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To Die One's Own Death – Thinking with Freud in a Time of Pandemic

47th Annual Freud lecture, Freud Museum Vienna, livestreamed from London Freud Museum, 23 September 2020

I want to know why we, like upside-down sunflowers, turn to the dark side rather than to the light.

Rachel Berdach, *The Emperor, the Sages and Death* (1938)

What is left of the inner life when the world turns more cruel, or appears to turn more cruel, than ever before? When it reels from inflicted blows – pandemic, war, starvation, climate devastation or all these together – what happens to the fabric of the mind? Is its only option defensive – to batten down the hatches, to haul up the drawbridge (to use the common figures of speech for a subject under assault), or simply to survive? And does that leave room to grieve, not just for those who have been lost, but for the shards, the broken pieces and muddled fragments of the human heart that make us who we are? Barely six months after the outbreak of the First World War, on Christmas Day 1914, Freud wrote to Ernest Jones to lament that the psychoanalytic movement “is now perishing in the strife of nations” (the two men were on opposite sides in the war) (Gay, 1988, 311). “I do not delude myself,” he wrote. “The springtime of our science has abruptly broken off . . . all we can do is to keep the fire flickering in a few hearths, until a more favourable wind makes it possible to light it again to full blaze” (Gay, 1988, 311). At a time of pandemic like the one we are living in today, is there room for anything like the complex reckoning with life and with death that is the unique domain of psychoanalysis?

“There used to be no house,” Walter Benjamin wrote in his 1936 essay “The Storyteller,” “hardly a room, in which someone had not once died” (Benjamin, 1968, 94). In modern life on the other hand, he argued, dying had been pushed beyond the perceptual realm of the living. Today death is no longer exiled to the outskirts of existence. Instead, it is an unremitting presence that seems to trail us from room to room. As our screens flicker daily with the toll of the dead, it is hard not to be overcome by the scale of a tragedy that has left people we love dying in isolation, funerals pared back beyond decency, the rituals of family commemoration that make death manageable, or almost manageable, outlawed. Not to speak of the interminable counting that reduces humans to abstractions, robbing us a second time of each individual loss, even while, in the words of UK palliative care doctor, Rachel Clarke, the pandemic “unfolds one

death at a time.” “When the statistics threaten to throw me off balance” she wrote of her struggle to restore dignity to those dying in hospital, “I try to keep things as small as I can” (Clarke, 2020).

Even harder, perhaps, in such moments, is the idea of allowing ourselves to admit our emotional ambivalence towards the dead as much as the living which, in our non-pandemic existence – if such a world can be imagined again – is our daily psychic fare. Truth, they say, is the first casualty of war; but psychic truth is not what is being talked about. War and pandemic strip the mind bare. They share a brute ability to smother our psychic repertoire. Just for a second, and if only in the public mind, they make grief seem pure. We cheer soldiers off to battle and weep when they fall; we stand gut-wrenched and helpless as a pandemic ravages its way through the homes that allowed us to cherish the illusion of safety. “You have, my poor child, seen death break into the family for the first time, or heard about it,” Freud wrote to his eldest daughter, Mathilde, when Heinrich Graf – her uncle, his brother-in-law – died suddenly in 1908, “and perhaps shuddered at the idea that for none of us can life be made any safer” (Freud to Mathilde Freud, 26 March, 1908, Schur, 1972, 263). He offered no false consolation. We do not live in a safe world. But he did insist that, for old people like him, an awareness of the inevitable end gives life its special value – Freud was about to turn 52, one of several points during his life when he was convinced he would die.

On 25 January 1920, Freud’s favourite daughter, Sophie Halberstadt-Freud (he called her his “Sunday child”), died during her third pregnancy from complications arising from Spanish flu, which had wiped out millions across Europe since the first recorded case on 4 March 1918. His daughter was one of its late casualties, falling like a soldier killed just before or after peace is declared – a bitter irony given that the final wave which killed her was by no means the most deadly of the three. In fact, according to some analysts, this was a fourth wave exclusive to northern countries, many of whose citizens had wrongly believed themselves to be free of the disease by December 1918, when there had been time to recover from the surge in infections following the Armistice celebrations in the streets (Spinney, 2014, 44-45). Beyond the fact of their historical coincidence, the plague and the war were two piled up disasters. The destiny of one was bound to the fate of the other. Erich Ludendorff, the commander of the German forces, declared that the Spanish flu had robbed him of victory. Things had started to go downhill for the Central Powers in April 1918, when the disease made its first appearance in the trenches: until March that year they had believed they could win the war (Spinney, 249-250).

The Spanish flu has turned out to be a silent stalker of history, barely included in lists of the world's modern afflictions, even though its death toll came close to the combined toll of the two world wars. Laura Spinney – whose book about the Spanish flu, *Pale Rider*, was published before the arrival of Covid-19 – suggests that what can fairly be described as the worst “massacre” of the 20th century has been rubbed out of history (Spinney, 4). Censorship also trailed the course of the disease, the extent of whose devastation was, just like today, silenced or palmed off from one country to the next. It was only called “Spanish” flu because Spain – neither the country of origin nor the most stricken – was the only nation not to suppress the truth of its virulent nature. Freud himself barely mentions it, though it claimed the lives of 15,000 Viennese. By the autumn of 1918, schools and theatres in the city were being intermittently closed to reduce the risk of infection (Gay, 382). In 1919, the year before Sophie's death, three of Freud's other children, Anna, Ernst and Mathilde, had fallen ill. In May that year his wife, Martha, after years of undernourishment as she tried to manage for the whole family through the war, went down with a case of “grippe-pneumonie”, with recurrent waves of high fever, from which she took two months to recover (Gay, 382).

