathies, Huntington's chorea, and others) we never encounter the trace of another accessory

tomatique sous le nom de névrose d'angoisse"; in *Névrose, psychose, perversion*, P.U.F., 1973, p. 15. [Trans.: "On the Grounds for Detaching a Particular Syndrome from Neurasthenia under the Description 'Anxiety Neurosis,'" *Collected Papers*, I, 76; Standard Edition, III.]

⁶ Manuscript B, *op. cit.*, p. 15.

⁷ In *Névrose, psychose, perversion*, P.U.F., 1973, pp. 47-59 (This appeared for the first time, written directly in French, in *La revue neurologique*, IV, March 30, 1896.)

⁸ *Ibid.* p. 51.

⁹ Freud's underlining.

Freud and Degeneracy

cause. But dissimilar heredity, much more important than the other, leaves lacunae which must be filled in order to arrive at a satisfactory solution of etiological problems. The fact is that members of a family are afflicted with the most diverse neuropathies, functional and organic, without our being able to discover a law which governs the substitution of one disease for another or the order of their succession through the generations. Alongside these afflicted individuals there are members of the family who are not affected, and the theory of dissimilar heredity does not tell us why one person supports the hereditary charge without succumbing to it, or why another affected person may choose a different ailment, hysteria in place of epilepsy or insanity, and so on. Since nothing happens by chance in neural pathology any more than it does elsewhere, it must be conceded that it is not heredity which governs the choice of the neuropathy which will develop in members of a predisposed family, but there is reason to suspect the existence of other causal influences of a less comprehensible nature, which merit the name of *specific causes*¹⁰ of such or such affliction. Without the existence of this specific etiological factor heredity would be powerless; it would lend itself to the production of a different neuropathy if the specific cause in question had been replaced by some other influence.¹¹

And so it is clear: if psychoanalysis does not deny the existence of hereditary predispositions, it should aspire to giving an exact account of what heredity does not explain, that is to say, the *choice* of the kind of affliction inside the large neuropathical family. The division traces a line of demarcation between psychiatry and psychoanalysis. But as Freud formally affirmed in 1916 before the students of the faculty of medicine in Vienna,¹¹ "Is there an opposition, a contradiction? Do you not see that far from contradicting each other psychiatry and psychoanalysis complete each other *at the same time that the hereditary factor and the psychological event, far from fighting or excluding each other, collaborate in the most efficient way, with the same end in view.*"¹³

¹⁰ Freud's underlining.

¹¹ *Art. cit.* p. 49.

¹² *Introduction à la psychanalyse*, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, Lesson 16: "Psychanalyse et psychiatrie," p. 236.

¹³ The present author's underlining.

So there it is, as far as the question of the relationship between hereditary predisposition and “specific” factor is concerned.

* * *

Second intuition: That of a genealogy of morbid types. Let us follow these reformulations in Freud. Actually, the dichotomy predisposition/specific factor (psychogenetical) has often concealed another, which modern readers of Freud never come across without a certain discomfiture. It is the one which opposes, from the first writings on neuroses, the neuroses called “real” (neurasthenia, anxiety, hypochondria) to the “psychoneuroses of defense” (hysteria, obsession): a somatic affliction (of chemical or toxic origin) in the one case, the psychical consequences of precocious sexual excitation in the other. But it has not been sufficiently noted that Freud saw a filial relationship between these two groups. Not by transmission from one generation to another but in the same individual: “There are no doubt cases of pure and isolated hysteria or obsession, independent of neurasthenias or anxiety neuroses, but it is not the rule. More often, psychoneurosis is an accessory to neurasthenic neuroses, provoked by them and following their course.”¹⁴

But from 1897, in a letter to Fliess¹⁵ Freud proposed the first example of the induction of neurotic or psychotic ailments on *several generations* by mechanisms which bypassed the genetic model, substituting a hypothesis which would prove to be one of the richest in psychoanalytical research. It is introduced apropos of the theory of “seduction”: “Here you see how a neurosis may be transformed into a psychosis in the following generation (what people term degeneracy) simply because the subject was implicated at a very early age.” Briefly summarized, here is the neuropathic genealogy reconstructed by Freud: his patient is an *hysteric*. The patient’s “seducer” is identified in the person of an uncle, a pervert and dyspomaniac. But the patient himself

¹⁴ “L’hérédité et l’étiologie des névroses,” *op. cit.* p. 59. Twenty years later, in *L’introduction à la psychanalyse*, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, p. 363, Freud will again take up this idea: “The symptom of a real neurosis is often the kernel and preliminary phase of the psychoneurotic symptom.”

