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Towards a Psychosocial Psychoanalysis

Stephen Frosh

A personal affair

It would be hard to wriggle out of the admonishment that an attachment to psychoanalysis always happens more for personal than for intellectual reasons. After all, the great founding text of the new 'science', *The Interpretation of Dreams*, had at its centre a set of dreams dreamt by its author, Freud. Of few if any other sciences could it be asserted that the dreams of its originator not only motivated it, but actually constituted its scientific credentials. Freud's achievement here is really quite extraordinary: at a time in which the scientific revolution was paying off in ferocious advances in knowledge and technology, and science itself was perhaps at its most esteemed, Freud came along and announced that its source was a set of dreams. And behind these dreams are all sorts of peculiarities, including embarrassing ones. For example – perhaps the most egregious one – an element in one of Freud's central dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the 'Count Thun' dream, is traced back to a memory of urinating in his parents' bedroom and being faced by an irate father who declares, 'the boy will come to nothing'. This paternal injunction flatly contradicted Freud's mother's endorsement of him as special – 'Goldene Sigi' – and clearly rankled with him through much of his life. Freud (1900, p.216) comments, 'This must have been a frightful blow to my ambition, for references to this scene are still constantly recurring in my dreams and are always linked with an enumeration of my achievements and successes, as though I wanted to say: "You see, I *have* come to something."' Given that Freud also declared *The Interpretation of Dreams* to be 'a portion of my own self-analysis, my reaction to my father's death' (p.xxvi), it takes little imagination to see that this founding text of psychoanalysis is born from a fairly infantile emotion, that of embarrassment due to incontinence. How often can one openly say this about an intellectual activity – or rather, how often is it admitted that this is the case?

A special contribution of psychoanalysis is that it breaks down the division between different kinds of knowledge and opposes the fetishising of objectivity, in the humanities and social sciences as well as in clinical practice. You cannot know anything, it suggests, without knowing something about yourself, even if what you know about yourself is the extent to which you are ignorant of yourself. Amongst other things, as Adam Phillips (2013) has argued in a provocative non-biography of Freud, it makes it impossible ever to write a full biography or autobiography: psychoanalytically speaking, how can we ever be sure that we know ourselves or anyone else sufficiently well to be able to give an account of our, or their, life? If one core discovery of psychoanalysis is our 'opacity' to ourselves and others, to use Judith Butler's (2005) vocabulary, in which she makes acknowledgement of this opacity a necessary bulwark against what she calls 'ethical violence', then to be truthful one has always to know how partial one is being; and to describe, autobiographically, an investment in psychoanalysis is always to leave open the possibility that one is not describing anything 'real' at all, but rather is writing fiction.

So writing impersonally about psychoanalysis is inadequate, because psychoanalysis is such a personal affair, from Freud onwards; yet writing (auto)biographically about the origins and development of one's investment in psychoanalysis is an impossible task, because even if it was reasonable to give a very personal, introspective account of it, it would never be sufficient to grasp the truth. What is hidden from us is what matters most; and the more we explain, the more tied up we are likely to become in evasions and false trails. That said, however, it is worth a try. Even in

psychoanalysis, fully aware of the limits of speech, one has to speak, or nothing happens at all. And most of us have some idea of what we are about, even if we know that there are a lot of unknowns hovering around – and that sometimes we would prefer them to stay where they are.