Conditions were not alleviated at the end of the war, when a defeated Austria was left, in the words of Stefan Zweig, “a mutilated rump, bleeding from all arteries” (Gay, 380). By then Freud, far from his earlier, exhilarated support for the Central Powers, welcomed the dismantling of the Habsburg Empire: “I weep not a single tear for *this* Austria or *this* Germany” (“all my libido is given to Austro-Hungary” he had pronounced in 1914 in response to the declaration of war) (Freud to Ferenczi, 23 August, 1914, Jones, 2, 192). “We are all of us slowly failing,” he wrote in 1919 to Jones, “in health and bulk” (Freud to Jones, 24 January, 1919, Gay, 378). His family was subsisting on a “starvation diet” (“*Hungerkost*”, Freud to Ferenczi, 9 April 1919, Gay, 381). A year later, Freud and his wife were unable to get to their sick daughter because there were no trains – “not even a children's train”, he wrote on 27 January 1920 to the Swiss pastor Oskar Pfister (Freud to Pfister, 27 January, 1920, Meng and Freud, 75), referring to the trains of the international children's association that were ferrying children out of starving Austria (Schur, 330n).

Over the preceding years, Freud's greatest anxiety had been for his sons Martin and Ernst, who had eagerly enlisted when war began (a third son, Oliver, rejected for active service, served as an army engineer). The dangers they faced at the front troubled his dreams. A nightmare in 1915

had as its manifest content “very clearly the death of my sons, Martin first of all” (he called it a “prophetic dream”) (Freud to Ferenczi, 10 July, 1915, Gay, 354). All his sons would outlive their father’s night-time prophecy, but he was right to tremble on their behalf. Martin, a prisoner of war on the Italian front, eventually returned home in April 1919, but he was one of the lucky ones. More than a million Austro-Hungarian soldiers died either in battle or from disease (Gay, 381). At no point did Freud have the slightest intimation – why would he? – that it was the fate of his daughter at the mercy of the Spanish flu which he should most dread.

As I was preparing this lecture, it slowly became clear that, because of Covid-19, I would not be able to deliver it on May 6, the anniversary of Freud’s birth, as has been the unfailing tradition for the lectures until now. Instead, the decision was made to postpone the lecture to another no less significant date, 23 September, 1939, the anniversary of the day he died. The switch seems apposite, resonant of the times, while also echoing the tension between affirmation and destruction, between life and death, that from 1919 onwards was increasingly at the core of Freud’s work. It was no doubt in response to this pressing context that I found myself newly alert to the wretchedness of the hour as it closed around Freud’s family in Vienna, around the walls of what is now the Freud Museum where I should have been speaking, first during the First World War and its aftermath, and then on the cusp of the even more deadly Second World War.ⁱ I became acutely aware, that is, of the way the disasters of history penetrate, float in and out, ricochet and are repudiated by the mind – including my own since, during a lifelong preoccupation with Freud, I had not fully grasped the scope of this reality before.

Psychoanalysis begins with a mind in flight, a mind that cannot take the measure of its own pain. It begins, that is, with the recognition that the world – or what Freud sometimes referred to as “civilisation” – makes demands on human subjects that are too much to bear. Rereading the famous biographies – Jones, Peter Gay, Max Schur – I was now struck by just how exposed and vulnerable Freud was to the ills, major and petty, of the times, and by the fierce contrasts in his moods between blindness and insight, equanimity and dismay. Freud was articulate about what he personally found most insufferable: debt was his greatest fear (by the end of the war he had lost 95 per cent of his cash savings); to those afflicted by poverty he responded with a mix of compassion and dread; he hated rationing; there were no lengths he would not go to in order to

ⁱ Because Covid-19 prevented my travelling to Vienna, the lecture was live-streamed from the Freud Museum in London.

secure the precious cigars that were killing him. For all the privilege of this Viennese family, they skirted penury and floundered in wellbeing and health. As we have recently seen only too clearly, disaster uncovers the material and racial fault-lines of a society, but it also unforgivingly exposes the truth that no human subject is spared, in Freud's words, "the perplexity and helplessness of the human race" (Freud, 1927, 18).

To read Freud against this backdrop is to witness someone capable of the wildest fluctuations, covering the entire range of switching moods to which everyone I know, affected by today's pandemic, has at one point or another succumbed. "We are suffering under no restrictions, no epidemic, and are in good spirits," he wrote to Jones at the start of the war, before his misplaced faith in the cause of the Central Powers began to wane (Freud to Jones, 22 November 1914, Gay, 353). "Curiously" he wrote to the Hungarian psychoanalyst Sandor Ferenczi in February 1917 (when food was scarce and lack of heating froze his fingers, making anything apart from letter-writing impossible), "my spirits are unshaken" – "proof", he continued, of "how little justification in reality one needs for inner wellbeing" (Freud to Ferenczi, 16 February, 1917, Jones, 2, 216). In August 1918 he wrote to Karl Abraham to say that he could once again venture to "join in the world's pleasure and the world's pain" (Freud to Abraham, 27 August, 1918, Schur, 316). He was citing Goethe, although the German word "*tragen*" is less "join in" than "bear" or "endure" ("*der Erde Lust, der Erde Leid zu tragen*"), as if in the world he was living, pleasure, no less than pain, had become a burden (Freud to Abraham, 27 August 1918, Schur, 316).