¹⁵ *Naissance de la psychoanalyse*, Letter 55, dated January 11, 1897, p. 164.

Freud and Degeneracy

had “certain relationships” with one of his sisters, who had been present at a very early age (one year) at the time of the seduction scenes between the uncle and Freud’s patient. The sister herself was afflicted with hysterical *psychosis* when she reached puberty. As for his other sisters, with whom the patient had had little contact, they were perfectly normal. This is a prime example, and quite fascinating, of a genealogy of morbid types through generations (here the sequence is perversion, hysterical neurosis, hysterical psychosis, a sequence which is still frequently found in clinical studies) which by-passes “genetics” (in the sense of the science of the same name). What Freud himself *explicitly* points out. Not the rejection of clinical intuitions discovered through the doctrine of degeneracy but a reinterpretation. Here, in support of the hypothesis which Freud was working on at that time: that of seduction by an adult or an older brother (or sister).

However, we will see that after the abandonment of the seduction theory and the recognition of the Oedipus complex, the intuition of the induction of morbid types from one generation to another remains, in a different form. The nervous affliction of the child is remanded to a malaise existing in the subjective position of the parents, especially of the mother.

In a forgotten article of 1909¹⁶ Freud described the mechanism which, because of repressed desire, results in a seriously-disturbed couple (impotence in the husband, neurosis in the wife), and he adds: “I wish, however, again to show how such a couple

¹⁶ “La morale sexuelle ‘civilisée’ et la maladie nerveuse des temps modernes,” 1908. In *La vie sexuelle*, P.U.F., 1969, p. 44. This rarely-cited text is remarkable for its “Reichism” before Reichism existed. In contrast to a large number of more famous formulations of Freud, here it is the social “repression” of sexuality which appears to be at the origin of repression (at least in the parents). It is known that this is the substance of the Reichian thesis. However, Freud will soon be led to give a greater importance to the “repression of origins” whose determinism appears infinitely more precocious. However, in this text, the position of the child, caught up in the neurosis of the parents, is very significant—and very close to modern psychoanalytical ideas. The child’s neurosis is not described, neither as the result of social repression operating directly on him nor as the effect of a repression of origins, almost innate, but as the effect on his own subjective position of the mother’s repression, itself electively colored by social repression. It is true that such formulations, in their complexity, leave the summary Reichism of many present-day defenders of “sexual liberation” far behind.

continues to have an effect on the child, or children, if they are few in number. We believe we are dealing with a hereditary transfer, but if we look more closely, we see that it is a matter of the influence of powerful infantile impressions. The neurotic wife, unsatisfied by her husband, is an over-protective mother and over-anxious for her child, to whom she transfers her need for love and in whom she awakens a precocious sexuality. The incompatibility between the parents excites the emotional life of the child and causes him to feel intensely love, hate and jealousy at a very tender age. The strict education which does not tolerate any sexual expression at such an early age lends a repressive force to the conflict, which contains all that is necessary to bring on a nervous malady which will be lifelong."

Thus again there is the induction of a nervous malady in the child by the neurosis of his parents. But heredity does not enter into it. The "dreamed" genetics of Morel or Dejerine give way to a *genealogy of desire and its manifestations*.¹⁷

Psychoanalysis is Oedipus, to be sure. The family triangle. Papa, Mama and me. Only, what quickly becomes apparent is that this drama with three actors is part of an epic which is larger than it is. There is no way to "account for" what is happening in this triangle if no reference is made to all that "preceded" it.

