Questions for Freud

The Secret History of Psychoanalysis

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Contents

Preface ix
Acknowledgments xii
Abbreviations xiii

Introduction: Why Question Freud? 1

I Fundamental Contradictions of Freudian Thought 7

1. Dream Interpretation: Free Association or Universal Symbolism? 9
2. The Concept of Psychical Reality and Its Traps 24

II Psychoanalysis in the Eye of Literature 45

3. Applied Psychoanalysis in Question 47
4. A Case Study in Literary Psychoanalysis: Jensen's Gradiva 54
5. The Distortions of Psychoanalysis: Freud versus Jensen 76

III Transmissions of Psychoanalysis 95

6. Censorship and Secrets in the Historical Topography of Psychoanalysis 97
7. The Setbacks of Catharsis: Emmy von N. 108

8. Neutralizing Constructive Criticism: Freud Faced with Ferenczi's Research on Trauma 115

IV Gaining Insight into Freud 137

9. Methodological Issues 139
10. The Freud Family's Disaster Seen through the Original Documents 145
11. Freud's Self-Analysis and the Field of Biographical Studies 156
12. Freud's Dreams: Witnesses to His Family Disaster 166
13. The Secret of Psychoanalysis 219

Conclusion 223

Notes 227
Index 235

Preface

Why is it, we ask, that in Freudian psychoanalysis extraordinary vistas of comprehension are at once opened and closed? We have discovered fundamental theoretical, clinical, and institutional paradoxes at the very core of psychoanalysis. The aim of our *Questions for Freud* is to pinpoint the internal contradictions that undermine the potential effectiveness of key aspects of Freudian thought (concerning, for example, dream interpretation, the origins of neurosis, reality, trauma, fantasy, sexual repression, and the psychoanalytic study of literature)—in the hope of finding the source of those contradictions. Showing that Freudian psychoanalysis is inherently paradoxical, we also call for new insight into Freud the man. Using partially unpublished documents and Freud's own dreams, we isolate a major upheaval that shook Freud and his family in 1865. In the final section of the book we address the question of the genesis of psychoanalysis. What role have hidden family traumas played in shaping Freud's psychological investigations, both promoting and impeding them by turns?

We began research on this book (first published in French in 1995) twenty years ago under vastly different political circumstances for psychoanalysis from today's. At that time, the Freudian

establishment was still enjoying its heyday of orthodoxy—and we were fighting for the right to criticize, for the freedom to open Freudian psychoanalysis to internal scrutiny. By the time we published the book, the world, at least around Freud, had changed. The pendulum had swung. As in Charles Laughton's film *The Night of the Hunter*, in which one of the characters rouses the townsfolk to lynch the very preacher she has until then adored, some of Freud's staunchest admirers had all but turned on him. Suddenly it appeared as if we had become his defenders—because we were upholding the value of psychoanalysis despite our diagnosis of its fundamental contradictions.

In any case, attackers or defenders, we are bent on transforming the premise of psychoanalytic inquiry because we have come to realize that Freud was just as often working against as for his creation. We have felt for years that psychoanalysis as a theory and as a therapeutic discipline needs to be made aware of its own internal destructive power before it can hope to answer any criticism from without. Today even the ranks of formerly confident psychoanalysts seem to be in disarray. The solution is not to cast about for new ways of presenting the merits or the inevitability of psychoanalysis in our culture and everyday language, but to allow psychoanalysis to engage in a process of maturation. Instead of indulging in self-pity about the ruthless incomprehension of the outside world, all those interested in a future for psychoanalysis need to sift through the recent assaults against it, asking what is valid in them.

If psychoanalysis is ever to have another lease on life, the first point to consider is that Freudianism in its classical form is indeed indefensible. Second, any proposition that psychoanalysis can be a viable field of psychological exploration and therapy must include an explanation (and not merely a justification) of the impostures, the lies and deceits, the dissimulation and secrets, the exclusions and ostracism that have punctuated the rise of Freudi-

anism and the entire history of the psychoanalytic movement. We are certain that if the recently intensified attacks against psychoanalysis have a real foundation, it is not grounded first and foremost on the charges brought thus far: Freud's alleged dishonesty or misconduct with his patients; his self-serving and propagandistic explanations; his willful misrepresentations and doctored evidence; the lack of independent empirical corroboration of his theories; the absence of safeguards in his system against unexamined dogma or arbitrary interpretations; his failure to produce lasting therapeutic results, let alone cures; the tendency to mistake his own obsessions and fantasies for scientific observation and clinical fact. Though serious, none of these charges would be sufficient to annihilate psychoanalysis as some of its opponents may long have wished. Still, psychoanalysis may as well disappear if it is incapable of escaping from oppressive dogma and if, for its survival, it must rely on an organization whose business it is to prevent the revelation of embarrassing clinical, personal, and historical facts or to deny their relevance.