He would also plunge into mental darkness. "One has to use every means possible to withdraw from the frightful tension in the world outside," he wrote to Ferenczi in 1916. "It is not to be borne." In November 1914, as the full horror of the war was beginning to emerge, he wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé: "I and my contemporaries will never again see a joyous world. It is too hideous." (Freud to Lou-Andreas Salomé, 25 November, 1914, Schur, 292). Mankind was a doomed experiment and did not deserve to survive. "We have to abdicate," he continued, "and the Great Unknown, he or it, lurking behind Fate, will one day repeat such an experiment with another race" (Freud to Salomé, Schur 292). In an extraordinary gesture of radical self-abnegation – not the type of gesture for which he is best known – Freud was willing to sacrifice humanity, as we might say these days, to save the planet (he could not of course have foreseen today's Voluntary Human Extinction Movement whose motto is "May we live long and die out," Cain, 2020) Later, in the 1930s, with the next war on the horizon, he again speculated that

the human race was approaching its end, now that the “ perfection of the instruments of destruction” allowed two enemies to exterminate each other (Freud, 1933, 213). Our great failing, he suggested, was the gulf which “ earlier periods of human arrogance had torn too wide apart between mankind and the animals” (Freud, 1939, 100). Freud’s despair was global and multi-species in its reach (a fact that seems to have received virtually no commentary, given the common travesty that his concerns were restricted to the small, privileged elite of Vienna). But it was the tragedy closer to home, Sophie’s death, that ushered his despair into a new phase – though it would not be until the death from tuberculosis of his grandson Heinele, Sophie’s second child, three years later, at the age of four, that he would declare all his joy in the world gone for ever. “ I myself was aware,” he wrote to his Hungarian friends Katà and Lajos Lévy, “of never having loved a human being, certainly never a child, so much” (Freud to Katà and Lajos Lévy, 11 June 1923, Schur, 358). Years later he would write to his friend Ludwig Binswanger, after Binswanger’s son had died: “ We shall remain inconsolable and never find a substitute . . . It is the only way of perpetuating the love which we do not wish to renounce” – an idea that could not be further from his best-known writing on mourning as a task to be completed (Freud to Binswanger, .11-12 April, 1929, Schur, 421; Wolff Bernstein, 2020).

So what, on this hundredth anniversary of the death of Sophie Halberstadt-Freud, did the loss of the daughter do to her father, Sigmund Freud? And how might this story help us confront the awfulness of our own time, when unimaginable deaths – Freud described the war as “inconceivable” – are again legion? In 1924, Fritz Wittels, Freud’s first biographer, suggested that there was a link between Sophie Halberstadt’s death and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), in which Freud introduced the idea of the death drive. Freud’s rebuttal came fast. The suggestion was implausible, he said. He wrote the first draft in 1919, when Sophie was still alive. It turns out that Freud had pre-empted Wittels; in July 1920, four years before the biography appeared, he had written to Max Eitingon: “ You will be able to certify that it was half-finished when Sophie was alive and flourishing” (Freud to Max Eitingon, 18 July 1920, Schur, 553) . This is already bizarre – “ half-finished” leaves plenty room for additions after her death. Why, we might ask, would the fact that it was completed before she died be presented as something which, in an unspecified future, would need to be *certified* (“*sie werden bestätigen können*”)? Today, thanks to the indefatigable efforts of the Freud scholar Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, who first brought the early manuscripts of his writing to light, we know that he was being evasive (she describes these “hitherto neglected and silent” documents as “rough hewn and overwhelming,” Grubrich-Simitis, 1996, 1). An entire new chapter, Chapter Six, the longest by far, was added to

a later draft, taking up almost a third of the published text (the new chapter ousted Chapter Six of the first draft which became Chapter Seven). The new chapter contained the first appearance in print of the term “ death drive” . Its only earlier appearance was in two letters to Eitingon of February 1920, just weeks after Sophie’s death (Grubrich-Simitis, 189). I think it would, therefore, be fair to say that Freud owes the genesis of this unprecedented concept to her.

In his response to Wittels, Freud acknowledges dismissively – Grubrich-Simitis’ word is “laconic” - only a single addition to the text: a “ discussion concerning the mortality or immortality of protozoa” (Grubrich-Simitis, 189). He is surely here displaying what he called the “ kettle logic” of the unconscious, in which a defendant offers a run of arguments, each invalidating the next: he had finished the text already; there is nothing significant in the additions he made; the only new material concerned the immortality and/or mortality of biological life (as if such a topic could have no bearing on the death of a child). In his letter to Pfister after she died, he described Sophie as being “ snatched away . . . as if she had never been” (Freud to Pfister, 27 January 1920, Meng and Freud, 75). “ The undisguised brutality of our time,” he continued, “ weighs heavily on us” (Meng and Freud, 75). Nothing, surely, conveys the sense of a life being snuffed out forever than loved ones in the prime of their lives dying in the midst of a war or pandemic (in this historic moment of Freud’s life, both more or less at the same time). How do you hold on to any intimation of futurity beyond death – whether in the shape of the immortal germ plasm or the eternal soul – when people all around you are dying like flies?

Beyond the Pleasure Principle is one of the most important works of the second half of Freud” s life. It is the culmination of his thinking on the topography of the mind and it introduces the new dualism of the drives (it was also the first of his works to be published as an individual monograph). It has excited passionate enthusiasm and virulent hostility in equal measure. Max Schur goes to considerable lengths to discredit it, which may seem odd given that his book is devoted to understanding the place of death in Freud’ s life and work. But the idea of an unconscious demonic principle driving the psyche to distraction could be said to sabotage once and for all the vision of man in control of his mind – and for Schur, as for many others, it was therefore anathema. I am not exaggerating. Schur was Freud” s physician in his dying years. When the pain of Freud’s cancer left his life without value or meaning, Schur – on the basis of a

spoken agreement between them – administered the fatal dose of morphine.ⁱⁱ It was unquestionably Freud’s wish, and Schur is eloquent on the dignity with which he approached the end of his life after 16 years of suffering. But at the risk of wild analysis, my reading is that Schur could only live with what he had done so long as he could trust in man’s ability to subordinate his will to his reason, and – contrary, one might say, to the entire spirit of psychoanalysis – always to do what is best for himself.