Everything happens as though, one long-ago day, which may go back to the dawn of humanity, something "memorable and criminal"¹⁸ occurred which the Oedipean triangle bears as a

¹⁷ Modern psychoanalytical research (Lacan, P. Aulagnier, Maud Mannoni) has considerably broadened these ideas, showing how the subjective position of the child (and thus his eventual neurosis or later psychosis) is determined by the way his desire for his mother is expressed and the exact place the father occupies in it (with regard to this desire). These studies have provided a better knowledge of the determinism of the psychosis. The statement "It takes three generations to make a psychotic" shows rather well the survival of the "genealogical" formula. Maud Mannoni: "Let us remember the very particular place held by the psychotic in the field of maternal desire. In the child's impossibility to be recognized by the Other as a desiring subject, he becomes alienated in one part of his body. His relations with his mother remain on a level where the child's only resort is to continually renew a demand, without ever having the right to assume it as desire." *L'enfant, sa maladie et les autres*, Seuil, 1967, p. 120.

¹⁸ S. Freud, *Totem et Tabou*, P.B.P., p. 163. [Trans: *Totem and Taboo*, London, 1950; Standard Edition 13]

Freud and Degeneracy

badly-healed scar, a *crack*, which may always reopen. Properly speaking, it is not a *disease* which has been transmitted but a constant possibility: the memory of an act, odious and yet necessary, the murder of a father—and its consequences, a feeling of guilt.

Totem and taboo have a double function in Freud's work: "A first attempt, having in view the *application* of the points of view and data of psychoanalysis to certain phenomena of collective society." Apparently, therefore, nothing more than the *application* of ideas already acquired by psychoanalysis to a double problem posed by ethnology (totemism and taboo.) The savage/neurotic parallel put into effect by a knowledge of primitive societies. The analysis of infantile zöophobias permits us to grasp the fact that the animal object of the phobia is, as Freud expresses it, a father-substitute (and in this case Freud uses clinical results obtained from analyzing Little Hans). We can thus assume that the worshiped and feared totem animal is itself a father figure. From which, the careful scrutiny of ethnographical data which are able to establish this hypothesis.

But very soon an inverse movement begins: the recourse to the hypothesis of the father's murder, a *guilt feeling dictated by remorse*, the interpretation of the totemic meal as a transgressive and collective celebration of this event, become in their turn necessary to the interpretation of the unconscious feelings of the neurotics. It is quite essential that the neurotic's guilt be justified: however, he is guilty of nothing. It is quite essential to admit that a real error has been committed with respect to the father and that its memory is transmitted from age to age, passing from collective history to individual history. This is therefore how it all must have begun: "The father of the primitive band had despotically monopolized all the women and had killed or run off all his sons, who were dangerous rivals. One day, however, the sons joined forces, triumphed over the father, killed and ate him who had been their enemy, but also their ideal. Afterward, they were powerless to succeed him, each barring the way of the other. Filled with failure and remorse,

¹⁹ *Ibid*, preface, p. 5.

they learned to get along with each other, formed a clan of brothers, according to the totemic laws which forbade the recurrence of such an act, and they renounced as a block, the possession of the women for whom they had killed their father. They were thus now reduced to foreign women: this is the origin of exogamy, so closely linked to totemism.”²⁰

Individual history will never do more than “continue” or resume the original scenario, that of collective history. But how then can we conceive of a “transmission” of such a model from age to age? How does it happen that every child repeats, in his own way, in his unconscious drama, the “event” which brought about the prohibition of incest?