In my own case, I do know something about what happened. In recent years, I have become increasingly aware of how much it means to me that psychoanalysis has Jewish origins, because of my own strongly Jewish identity, with all the complexities that make that a somewhat uninterpretable label, and because of what I read as the verve and critical capacity that comes from psychoanalysis' original position 'on the margins' of society. Freud wrote that being Jewish meant that he found himself 'free of many prejudices which restrict others in the use of the intellect: as a Jew I was prepared to be in the opposition and to renounce agreement with the "compact majority"' (Freud, 1961, p.368). Both accepted and rejected, both emancipated and excluded, educated and denied status, Jews of Freud's time and class stood on the outside looking in, wishing for full entry into European culture but also turning an ironic, acerbic eye to the goings-on of their supposed superiors. In this sense, psychoanalysis was specifically Jewish (as indeed it was in terms of the ethnicity of its early adherents) and Freud's Jewish identity was crucial to the invention of psychoanalysis. This has had numerous effects, not all of them comfortable; and there is plenty of evidence that psychoanalysis' Jewish heritage, or resonance, or 'trace', has at times been problematic both for and within the international psychoanalytic community (Frosh, 2005). For me, however, echoing Anna Freud's message at the inauguration of the Sigmund Freud Professorship at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, this Jewishness could 'serve as a title of honour' (A. Freud, 1978, p.148; Yerushalmi, 1991). Certainly, there is something that can be very attractive in finding oneself on the margins (so in a peculiar way 'special'), despite the insecurity of this position; and this might be part of the pull towards 'critical' disciplines and the privileged position they claim, able to see through what other people take for granted. Both Jewishness and psychoanalysis, with their esotericism and slightly uncanny complexities, fit this bill.

The language of destruction

With this strong identification between Jewish identity and psychoanalysis in mind, it is ironic that my own engagement with psychoanalysis started with the impact of a charismatic, aristocratic English teacher at school, whose enthusiasm for leading his young charges into speculations about anality and phallic symbols meant that literature became spellbinding for what it hid as well as for what it might be made to reveal (Stuart, 1979). What was enticing was the thrill of something grand and at the same time disreputable, exciting, difficult and dangerous. Using psychoanalytic ideas, one might ask questions that actually allow one to find something out – something that all adolescents want, yet fear. Intriguingly, this has some parallels with the British scene of psychoanalysis, which had very different origins to that of psychoanalysis in the rest of Europe. In Britain, the first stirrings of interest in psychoanalysis were from sexology, the Society for Psychical Research and the literary and if anything antisemitic enthusiasms and blind spots of the Bloomsbury group (Frosh, 2003). It is as if the very pragmatic approach of British philosophy and psychology was always on the lookout for something eccentric that might help make sense of the irrational and also allow a kind of vicarious thrill; this might even explain the otherwise hard-to-understand welcome British psychoanalysts gave to the bizarre and extreme formulations of Melanie Klein. At least that is how I saw it when first trying to understand why British psychoanalysis might have been so responsive to Klein in the 1920s and 1930s, given the famous British opposition to flights of fancy (or fantasy, though not whimsy, which is peculiarly British in form) – given precisely, that is, its lack of imagination. After all, there can be few theoretical schemes as baroque and belligerently fantastic as those of Klein; maybe this foreignness was exactly what the British psychoanalysts needed to make sense of their own professional choice to walk into these 'Jewish' margins that on the face of it they

were so ill-suited for. Nowadays I have a different view, not only because of a greater awareness of the English gothic tradition, which presages some of Klein's darkness, but also because I think that Klein put her finger on a deeply engaging issue for British (and European) society in the inter-War years, that of destructiveness and loss, and that this issue has not gone away (and perhaps never will). It is probably, for instance, no accident that the term Kleinians use to describe what might be done with destructiveness is 'reparation', given the use of that word in the post-World War I period, with its potent attestation to ambivalence: making good and being punitive, dealing with one war whilst helping sow the seeds of another (Stonebridge, 1998). More generally, faced with the question of how it can be – in the supposed centre of civilisation – that the terrible barbarism of the twentieth century can have been bred and spread, Kleinians have something useful to say that adds to Freud's generic postulation of death drive. We all have the potential for violence; it is a natural consequence of our aggression and vulnerability; and the question is how to face this head on, and how to translate it into something liveable with. My own interest in Klein was very much fed by working in a Kleinian institution, the Tavistock Clinic, for ten years, and of course it comes very much later than the original British Psychoanalytical Society engagement with Klein herself. Nevertheless, this pull towards the extreme formulations of the Kleinians is one I recognise: what is the point of psychoanalysis if it only deals with the normal and the rational, with developmental sequences and paths to adaptation? Why follow it if it doesn't burst the conventional at the seams, offer some critical awareness of the damage done to people by the world in which they live; and if it doesn't provide a vocabulary and structure for noticing and investigating and – if possible – ameliorating the extremes which we all have at some point to face?