Who does death belong to? If this has become a question during the current pandemic it is because the lack of state provision, the missing medical supplies, the dearth of equipment and isolation from human touch have made it feel to many for the first time that death is something of which a person – the one dying, and those closest to her or him – can be robbed. Freud and his wife could not reach their sick daughter because there was no transport, not even the trains getting children out of a starving country in the aftermath of war. They could not be with her when she died. This may help us to understand these remarkable lines from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, from what we now know to be its new Chapter Six: “If we are to die ourselves, and first to lose in death those who are dearest to us, it is easier to submit to a remorseless law of nature, to the sublime ἀνάγκη [Necessity], than to a chance that might perhaps have been escaped” (Freud, 1920, 45). In the preceding chapter, Freud had been elaborating on the repetition compulsion, which he had first identified in soldiers returning from battle who found themselves reliving their worst experiences in night-time and waking dreams. Slowly tracing this tendency from the front to the consulting room (patients wedded to their symptoms), Freud concludes that such a compulsion is a property of all living matter. The urge of all organic life is to restore an earlier state of things. What follows is a considerable downgrade in the status of the drives of self-preservation and mastery that were key to his earlier topography of the mind, as they are all now seen to be working in the service of the organism’s need to follow the path to its own death: “The organism wishes to die only in its own fashion.” “*The aim of all life,*” Freud states in perhaps one of his most counterintuitive affirmations, “*is death*” (Freud, 1920, 38-39).

In this theoretical trajectory – by Freud’s own account one of his most speculative – he is moving between elegy and treatise, between sorrow and science: “We are strengthened in our

ⁱⁱ This version of events is contested although there is no conclusive evidence for any of the alternative versions. For a strong summary of the issues, see Nobus, 2021; Molnar, 2013. See also Lucie Freud to Felix Augenfeld, 2 October 1939, Library of Congress, 1939, 1973, 1976). I am grateful to Daniela Finzi for alerting me to this controversy and to Dany Nobus and Michael Molnar for sharing their research.

belief,” he says, “ by the writings of our poets” (Freud, 1920, 45). But what stood out here for me this time was a dimension that seemed to enter his thought with the death of Sophie, to which we can now confidently say this whole chapter came in response. Better death as a silent companion than a death that falls out of the skies. A remorseless law of nature is preferable to a death that should – might – not have taken place. The resonance for today could not be more striking, as one person after another is confronted with the intolerable idea that their loved ones died through the sheer, reckless inefficiency of political scoundrels whose behaviour, in the words of one *Guardian* newspaper columnist, “is often indistinguishable from deliberate destructiveness” (Williams, 2020).

We know that all Freud’ s writing coils out of his inner world, but I can think of no other moment when he lays his psychological cards on the table with such transparency. Nothing worse than the idea of death as part of a string of accidents. Hence the numerous cases of negligence which are being brought against the UK government on behalf of some of the twenty thousand victims of Covid-19 who, if lockdown had been declared one week earlier in March 2020, would not have died: care-workers in their twenties, young predominantly BAME nurses and doctors (Black, Asian, minority ethnic), dementia sufferers who, once their families could no longer visit, lost the will to live. Through the merciless randomness of their deaths, the victims of pandemic and war are being deprived of the essence of life. This is what Freud is trying to give back to his daughter, restoring her rightful inheritance. To put it simply: without the belief that life should move along its path to its own end, her sudden death – five days after falling ill – would have been too much for him to bear: “ easier to submit to a remorseless law of nature . . . than to a chance that might perhaps have been escaped” . “Perhaps,” he adds, “we have adopted the belief because there is some comfort in it.” “ It may be,” he adds, citing Schiller, “ that this belief in the internal necessity of dying is only another of those illusions which we have created “um die Schwere das Daseins zu ertragen” [“to bear the burden of existence”] (Freud, 1920, 45). He was warding off her destiny, naming it for the outrage it was. At a time like today, for all the glaring differences of class and race in how, where and whom the pandemic strikes, this prospect has to include just about everyone. Freud is offering a philosophy of grief. He helps us understand why what is happening among us now can feel as much an internal as an external catastrophe. Death in a pandemic is no way to die.

Freud’ s dismissal, in his exchange with Wittels, of his own ruminations on the immortality of the germ plasm should give us pause. As if immortality were not something you were likely to

find yourself thinking about after the death of a child. This perhaps partly explains the reason why, in a letter to Ferenczi written two weeks after she died, grief-stricken as he was, he described her loss as a “narcissistic injury”, to be uncovered deep beneath the daily duties through which he was finding his way back into his life (Freud to Ferenczi, 4 February 1920, Schur, 331). “I do as much work as I can,” he had written to Pfister two days after she died, “and am grateful for the distraction. The loss of a child seems to be a grave blow to one” s narcissism” (Freud to Pfister, 27 January, 1920, Meng and Freud, 75).