Freud did not conceal his discomfiture when faced with such a question. He evoked the “oral” tradition which would have been able to leave “memory traces” of the event down through the generations, but he could not resign himself to seeing in that the complete explanation of so universal a transmission. And in spite of all the objections which arose to his hypothesis (his own, first of all) he had to call on the idea of an “archaic heredity” of “philogenetic” origin. In effect, “The behavior of a neurotic child with regard to his parents, when he is suffering from Oedipus and castration complexes, presents a multitude of similar reactions, which seem unreasonable in the individual and are comprehensible only when they are viewed from the angle of philogenesis, by connecting them with the experiences of earlier generations.”²¹ And yet Freud was not unaware that the biology of his time had destroyed the Lamarckian hypothesis of hereditary transmission of acquired characteristics. It didn’t matter. To affirm this “transmission” was, for him, a basic theoretical necessity. And here he accepted to be in contradiction with the state of science of his times. “Audacity is indispensable here.”²² In effect, “By admitting that similar memory traces exist in our archaic heredity, we bridge the abyss which separates

²⁰ Here we quote from the version found in “Ma vie et la psychanalyse,” series Idées Gallimard, p. 84.

²¹ S. Freud, *Moïse et le Monothéisme*, series Idées Gallimard, p. 134. [Trans: *Moses and Monotheism*, Standard Edition, 23, 3.]

²² *Ibid.*, p. 136.

Freud and Degeneracy

individual psychology from collective psychology, and we can treat peoples the same way we treat neurotic individuals.”²³

Thus when it was a question of accounting for “neuropathic transmission,” Freud succeeded in rejecting the idea of a heredity (individual) at the expense of a genealogy of desire and its manifestations. But here the necessity for an archaic heredity reappears to justify the Oedipean fantasy itself, the question remaining open as to the origin of the feelings under observation: desire for the mother, jealousy and guilt toward the father, and so on. The recourse to the Oedipus myth was already a first report of a fantasy in the distant past. But still too caught up in modernity and the individual. From which, the recourse to a collective history sensed to be itself the founder.

And yet. Let us reread the story of the father’s murder, given above: “The father of the primitive band had despotically monopolized all the women and had killed or run off his sons, who were dangerous rivals.”²⁴ Thus even before the father’s murder, the presumed inaugural incident, the conditions for an Oedipal “structure” are present and have been since time immemorial: *had monopolized*. The pluperfect, as Catherine Backes pertinently remarks, is the mythical tense par excellence: everything had already begun, “the origin is pushed back beyond itself, indefinitely.”²⁵ The recourse to the myth of the primitive band and the murder of the father suddenly appears useless since “everything happens as though the story were already Oedipean, since before the organization of the clan the father had banned the mothers by holding on to all of them.”²⁶ And besides, did not the original action (the murder of the father) occur only once? And when? An apparently incidental remark makes the questions pertinent: when, in *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud asks himself about the conditions which permit such a memory to pass into archaic heredity, he notes, “A memory passes into archaic heredity when the event is important or when it is repeated often enough, or when it is both important and frequent. In the case of a

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 135.

²⁴ Here we closely follow the pertinent analysis of Catherine Backes Clément, in *Anthropologie, science des sociétés primitives?*, Denoel, 1971.

²⁵ Catherine Backes, *op. cit.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

father's murder, the two conditions are met."²⁷ The murder of the father, the "original event"²⁸ which we would like to believe happened only once, is *repeated*. At least three "versions" are described by Freud: the one perpetrated by the sons (in *Totem and Taboo*); the one which saw the establishment of monotheism and resulted in the murder of Moses; and the version Freud sees in the story of Jesus, in a disguised form: "A Son of Man, innocent of all fault, sacrifices himself, takes on the guilt of all. It had to be a son since the murder had had a father as victim."²⁹ Thus through all these *repetitions*, with transformations, disguises and displacements due to repression, the event loses all "real" consistency. The original act appears for what it is, a myth. Only the repetition has an origin. If Freud continued up until his death to recount the event, to pretend to think it had "really" happened, to speculate on the conditions of its being transmitted, what really interested him were these multiple disguises, transformations and differences which the various versions underwent. Repetition and difference. Tirelessly, the "fantasies of origin" of these neurotics (and his own) sent him back to the origin of the primitive fantasy. And what he discovered in pursuing these ever-burning questions was that the original event does not occur: it is constructed.

The remanding of the individual fantasy to the collective myth and vice versa, seems to make a circle. But in fact the task of analysis is to take the subject out of this mythical circularity in helping him to achieve a sense of his own history, in its singularity.