Kleinian language does this well, even excessively, but I have never felt quite comfortable with it. I think the problem is a 'religious' one: Kleinian metapsychology is so powerful, so all-encompassing, that it can turn into a way of knowing the truth that brooks few contradictions or uncertainties. In my case, this was helpful for a while, sustaining my flight to the margins as I negotiated a behavioural training in clinical psychology at the Institute of Psychiatry in London in the 1970s (when Hans Eysenck was Professor of Psychology there) and trying to put together a commitment to radical politics with some thinking and practice on psychotherapy. I could see the links: projection and introjection are useful notions in trying to understand how 'inner' and 'outer' lives might be entwined, how for example social suffering and psychological suffering (what I now theorise as the unhyphenated 'psychosocial') might be intimately connected with each other. And these notions remain useful. Just as the notions of envy and reparation help in understanding personal and social violence, so do the psychic mechanisms promoted by the Kleinians help in theorising racism, sexism and homophobia, to give just the three 'classic' examples (though where has class gone I wonder (Frosh, 2009)?). The things we cannot bear in ourselves are projected outwards and become lodged in socially sanctioned containers for them ('race', class, sex); the factors that stratify our world and offer defences against the anxiety it produces become internalised and fixed as rigid strictures within an internal world that is organised to deny the dependency, demands and threats of others. The embodied, intuitive approach of the Kleinians is helpful in making sense of all this, and has productively informed my own engagement with feminist psychoanalysis, explorations of racism and antisemitism, and latterly of postcolonialism (Frosh, 1999, 2006; 2010). But there was something else too, even more exotic, that came along in the 1980s and 1990s in the name of Lacan.

The lure of Lacan

Why Lacan? There were certainly some literary sources for this, especially Coward and Ellis' (1977) *Language and Materialism*, which helped introduce French poststructuralist thinking into the social sciences in the UK, and which gave me a vocabulary that I did not understand, but could sense there was something excitingly original about. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose – both hugely important

figures for me to this day – brought out their pathbreaking collection, *Feminine Sexuality*, in 1982, following up Mitchell's (1974) profoundly significant *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*, which had shown the possibilities for radical thinking to be found in a psychoanalysis inflected with a Lacanian sensitivity (this was before Mitchell became a British School psychoanalyst). At a time when I was working with gender issues at the new 'coalface' of child sexual abuse (one of my most read articles was published in the *British Journal of Psychotherapy* in 1987 as 'Issues for men working with sexually abused children'), these texts were utterly essential for helping me think through the labyrinths of real-life gender politics, whilst holding onto something that felt theoretically firm and innovative. In itself, this did not mark a move to Lacan, despite the content of this work and the extraordinarily playful take on it by some other Lacanian-inspired writers (Jane Gallop's *Feminism and Psychoanalysis* being the most ebullient example). Indeed, my own writing on gender, for example in my 1994 book *Sexual Difference*, remained heavily informed by Kleinian and even object relational thinking, as well as finding an increasingly large space for Lacan. But the Lacanian moment was there; and I was confirmed in my wish to understand it especially by a psychoanalytic conference I went to in 1990 where the distinguished psychoanalysts present dismissed Lacan (as I recall it, in answer to a question from me about him) as – a term of deep disavowal is coming up – 'French'. 'French theory': Althusser, Derrida, Foucault, Lacan – all incomprehensible, all a million miles away from what might matter to a practising, well-grounded, balanced British psychoanalyst. That was enough for me: if the latest marginal space was difficult French theory, I would have to go there.