A closer look at Chapter Six of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which sees Freud on the trail of biological death, can perhaps guide us here (although, as he notes, in the writing of biologists, the whole concept of death “melts away in their hands,” Freud, 1920, 45). His question is whether biology will confirm his conviction that death is an inherent property of all organic life, or whether there is something in living substance that is immortal. According to the evolutionary biologist August Weisman, death belonged solely to multicellular organisms whose soma dies at the moment of reproduction when the germ plasm enters a new living form. Unicellular organisms, on the other hand, do not appear to die but eternally reproduce themselves. Or you could argue, as Max Hartmann did in *Death and Reproduction (Tod und Fortpflanzung)*, (Hartman, 1906), that death cannot be reduced to the appearance of a dead body, but describes the moment when a cell comes to the end of its individual development as it mutates and gives itself over to the next stage of life (Freud, 1920, 45-49).

What matters here is not whether biology can actually give backing to Freud’s troubled concept of a human drive to death. As is so often the case in his work, the issue is what these preoccupations generate, what they allow him to go on thinking about. “In this sense,” Freud writes with more than a hint of satisfaction, “protozoa too are mortal; in their case death always coincides with reproduction, but it is to some extent obscured by it, since the whole substance of the parent animal may be transmitted directly into the young offspring” (Freud, 1920, 47). The only thing that saves the organism from dying is its passage, entire, into its offspring – perish the thought, one might say. Transpose this into human life, and the death of a biological child becomes a narcissistic injury because it is only through the existence of children that the parent has a stab at eternity. What Freud is saying here is as chilling as it is simple. The only thing that keeps a parent alive is their child.

Freud's death drive seems, therefore, to lose itself in the minutiae of organic life. But at the same time it reaches into the external political world: contrary to what is often suggested, the two realms of Freud's thinking work in tandem. Remember that the war was the essential backdrop to the concept of the repetition compulsion as returning soldiers were reliving the dangers inflicted by the outside world (the very concept of trauma which, according to an influential misreading, Freud – from the 1890s onwards – had definitively left behind). Freud's preoccupation with organic life and with the perils of the world, with inmost biological process and external hardship, become increasingly tied up in his thought, just as the question of what we inherit without knowing it (our predisposition), and what the world rains down on us (the accidents of life) begin to come together on the same page. I have no doubt that it is Covid-19 that has newly alerted me to these strange alliances, not least as I struggle, like so many, to bring into some psychic alignment the pain of my inner life and the tragedy unfolding outside my door. How to link these domains becomes the preoccupation of the second phase of Freud's working life. This is what war does to theory. At a symposium on "The Psychoanalysis of the War Neuroses," delivered at the Fifth International Psychoanalytical Congress held in Budapest in 1918, Freud refuses the distinction between war neuroses and peacetime neuroses, which pits the external threat of the former against the internal libidinal conflict of the latter. Freud wants to unite them. The difficulties in doing so, he concludes, cease to be insuperable if one "described repression, which lies at the basis of every neurosis, as a reaction to a trauma – *as an elementary traumatic neurosis*" (Freud, 1919, 210, my italics). Repression, which is the foundation of all neuroses, is a trauma in and of itself. No one escapes. In the midst of the war, trauma, we might say, has been reinstated, straddling the division between inner and outer worlds. By his own account, a traumatised soldier is torn between the two: between the demands of loyalty to his ego – which tells him to avoid danger at any cost – and loyalty to his nation, which requires that he be prepared to die (Freud, 1919, 209).

Are war and pandemic the worst things that can happen to humankind? If at first sight this seems an insane question – though not, as we will see, as insane as Freud's reply – it nonetheless has resonance for the task he has set himself of trying to track the impact of the world on its subjects, and of bygone ages on present time. We have seen that a pre-occupation with immortality, duration and transmission runs through Chapter Six of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as Freud tried to navigate his daughter's death and face up to the fact that a link in the chain of being had been broken beyond repair. But in another work written in the middle of the war, Freud follows a different path of prehistory. This time it is not the life of the germ plasm but

a far-off epoch when existence could fairly be described as hell on earth – war and pandemic shrink by its side. I am referring to Freud” s 12th meta-psychological paper, which he did not wish to see the light of day, and which again none of us would have been able to access without the scholarly devotion of Grubrich-Simitis, who published it in 1987 under the title “ A Phylogenetic Fantasy” (Freud, 1915a, 1987).ⁱⁱⁱ It was one of seven meta-psychological papers that Freud discarded or destroyed. Retrieving it against his wishes, Grubrich-Simitis was playing Max Brod to his Kafka. She calls it a “ document of failure” – it is truly wild – but also accords it the deepest respect, arguing that it is the text in which Freud’s theories of the drive and of trauma, so often seen as incompatible, reveal their deepest affiliation. “My thesis,” she writes, “is that Freud, in his phylogenetic fantasy, once again made an effort to integrate theoretically the traumatic aspects of pathogenesis into the drive model – a task with which we are still confronted today” (Grubrich-Simitis, 1988, 6).

“ The Phylogenetic Fantasy” , or “ Overview of the Transference Neuroses” , makes the speculations of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* look like hard science. In the beginning, Freud narrates, an Ice Age turned man into an anxious animal when “ the hitherto predominantly friendly outside world . . . transformed itself into a mass of threatening perils.” “ Food was not sufficient to permit an increase in the human hordes, and the powers of the individual were not enough to keep so many helpless beings alive” (Freud, 1915a, 14). Faced with an emergency “beyond his control” , man imposed on himself a ban on reproduction, since to propagate the species in a time of such want was to put his very existence on the line: no children, no future, no glimpse of eternal life (Freud, 1915a, 14). Man” s response to such a brute curtailing of his drives was hysteria: the origins of conversion hysteria in modern times in which the libido is a danger to be subdued. Man also became a tyrant, bestowing on himself unrestrained dominance as a reward for his power to safeguard the lives of the many: “ Language was magic to him, his thoughts seemed omnipotent to him, he understood the world according to his ego” (Freud, 1915a, 15). I love this. Tyranny is the silent companion of catastrophe, as has been so flagrantly demonstrated in the behaviour of the rulers of several nations across the world today, not least Donald Trump. As if to say: I will save you, but you must make me king (not that such rulers save anyone). Not to mention the accompanying idea that the tyrant was the first hysteric: the