Thus Freud's need to link (without regard for the biological findings of his day) individual history and collective history was tied to another, much more fundamental need: to give theoretical status to the question of origin and repetition. His break with Jung is, in this regard, significant: Freud could no longer follow when Jung himself entered the circularity of the myth, explaining without reservation the individual through collective archetypes

²⁷ S. Freud, *Moïse et le Monothéisme*, p. 134.

²⁸ For the present, this expression must be written in quotes, inasmuch as we are going to show that the characteristic of the Freudian break is to overthrow the idea of both event and origin.

²⁹ *Moïse et le Monothéisme*, p. 117.

Freud and Degeneracy

(and vice versa). What is lost, in the desire to bring the guarantees of mythology to psychoanalysis, is the radical specificity of the analytical process, to know the meaning of the deferred (different) *repetition* of the subject who *reconstructs*, by means of his own fantasy (of his own history), the event which is at the origin. The recourse to an archetype, to a pre-established symbolism (dictionary of symbols or key to dreams) always marks, in one way or another, the failure of the analytical process.

If then, for Freud, the specific recourse to an archaic heredity, a “phylogenetic” inheritance, seemed necessary, we begin to see that it was at the price of radically transforming its meaning: what is felt to be so transmitted from generation to generation, from time immemorial, is not a “characteristic” *but the memory of an original event which, however, continues to repeat itself in transforming itself*. And what analysis discovers, in the end, is that this original event (an “originating” illusion) has never been anything but the *product* of these multiple repetitions and transformations.

Or rather, it never *will have been* other than that. In fact, as Catherine Backes remarks, following Lacan, if the mythical tense par excellence is the pluperfect, “the tense of neurotic evolution is the *future anterior*, rejection and reprise of the imperfect tense, but also a retroactive link.”³⁰

Here we can only refer again to the brilliant analyses of Catherine Backes showing how the Freudian problematic radically subverted linear time, that of the narrative (simple past). A radical break which, with the introduction of the concept of repetition exploded the idea of an event (especially an originating event) to introduce a new idea of repetition *and history*: “The fascination of origin is powerful: to go back in time, to go back to an actual event, birth or shock, and cancel it out. This would be the dream of all theory and all action, this is what is said in the psychoanalytical myth constructed by Ferenczi, Rand and Jung with the Freudian truth as a starting point. Return to the initial event in its reality, this is the myth; to construct a model event,

³⁰ Catherine Backes, *Le pouvoir des mots*, p. 83.

a fictional framework for events which will remain forever inaccessible, this is what Freud says.”³¹

It remains to indicate a final course which can barely be touched on here. Our progress along the road of Freud's inquiries concerning archaic heredity as the founder of fantasies of origin (Oedipus complex, fictional history of the neurotic's family) has led us to a concept of origin as primordial repetition, sending back to its “mythical” (illusory) dimensions the search for an initial event. Now Freud also finds in the compulsion to *repeat* material for a hypothesis of a *death drive*. By this is meant the fundamental tendency of all living creatures to return to an inorganic state. In this new subject, if the life force (Eros) is conceived as a compulsion to unite, the aim of the death drive would be to “break off all relationships, and thus destroy everything.” A return to an undifferentiated origin, free of all ties. A concept which was known elsewhere as entropy. Again, such a concept, judged very daring, indeed metaphysical, discomfited Freud's disciples, who endeavored to reject its novelty. Again, the biological models to which Freud seemed to return cause trouble and yet he insisted that he had been led to this conclusion (as for archaic heredity) by a *necessity* resident in analytical theory. On the life/death dualism was seen a notable regression with regard to the abundance and complexity of clinical contributions, since Freud did not hesitate to look for his sources in works whose contents were patently metaphysical, indeed even mystical: the *Upanishads*, Plato's *Symposium*. However, and without claiming to give here a complete theoretical development of this “topic”,³² it must be pointed out that in the new model the “dualism” of life force/death drive is only apparent. What in fact it introduces is actually a strict redefinition of the idea of force or drive itself. In effect, Freud conceded from that time on that a drive “is only the expression of an inherent tendency in all organisms, one which compels it to reproduce, to re-establish a former state which it has been obliged to renounce because of disturbing outside influences: the expression of a sort of organic elasticity or, if you prefer, inertia of organic

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 87.