Why was Lacanian thought so influential in the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s? For one thing, its difficulty was an attraction. This often happens for both mystical and sociological reasons, as some people become 'expert' in a difficult arena, gaining academic capital from it and being able to pursue their careers through arcane study. If a topic generates enough intrigue but is also hard to understand, a class of interpreters grows up to provide the necessary material. I found even my own half-baked understanding of Lacan was in demand, and this certainly happened to other people, better qualified and more philosophically minded than me. But there was also a genuine and substantive intellectual force at work, something deeply innovative at the level of style and content. Whatever the drawbacks of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which includes a surprisingly conservative strand both politically and psychoanalytically (Lacan himself declared he was certainly no liberal, but he was no revolutionary either, as he made clear to the students of 1968; and in some places, such as Argentina and Brazil, Lacanian psychoanalysis beat a 'retreat to the clinic' in the face of authoritarian regimes – e.g. Visacovsky, 2009), it effectively challenged the dominant drifts of Anglo-American psychoanalysis and spoke richly to students of culture at a time in which there was a 'cultural turn' in the humanities and social sciences. What Lacanianism helped clarify was how 'humanistic' versions of psychoanalysis, including the relational psychoanalysis that emerged in America in the mid-1990s, may be at odds with a psychoanalytic project that is understood as a practice of ethics, a pursuit of a certain kind of 'truth' that is not necessarily the same as therapeutic improvement. This tension between analytic and therapeutic efficacy has always interested me: Philip Rieff's (1966) *Triumph of the Therapeutic* was one of the texts that first founded my interest in psychoanalysis, and which I wrote about in my undergraduate dissertation for a course called 'Humanistic Psychology', earning the ire of my countercultural teachers who disliked my criticism of 'ecstatic' psychologies. Lacanianism seemed clear (though this is less the case now, as Lacanian clinical work has gained ground in the UK) that the compromises required for therapeutic work might be reasonable, but they missed the point of psychoanalysis. Such rigour! Such demandingness! Such radical obscurity! Who could resist it? But also, when one started to read it, such an interesting voice speaking, such provocation to rethink the principles of the unconscious from the beginning; and oddly, unexpectedly, such lyricism. Even today, when the Lacanian industry has moved on and there is much better access to texts and also to critiques, and when some of the most fashionable social theorists have worked their way through and beyond Lacan, my students

remain eager and fascinated; something draws them in – possibly, as Lacan said, some hope of a Master, but also a sense that there is a real intellectual system to be found here.

I am not, however, a Lacanian, even though I am sometimes positioned that way. In fact, in recent years I have been more influenced by the intersubjectivist work of Jessica Benjamin, the profound rethinking of trauma theory by Jean Laplanche, and most of all by the takes on psychoanalysis by the social theorists Slavoj Žižek (who probably is best described as a Lacanian in this area) and Judith Butler (who is not). Whilst Žižek is a colleague of mine at Birkbeck and remains a provocative figure gifted with the ability to suddenly turn things around so they look different from the way they did before (sometimes for the good, sometimes just for the sake of it...), it is Butler who has had the deepest impact on my thinking and that of many of my colleagues in our Department of Psychosocial Studies. (This interdisciplinary department is one that I formed on giving up as a psychologist and leaving the Department of Psychology at Birkbeck after nearly 30 years, faced with what I see as the increasing normativeness of a psychology reduced to cognitive neuroscience.) Why Butler, in relation to psychoanalysis? Because in her rethinking of Freud's writings on mourning and melancholia; of notions of the 'opaque' unconscious in connection with recognition and ethics; of Laplanche in connection with otherness; and latterly Klein in the context of nonviolence, Butler has offered, to my mind, a prolonged and profound mapping of how psychoanalysis can function as social theory and radical intellectual practice. She is a genuinely psychosocial thinker in this respect and also a generous one. It is to her work that I return frequently when looking for concepts that can make sense of social suffering and personal politics (think, for instance, of the way she uses the idea of 'precarity' not only to mark out particularly vulnerable populations, but to convey a state of psychic being that this vulnerability produces). Butler is a rigorous, detailed intellectual; cautious and exact, at odds with the flamboyance of Žižek (who is also, it should be said, no fool); there is a sense of substance in her work, even in the brief texts, that seems to me to make it enduring. This is why it is disappointing that psychoanalysts are not great readers of these engaged philosophical (and of course, increasingly 'Jewish') writings. When Butler came to speak at the British Psychoanalytical Society in 2015, she was heard respectfully, even enthusiastically, but by a very small audience of psychoanalysts, for whom this work was alien. Yet she spoke about Klein and reparation! On the other hand, when she and Jacqueline Rose treated us at Birkbeck to a conversation the next day, the large lecture theatre was full, and the debate (on violence) caught fire. Where is the imaginative engagement of psychoanalysis with exacting philosophical thinking? Not, I am afraid, in those who are 'officially' identified as psychoanalysts, and whose clinical work – which is often excellent – does not seem to provoke them into critical social theory.