ⁱⁱⁱ Freud” s title had been “Overview of the Transference Neuroses,” which Grubrich-Simitis makes the sub-title of the English edition as it corresponds less closely to the work’s content.

idea of bodily panic as the unspoken subtext of masculine power is as unexpected – and as progressive – as any of Freud’s thoughts. Note how political he is being in a text too easily dismissed as sheer fantasy, including by Freud himself. Rather, I suggest that we see this paper as a thought experiment allowing him to take huge, and unprecedented, mental strides.

What passes through the generations, then, deep within the psyche of the people, is anxiety. Anxiety in response to an imperilled world, but also as a reaction to the tyranny of the powers that come to meet it. This is what children usher down through the generations: “ the children bring along the anxiousness of the beginning of the Ice Age (Freud, 1915a, 14). The child is repeating the history of the species, offering Freud support in his belief in phylogenetic transmission – the “ preponderance of the phylogenetic disposition over all other factors” Freud, 1915a, 14). A year later, in Lecture 23 of the Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, “The Path to Symptom Formation,” he states, “I have repeatedly been led to suspect that the psychology of the neuroses has stored up in it more of the antiquities of human development than any other source” (in *Totem and Taboo*, he had suggested that guilt can be stored in the unconscious of peoples for “many thousands of years,” Freud, 1916-17, 371, 1912-1913, 158). “What,” he asks, “are the ways and means employed by one generation in order to hand on its mental states to the next one?” (Freud, 1912-1913, 158). An emphasis which, he also insists, does not eliminate the question of acquisition: “ It only moves it into still earlier prehistory” (Freud, 1915a, 10). This is Freud’s Lamarckianism to which he remained committed, even when Lamarck’s findings had been scientifically discredited (although this is contested today).

What this strange unpublished meditation allows us to infer is that the concept of phylogenesis, far from being some biologicistic remnant in his thought, is his way of acknowledging the parlous state of mankind: want, poverty affliction and trouble, the catastrophes of history, the burden of the past. Modern-day psychoanalysis talks of “ transgenerational haunting” , the unconscious passage of historical trauma from one generation to the next. We bring our ancestors trailing behind us, which means that, while we may die our own death, we also die on behalf of others who were there before us. Once more way ahead of his time, Freud has taken this reality, which is now clinically recognised, and injected it into the bloodstream of humankind. The organism passes its entire substance into the next generation. Given a world of disasters, Freud’s 1915 paper reminds us of the price. As Grubrich-Simitis put it in a 1987 lecture on the topic, Freud was writing a guide for our own times, “ should we want to imagine a new man-made Ice Age, and think in psychoanalytic terms about the consequences of a nuclear winter” Grubrich-Simitis,

1988, 5). Nuclear winter then, pandemic or climate catastrophe now: the document still has no less, and no less alarming, resonance.

We are not done with the death drive. My attempt to grapple with it would be deeply misleading if I stopped there. In Freud's account, that drive does not only belong on the side of quiescence, the slow, steady return of the living organism to an inanimate state.^{iv} If the death drive is one of the most controversial of Freud's theories, it is not just because of the deathly pallor it casts over life. It is also – perhaps even more so – because it turns violence into the internal property of everyone. This aspect of the drive proved to be an idea even more scandalous than Freud's earlier belief that the drive for pleasure was the chief motivator of human life. Not least because it put paid to the cherished illusion that the evils of the world are the responsibility of everyone other than oneself. In 1929, Freud wrote to Einstein:

All our attention is directed to the outside, whence dangers threaten and satisfactions beckon. From the inside, we only want to be left in peace. So if someone tries to turn our attention inward, in effect twisting its neck, then our whole organisation resists – just as, for example, the oesophagus and the urethra resist any attempt to reverse their normal direction of passage (Freud to Einstein, 26 March 1929, Grubrich-Simitis, 1996, 11, translation modified).

This must be one of his most visceral statements on the reason for the hostility of the response to psychoanalysis. “There is nothing for which man's capabilities are less suited,” he had written somewhat more decorously to Binswanger in 1911, “than psychoanalysis” (Freud to Binswanger, 28 May 1911, Schur, 262).

Once again, this idea, elaborated for the first time in Chapter Six of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is deeply imbricated in war. We may conjecture that it would have made Freud's task too easy, his own grief fraudulent, if he had not also considered the way war shatters the innocence of the human mind – after all, to begin with, all his libido had been on the side of the war. What drives people crazy in wartime is their capacity, after a lifetime of prohibition and restraint, to take violence upon themselves. Not just because killing presents man with a clash, as Freud puts it, between “the claims of humanity” and “the demands of a national war” (Freud, 1919, 214). But because it brings him up against the violence that is an inner portion of being

^{iv} “Quiescence,” or “*ruhende*” in German is the word Freud repeatedly uses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to describe how the mental apparatus tries to subdue the trauma of acute physical or mental shock. (Freud, 1920, 30-31, 1940, 30-31).

human. “ Consider,” Freud wrote in his 1916 introductory lecture on the censorship of dreams, “the Great War which is still laying Europe waste. Think of the vast amount of brutality, cruelty and lies which are able to spread over the civilised world. Do you really believe that a handful of ambitious and deluding men without conscience could have succeeded in unleashing all these evil spirits if their millions of followers did not share their guilt?” (Freud, 1916-1917, 146). As in 1916, so in 2016 with the election of Trump, and since, in the era of Bolsonaro, Modi, Erdoğan, Orbán, Duterte et al. “ We lay a stronger emphasis on what is evil in men,” he continued, “ only because other people disavow it, and thereby make the human mind, not better, but incomprehensible” (Freud, 1916-1917,147).