³² For an initial outline, concise but exact, of this work, refer to the article “Pulsion de mort” by Laplace and Pontalis, in the *Vocabulaire de Psychanalyse*.

Freud and Degeneracy

life.”³³ He himself admitted what was new and surprising in such a concept “inasmuch as we are accustomed to seeing in drive (Trieb) a developing and changing factor, not the contrary.”³⁴ And yet a profound necessity impels him to explore where this hypothesis of drive as repetition and return might lead. To the point that by an impressive paradox he arrives at the pronouncement “The goal toward which all life aims is death.”³⁵ And, a striking “coincidence,” Freud again invokes heredity to support his statements: “We have only to remember that the phenomena of heredity and the facts of embryology furnish us with the finest illustration of the tendency of an organism toward repetition.”

In this regard, the prototype itself of all drive and the only case in which it is truly realized, is the death drive. The life force to be seen *not as an antagonist* (which would produce a model comparable to that of Prosper Lucas: law of invention, law of repetition, antagonistic and complementary) but as its most important manifestation. A simple “detour” which would lead to the goal set up by the death drive: “It is these detours *taken by life during its journey toward death*, detours faithfully and rigorously followed by the instinct of preservation which form what appears to us today to be the tableau of the phenomena of life.”³⁶ There is no doubt about the significance of these instincts of preservation: in the light of the new hypothesis, they can only be considered as “incomplete drives intended to assure the organism of its only real means of returning to death and to shelter it from all possibilities other than those of arriving at this end.”³⁷ Thus the sole *origin* (real and no longer mythical) assigned to a living being and achieved by a return would be death.

³³ S. Freud, “Au-delà du principe de Plaisir,” in *Essais de Psychoanalyse*, Petite Bibliothèque Payot, p. 46. [Trans: *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, London, 1961. Standard Edition, 15-16.]

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 49. We may note everything that separates this position from the celebrated formulation of Bichat, founding biology: “Life is the ensemble of functions which resist death.” (*Recherches physiologiques sur la vie et la mort*):

Here we must rapidly put in its place the last disturbing element of Freudian theory which acts as the bridgehead from which we will begin the re-reading of the alienists' texts.

* * *

We now permit ourselves to take a step backward: if the break which inaugurated psychoanalysis occurred because of certain favorable conditions, we should be able to find, by going backward, evidence in the earlier texts, like debris washed up by the tide, evidence in which the theory of analysis takes the place, in a way, of interpretation.

1. First, the question of the death drive. A rather rapid attempt has been made³⁸ to identify degeneracy (as an accumulated heredity tending progressively to sterility and the extinction of the line) with the death drive. It would be more correct to say that *this is a possibility (which is one way of saying that it has something to do with it, but in a "repressed" fashion.)*

In effect, it could be said that degeneracy is a reversed image of the death drive: certain lines (pathological, it should be stressed), contrary to the normal, tend to a more and more disorganized state, and even seem to seek out circumstances and unions which would precipitate this progressive and fatal decadence. But this is a good thing, according to the logic of the doctrine, because it permits the normal type to pursue the end assigned to it, the unlimited progress of the species. Thus, far from life's being only a detour toward death, in this case degeneracy, a pathological and deadly manifestation, is on the contrary a means tending, by the elimination of defective elements, to the preservation of life, a primordial tendency. In every case, heredity is at life's service: let it conform to its destiny and heredity's role is to propagate it indefinitely, indeed to encourage its progress; let it be committed to a morbid path and, from that time, heredity will be in charge of progressively eliminating the elements which oppose its perfection. What is also

³⁸ This is the case of Michel Serres, for example, in his book on Zola, *Feux et signaux de brume*, Grasset, 1976.

Freud and Degeneracy

protected against the (accessory) powers of death is the grandiose adventure of the living.