Towards the psychosocial

My own work has developed in a number of different directions in recent years. For a long time I have been concerned with the study of various forms of 'identity', drawing on contemporary psychoanalytic ideas as well as those deriving from social psychology, feminism and postcolonialism (e.g. Frosh, 1991). However, with the shedding of my 'psychologist' identity in the 2000s (I left clinical work in 2000 and the Department of Psychology at Birkbeck in 2007), I have become focused on the development of psychosocial studies as a space, and have felt freed up to explore a variety of topics that might not easily have been absorbed into the categories of academic psychology. These include historical issues surrounding the political investments of psychoanalysis in Europe (Frosh, 2005) and in Brazil (Rubin et al, 2015); questions of the place of psychoanalysis in contemporary thinking in the social sciences and humanities (Frosh, 2010); postcolonialism and racism (Frosh, 2013a) and in particular questions of memory, identity, mourning and historical 'transmission' – all bundled up together in the notion of 'haunting' (Frosh, 2013b). Psychosocial studies has been a freeing location for this work, because it operates in a transdisciplinary way across psychology,

sociology and several related disciplines (anthropology, feminism, postcolonial studies, queer studies, etc) to examine how psychic and social processes can be understood as 'always implicated in each other, as mutually constitutive, co-produced, or abstracted levels of a single dialectical process' (Frosh, forthcoming). Psychoanalysis has been one of the central planks of this development, even though there is a great deal of methodological diversity. Indeed, there are some elements in the psychosocial studies community who seem to see psychoanalysis as a *sine qua non* for the new discipline, even making it a kind of subset of psychoanalytic studies. Despite the fact that I actually run an MA Programme in Psychoanalytic Studies and use psychoanalysis in all my work, centring my scholarly activities on it, and indeed have a professional investment as an Academic Associate of the British Psychoanalytical Society, I am opposed to this psychoanalytic saturation of the new space. For me, it is precious to have the freedom to move around intellectually, sampling and garnering material and ideas as needed, without necessarily feeling completely absorbed in any one way of thinking. This is perhaps another version of my reluctance to be aligned to any one 'school' of psychoanalysis – and even within psychosocial studies, I have at times used one psychoanalytic approach against another in order to argue against any kind of dogmatic adherence to one kind of 'expert' knowledge (Frosh and Baraitser, 2008). Still, psychoanalytic practices have become a model for some aspects of psychosocial work, especially in relation to its focus on intense study of individuals, its explicit engagement with ethical relations, and its traversing of disciplinary boundaries across the arts, humanities and social sciences. It is perhaps within psychosocial studies that the intellectual versatility of psychoanalysis will come to show itself, because of the freedom that this space allows for systematic, critical thinking across boundaries. But this depends on ensuring that psychoanalysis has prospects for development in the academy and is not defined as solely an institutionalised, clinical practice – however important this practice is for generating psychoanalytic theories, and however useful the institutions might be strategically (though they are also limiting and coercive in a conservative kind of way).