I began by suggesting that one thing which today’s pandemic is depriving us of is the ambivalence of human grief. But as I was writing it came to seem unsurprising to me that Freud should emerge in these pages as a thinker of disaster. In a world today gone numb under the pressure of incompetence, lies and false triumphalism, his ideas can help us restore, first the bald truth of what is happening, and then – and only on that basis – all the shades of our inner world that live and die in the unconscious. In a relatively unknown section of “ Thoughts for the Time on War and Death” , written in 1915, Freud describes the birth pangs of ethical life arising when man, as yet unsullied by civilisation, confronted the mix of emotions – despair, rage, hatred and pleasure – that he experienced in the face of death, especially towards those he loved most. “In each of the loved persons,” he writes, “there was also something of the stranger... there adheres to the tenderest and most intimate of our love-relations a small portion of hostility which can excite an unconscious death-wish” (Freud, 1915b, 213). Out of this mix arises the first ethical commandment, “ Thou shalt not kill” : “ It was acquired,” he writes, “ in relation to dead people who were loved as a reaction against the satisfaction hidden behind the grief for them; and it was gradually extended to strangers who were not loved, and finally even to enemies” (Freud, 1915b, 295). But, he observes, with an eye to the unfolding war, such an embrace of everyone, enemies included, has been lost to so-called “ civilised man” together with the “ vein of ethical sensitiveness” that accompanied it (Freud, 1915b, 295).

When teaching Freud, I use these lines to convey to students that, at decisive moments, he was far less ethnocentric than is often assumed. But what makes these thoughts so relevant today is the implied message, one that is barely audible at a time when the exile of the psyche to the outskirts of existence – like death in the time of Walter Benjamin - is the unshared secret of the hour. Only if you admit your ambivalence even towards those you love most is there the faintest

chance that you will reach out across the world to everyone, including your putative enemies: to China, for example, a country the Western world is now being told to hate; to black men being mown down on the streets; to the citizens of another country which, in the race for a Covid-19 vaccine, may just be ahead in the game; to all those who are also suffering, whether from war or pandemic, or, like everyone else, simply from the fact of being human. But for this to happen, the present-day run of narcissistic – mainly male – leaders would first have to acknowledge their failings, something of which they seem constitutionally incapable and which would entail withdrawing their casually dispersed and carefully targeted hatreds. “ I, of course, belong to a race,” Freud wrote to Romain Rolland in 1923, “ which in the Middle Ages was held responsible for all epidemics” (Freud to Romain Rolland, 8 April, 1923, Schur, 350). Ten years later, in a letter to Marie Bonaparte, he predicted that persecution of the Jews and the suppression of intellectual freedom were the only parts of Hitler” s project that were likely to succeed (Freud to Bonaparte, 26 March 1933, Schur, 444). He would have been appalled, I think we can safely assume, by the blame-game which has become the daily accompaniment to Covid-19.

Although Freud remarked that the impulse to human empathy is difficult to explain, that compassion can be a veil for narcissism (Freud, 1921, 110n; Freud, 1918 [1914], 88), there are moments in his writing, again in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, when the bare outlines of such an impulse can be found: the protective shield of the psyche which allows itself to die to save the deeper layers of the mind from a similar fate; or the community of cells which survive even if individual cells have to die (Freud, 1920, 27, 50). Something is working through Freud” s text, a “ socius primitive” in Jacques Derrida’s reading, or a new form of common life, never more needed than now, which sheds the common pitfalls of the singular ego. Or, to permit a modern-day example, like black activist Patrick Hutchinson carrying a far-right protestor to safety, at the risk of his own, in the midst of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations in London of June this year. The video clip went viral for what it made momentarily seem possible. A life in which the pain of the times is shared, and in which every human subject, regardless of race, class, caste or sex would be able to participate (Derrida, 1980, 288; Balibar, 2020). This may be what it means to struggle for a world in which everyone is free to die their own death.

Let me end with two writers I have only recently encountered, both of whose lives brushed against Freud’s and who, in their different ways, bring these issues into stark relief. The first is Rachel Berdach, who got in touch with Freud in 1938, shortly after he arrived in London “ to die

in freedom” . They had both escaped from the Nazis; four of Freud” s five sisters, who remained, were deported to Theresienstadt; one died in the ghetto, the other three in the Treblinka extermination camp. Berdach had sent him her novel, *The Emperor, the Sages and Death* – a “ mysterious and beautiful book” , he wrote to her, which “ pleased me so much it made me unsure of my judgment” (Berdach, 1938; Freud to Rachel Berdach, 27 December 1938, Schur, 514). “Who are you?” Freud asked. “ Where did you acquire all the knowledge expressed in your book?” Freud to Berdach, Schur, 514). He invited her to meet him, and assumed, given the priority her novel grants to death, that she must be very young. Schur notes that the meeting between them took place though there appears to be no detailed record (it was one of the final encounters of his life). As for her age. Freud was right and wrong. In 1938 she was 60 years old; Freud was 82. But according to Theodor Reik, who had been her analyst, she had composed the novel in her head as a young woman, reciting it to herself word by word over decades, unwilling to commit it to print because of a fear that had set in following the death of someone she had loved. It was only after the far greater losses she experienced at the hands of the Nazis that she had been finally able to commit her novel to writing.