The doctrine of a morbid heredity and degeneracy seems to be just the right structure for exorcising the menace presented by the hypothesis of the death drive: it rejects this possibility as being pathological. The tendency toward death is pathological. There is a word for it: morbid.

2. The neuropathic family and the idea of an *origin* of the morbid factor.

After a reading of the Freudian texts, we have a clearer perception of to what degree the idea of a “neuropathic family” (Charles Féré), issued from the same syndrome of origin,³⁹ participates in a “mythological” explanation: to fix an original event, a zero degree of mental illness from which all the rest ensues. There is a confused feeling that such an existence is an illusion, that this point of origin is often artificially designated, but it is clung to with a blind passion.

From then on we have a better perception of to what point the new “genetic” model (genetic in the sense of a science of development and maturation) participates in the same epistemology: since we despair of ever fixing the original moment when the “crack” occurred, we try to follow the linear and constantly recommenced development which ends in full maturation. It is the precise *epoch*, precisely datable, where some disturbance occurs which will determine the form of the mental illness. The “genetic” schools of psychoanalysis (on the type of that of Anna Freud), which are polarized on the concept of “fixation”, take up these models. We have attempted to show that by so doing they miss the essential point of what constitutes the profound change in psychoanalysis.

However, and precisely because of this naive desire to make certain of an “origin”, a reading of the works of Prosper Lucas or of Morel cannot fail to evoke, for the psychoanalyst, the fantasies which he hears unroll from his couch, or of which he carefully reconstructs the meanderings through his patient’s as-

³⁹ This important syndrome, felt to be at the root of all forms of alienation, was for the authors at the end of the 19th century none other than *neurasthenia*.

sociations. The multiple versions of the neurotic's family history: do they not daily present him with a picture of the adventurer uncle, felt to be at the origin of the family blemish, or of the prostitute grandmother or "dame-maquerelle" in Bangkok, about whom scraps of information, carefully censured by the family, have come to the surface, the bearers of who knows what "crack" according to the patient's fantasy? Or the grandfather, that drunken and libertine ancestor, whose successes with female servants are evoked with scorn and a confused complacency, or syphilis brought back as war booty from some distant colony.

The alienists have of course been deluded into taking these "antecedents" for real. They have tried to find in the "facts" which have been told them the indisputable origin of the neuro-pathy of their patients. And afterward, rather than let them continue to reel off all their fantasies about these facts, to interrupt the patients, press them with precise questions, indeed to put themselves into the picture in order to perfect the anamnestic inquiry, to correct faulty memories. And yet, they themselves are aware of the difficulties they run up against in obtaining these "confessions." Where Freud saw resistance or compromise for which the reasons were to be cleared up, they pound away at the unwillingness of their clients, their "reticence" when faced with the truth. Every page of the texts shows that they feel a secret guilt in this regard, but it seems automatic to them, beyond question; what could be more natural than to be ashamed of a drunken or adulterous uncle or grandmother? Now, such a feeling is anything but simple, and we have seen the tenacity of Freud in searching out the explanations for these feelings which seem to us "automatic," such as jealousy of a father.

Such an instance (trauma theory) was also tempting to Freud: to find and specify (a necessity for "objective" inquiry) the "reality" of the traumatizing incident. But he soon recognized that what was needed for this procedure was the "psychical reality," that which is glimpsed in the patients' accounts, the stammering of his confessions and lies, his memories and partial amnesias, his bursts of sincerity and his sudden reticences. A reading of the alienists confirms that the patients of Morel or

Freud and Degeneracy

of Magnan⁴⁰ had the same things to tell as those of Freud, but Morel and Magnan, fascinated by the "message" which was being addressed to them, did not realize that the essence of the information was to be found in the "code."