The place of psychoanalysis in the university has always been a contested one. Freud (1919) started the debate, arguing that there would be benefits for the 'medical student' if 'he' [*sic*] was taught psychoanalysis in the university, though these would be limited: 'for the purposes we have in view,' he wrote, 'it will be enough if he learns something *about* psychoanalysis and something *from* it' (p. 173). Lacan too warned of the reductions produced by trying to contain psychoanalytic understanding in the mode of knowledge characteristic of the university. Lacan regarded himself as misunderstood within the domain of the university and – despite his use of university premises – emphasised how academic understanding systematically reverses psychoanalytic understanding. Here he is, for example, entertainingly, on the subject of Anika Lemaire's (1970) thesis and book on him, to which he wrote a famously undermining foreword. In this passage from Seminar XVII (Lacan, 1991, p.41), he links the book's inadequacies to the general issue of the university:

From a strictly academic motive, I say, flows the fact that the person who has translated me, by virtue of having a background in the style, in the form of imposition of the university discourse, cannot do anything other, whether he believes he is commenting on me or not, than reverse my formula, that is, give it a significance that, it has to be said, is strictly contrary to the truth, without even any homology at all with what I claim... This thesis, then... retains its value nonetheless, its value as an example in itself, its value also as an example because of what it promotes to the level of distortion, in some way an obligatory one, of a translation into the university discourse of something that has its own laws.

The important phrase in this rather hilarious quotation is perhaps that the person working in the realm of the 'university discourse' 'cannot do anything other... than reverse my formula, that is, give it a significance that, it has to be said, is strictly contrary to the truth.' The *formulaic* way in which the discourse of the university operates even makes it impossible to say exactly what it consists in, what its 'dominant' motif might be (p.49), because its attempt to constrain the free wandering of Lacanian speech automatically distorts everything and makes it impossible to understand it. In my

smaller way, I have also argued (Frosh, 2010) that we have to be very cautious when moving from the clinic to the ‘applications’ of psychoanalysis outside it. There is no guarantee – indeed quite the opposite – that concepts which have a certain meaning when used to address clinical phenomena (e.g. transference) refer to the same things when used in the broader social terrain (for instance in pedagogy, or politics, or research).

Nevertheless, the vibrancy of psychoanalysis is not always attested to by its workaday practices in the consulting room, and certainly not in most of its ‘official’ societies, which at times have shown themselves only too available for adaptation to the requirements of social norms – even when these are conformist or authoritarian, as in Argentina, Brazil and Nazi Germany (Damousi and Plotkin, 2012). Maintaining the *critical* heritage of psychoanalysis – as in Freud’s great social texts, or the work of the Berlin Institute before the Nazis, or Reich and Marcuse, or feminist psychoanalysis of the 1980s and 1990s, or the postcolonial uses of psychoanalysis that perhaps started with Fanon (1952) but have blossomed in recent years (e.g. Khanna, 2004), or Laplanche, or Žižek and Butler – requires serious work that crosses boundaries and is not precious about ‘ownership’ of psychoanalytic ideas. It seems clear that as nationalisms erupt again, as violence and ‘extremism’ abound; as collectives come together in suffering and resistance, but also turn away from vulnerability in prejudice and xenophobia; as the world witnesses huge migrations and vast experiences of loss and precarity – in the face of all this, we need serious ways of confronting our reluctance to recognise what is happening, of acknowledging our complicity in it and taking responsibility for becoming active rather than ‘failed’ witnesses (Benjamin, 2016). This means we need tools to help us envision modes of ethical relationality that carefully tread the boundary between recognising and colonising others, that make those ‘connections across difference’ that feminists have argued for, and that can offer cogent critiques of the operations of racism and other modes of intolerance in ‘personal’ as well as ‘social’ domains. I see psychoanalysis as having a great deal to say here, if it can attend to these things as priorities and free itself from some of the regressive tendencies that as a discipline and practice, it shares with all of us.

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