The book would merit an entire lecture to itself. It is orchestrated as a set of philosophical dialogues between the 13th-century German emperor and enlightened despot Frederick II, the Egyptian Arab physician Abu Sina and the rabbi Jacob Charif ben Aron. There are also several Catholic anti-Semites. Across the borders of race and creed, the novel stages a meeting and clashing of minds (Berdach, 189). The psychoanalytic resonances are everywhere, from the emperor” s wish to understand man” s propensity for the dark (the epigraph to this essay), to the rabbi” s description of Jewish understanding as aimed not just at what is being kept secret but at what is unknown (Berdach, 32, 90). As Freud observes, this is a novel about dying. “ I wish to be conscious to the very end,” the emperor asserts, “ so as not to lose life” s most mysterious part” (Berdach, 142). When the Rabbi” s scribe, Michael BenChacham, dies, the Rabbi finds in his desk a batch of papers held together by parchment, which include these despairing lines: “Is man alone accursed to know of death while full with life.” Do leaves fear autumn” s “deathly winds” , do fruits long for the tree from which they fall, do beasts hear death” s “approaching steps?” “How come,” he exclaims, “we don” t love each other? Do we not share one fate?” (Berdach, 192).

Again, this knowledge has the profoundest social and cultural repercussions. Death is, or should be, the great equaliser, flattening out the arbitrary distinctions between us. This is the Rabbi” s

cherished vision, whose political implications rebound in our time. His most fervent wish is to be neither ruler nor slave: “My dream is this: not to be ruler in my land, in any land, neither be slave in any place, not to erect new boundaries – remove the old ones for all, not to be chosen [...] My Canaan is the soil that all men plough” (Berdach, 127). For a Jew to express such sentiments – not to be chosen, Canaan as the land for all men to plough - is close to blasphemy, especially in the historical context of what was in 1938 the ongoing struggle over Palestine. What is this glimpse of an alternative ethical life? In a key chapter, the characters light on a dolls house in the imperial library which has inscribed over the gate: “Whomever thou meetest, it is Thou.” “What a small world, indeed,” Frederick exclaims, “A German elector dreams he meets himself; a Jew from Spain writes the same words which, when in India, a fakir did recite for me when asked about his faith... *Tat twam asi* – it’s you” (Berdach, 168). A bit like the Freudian unconscious, this is a world that is both one and infinite, in which everything and everybody is included, and from which nothing can escape or disappear: “no light that has once been shone, no sound that has ever been heard” (Berdach, 189).

As we have learnt over this past year, to die one’s own death is not the same thing as to die alone in a world that seems deserted (Siddique, 2020). In the very last pages, the rabbi wakes up one morning in a still, grey, empty world of disaster: “Cold fear now filled his heart. Where were the people, and was there war in the town? Had they chased out the citizens or had they fled? Had they perchance been killed? Was he the only one to have been forgotten?” “Where is he now? He cannot tell” (Berdach, 197). Slowly, realising that something awful has happened, he is overwhelmed by a single desire, to catch up with those he is sure are about to be confronted by “unexpected terror” : “ Must he not share their fate before he dies?” (Berdach, 196). He is too late. Men, beasts and plants are gone; death has swallowed the earth. Not a million miles from Grubrich-Simitis’ nuclear winter or from the catastrophe of climate change, this could be a chronicle of deaths foretold for the era we are living in now. The rabbi dies in isolation, but it is to a solidarity of people amid disaster – “ Must he not share their fate?” – that he commits his last breath.

In 1937, a year before the encounter between Berdach and Freud, the German psychoanalyst and neurologist John Rittmeister returned from Switzerland to Germany to complete his training analysis – at considerable risk, since he was known to the authorities for his communist sympathies. Appointed director of the Göring Institute, the skeleton psychoanalytic institute purged of Jews that was permitted to function under Hitler, he worked for the resistance until he

was arrested by the Gestapo for treason in 1942 and executed in Plötzensee Prison in 1943. His remarkable prison diaries contain two entries that go to the heart of our theme. In the first, dated 24 December 1942, Rittmeister refers to his “abominable fate”, and then immediately chastises himself: “I say “my abominable fate”, forgetting too quickly the millions of “abominable fates” being played out across Europe and everywhere without an end to blood, suffering, tears and fear. Like someone who loses all taste because their neighbour’s plate is empty, this suffering prevents me from enjoying the pleasures of life” (Evard, 1984, 172). In the second, dated 12 January 1943, he is musing on two different ways of ethical being in the world. One is dominated by the self, where an individual simply absorbs the other into their own mental sphere, turning them into no more than an occasion for enlarging their own ego. The second path, by contrast, grants autonomy to the other – making them free to subsist in their own way. This way of being belongs, he writes, at the core of Freud’s work, which teaches us “love, not introversion” (Evard, 174).

Against the odds, Rittmeister was dying his own death. But how, we may ask, could a man on the brink of execution by the Nazis find room to think of the millions of others doomed to an abominable fate, and remain so expansive and open? Today, in the midst of a pandemic seemingly without end, there are calls for new forms of solidarity in life and in death, and for a new inclusive, political consciousness. How, though, to find a place in this new reality for the darker aspects of being human which, like upside-down sunflowers, remain at the centre of the unfinished project of psychoanalysis? Failing which, with the best will in the world, any move we make in that direction will, I fear, prove in the long run to be an empty gesture. To make sure this does not happen, we could perhaps do worse, as I have tried to do here, than to return to Freud’s radical, all-encompassing and finally loving vision.

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