3. Sexuality, most certainly. A second reading of 19th-century alienists would show how omnipresent it was: a prevalent danger signaled by onanism, of primary importance in the pathological heredity of venereal diseases, indeed of simple "sexual excesses." Who cannot see that what is thus designated as the origin of degeneracy is precisely sexuality, in the measure in which it frees itself from the function which makes it acceptable, namely, reproduction. Vice and thus pathology begins where sexuality is a pleasure in itself. And in a remarkable turnabout, degeneracy, fruit of sexuality freed from the burden of procreation, brings in its turn a pathology of procreation: a weakening of the "product," impotence, sterility. We have the "scientific" translation of the precept according to which "we are punished in the same way in which we have sinned."

Thus, on every hand, persistently, are displayed in numerous disguises, the themes of transgression, guilt. From the beginning, from the first "scientific" look at sexuality, the alienists discovered its culpability. But it appeared to them as a "normal" consequence of error and hence of the organic injury it brought about: an epiphenomenon. The characteristic of Freud's procedure was to put it at the center of his attention. What became pathogenic was not sexuality, as a physiological function, but the guilt feelings which accompanied it. And the clearing up of which, far from being automatic, was one of the principal functions of the therapeutic process.

* * *

For Nietzsche, the ascetic ideal has a part in decadence: it is at the same time its therapeutic "sedative" and one of its symptoms.

⁴⁰ Magnan, a student of Morel, in the last decades of the century was himself the leader in developing the clinical and nosographic results of the Morelian doctrine. Cf. in particular his descriptions of "dégénérés supérieures" which are the basis of the precise descriptions of neurotic tableaux (especially obsessions and phobias).

For Freud, religion is to be understood as “the universal neurosis of mankind”,⁴¹ but at the same time it exempts the believer “from the task of creating his own personal neurosis.” At the heart of nihilism and decadence, the affirmation of the desire for power. At the heart of the life force, and perhaps at its origin, the death drive.

At the end of the two lines, an analysis of the guilt feeling: genealogy of morals, uneasiness in civilization. The convergences are more than coincidental. It is not a question of erasing the reason for the deep disparity of the problematics. To reduce one to the other. To see in Nietzsche a simple forerunner, in Freud a theory which was finally scientific, accounting for the contradictions in the discourse of Nietzsche.

Let it suffice here to remark that the two endeavors are, each in its own way, a “bridgehead” for the problematic of “degeneracy.” They are not content to “correct the error”: they claim to give an account of it, to furnish an interpretation. The one, in showing that the “causes” of degeneracy are in reality the effects of the morbid process and by pointing out its affirmative and creative consequences;⁴² the other, by bringing forth from the apparent hereditary transmission of a morbid factor a genealogy of desire and the tenacious persistence of the effects of repression. In the one case as in the other what is brought into question is the stability of the healthy/unhealthy division. And with that, the exclusive privilege of the doctor to give an account, in his closing statements, of the plentiful harvest of questions gathered during more than a century under the name of degeneracy.

But more essential still, it is a particular idea of man and his history which is found, all confused. To the unbroken linearity of a teleological history, the promise of unlimited progress in the course of which regressions and decadence appear as unhealthy deviations, has been substituted a syncopated time, open

⁴¹ S. Freud, *L'Avenir d'une illusion*, 1971, P.U.F., p. 61. [Trans: *The Future of an Illusion*, London, 1972; Standard Edition, 21.]

⁴² A demonstration which is outside the scope of this article devoted to Freud, but which has been attempted elsewhere. However, the posthumous texts of Nietzsche organized around the idea of “European nihilism” may be consulted (U.G.E. Col. 10/18 1976).

Freud and Degeneracy

to all the uncertainties of afterthought: the compulsion to repeat, the constant return. Man and his madness are from now on caught in a temporality which has lost its fixed guideposts. The anthropological view of alienation, whose lineaments we saw established in the second half of the 19th century, is suddenly obliterated. It can no longer be experienced as a return, a regression, a decadence, since man himself has lost all confidence in an assured goal with which he can identify his destiny, as an individual or as a species. Thus he can no longer conceive of his madness as the negative of this lost design. Nor can he consider it as something positive on which to fasten new hopes. To be degenerate was at least to still belong to a lineage, to have a father. With Nietzsche and Freud, man learns that he was born an orphan.