Whether the disappearance of psychoanalysis is a necessary next step is not for us to predict. We argue that Freudian psychoanalysis is at an impasse today not because, deluding itself, it is the means of deluding others, but because its inherent contradictions have effectively prevented it from determining its own aims ever since its inception. Therefore, in our opinion, even the most trenchant attacks on Freudian psychoanalysis have value as the external manifestations of its own internal disharmony. We will let our readers draw their own conclusions. Our aim here is to spark a new debate with and about Freud's texts, to propose an exchange of opposite views from within the body of Freudian psychoanalytic theory and practice.

Introduction: Why Question Freud?

In the hope of enhancing the intrinsic potential of psychoanalysis, we are posing a number of questions for Freud. These are not queries by scientists, looking for criteria of verifiability in psychoanalytic theory; neither are they the questions of sociologists or of philosophers who might examine the contribution of Freudianism to an understanding of society or the self. Our questions reflect the interests of the therapist and the committed student of psychoanalysis. This viewpoint cannot allow disciplines other than psychoanalysis to assess its value. However, in the eyes of psychoanalysis itself, Freudian theory appears beset by fundamental contradictions. We shall uncover some of them, not to diminish Freud's achievement but to know and make known its tensions, to suggest the incessant and insidious effects of these tensions in the lives and works of those who psychoanalyze (people, texts, films, and the visual arts) or are themselves being psychoanalyzed.

If the contradictions of Freudian thought are as basic as we

claim, how should we react to them? Why not reject Freud's theories out of hand as fundamentally flawed? Should we perhaps try to free ourselves from paradox by starting from the ground up to build a more cohesive system? Can we overlook the discrepancies and continue to envision and practice psychoanalysis in our own personal ways? All of these reactions are quite acceptable, but what we believe matters is not so much the stance—faithfulness or unfaithfulness, complete repudiation, unquestioning adoption or selective use—as our willingness to rethink the very project of psychoanalysis with the full knowledge that Freud's work evolved along self-contradictory lines.

What is the use of exposing rifts in Freud's thought? Does not this type of return to canonical texts merely shut out the post-Freudian development of psychoanalysis and disregard the many non-Freudian approaches to psychotherapy? We wish to study Freudian paradoxes because we find them just as active today as they were a century ago. We also believe that nearly all modern forms of psychotherapy issue from Freud and therefore share at least some of the contradictions of his thought. These contradictions operate with the same force as they did in Freud's own time because of the specific way in which professional psychoanalysis is transmitted. Freudian theory comes down primarily through analysis; the people practicing it are patients first and only later become certified analysts. Let us admit for the sake of argument that undergoing psychoanalysis is the best preparation for understanding other people. However, this kind of teaching runs the risk of perpetuating flaws. And the gravest flaw in this domain is undoubtedly the patient/analyst's difficulty in reflecting freely on the possibility that the premises of Freudian psychoanalysis are contradictory.

We do not want to show that a Freudian idea is erroneous in itself or that another theory, articulated more recently or validated through more broadly based research, would be more correct. If there are flaws, they are not essentially experimental. The contra-

dictions we see arise from the methodological crux of Freudian theory. Many practitioners are still wondering today how important a role the psychoanalysis of real traumas as opposed to fantasies should play in therapy. Freud's vacillation on this fundamental question has affected every aspect of his theory; unknowingly, we still labor under its influence. Our aim is to halt the nearly unconscious transmission of Freudian methodological rifts. These rifts have thrown psychoanalysis into a disarray in which the most far-reaching understanding of the human psyche collides with a singular absence and, yes, even a refusal of understanding.

The paradoxes of psychoanalysis are symptomatic of its founder's psychic life. How did we arrive at this hypothesis, and what conclusions do we draw from it? We are party to the tradition inaugurated by Freud and cannot but adopt an analytic attitude toward him. We therefore raise the question of the deep-seated reasons behind the contrarieties of Freudian thought. We are not content to assert, as others have done, that Freud uses defective logic or that his enterprise is a mere sham, because our psychoanalytic orientation leads us to inquire into the source of meaning, that is, into the often concealed and painful personal sources of meaning, even of paradoxical meaning. We ask: Why did Freud—wittingly or unwittingly—have a high level of tolerance for clinical, theoretical, and institutional contradictions? We propose an answer: Freud constructed his theories of unconscious mental life even while crucial insight into the traumatic aspects of his immediate family's life forever eluded him. If the methodological fissures of psychoanalysis result from Freud's own familial traumas, we no longer have to adopt the contradictions as our own or continue to hand them down dogmatically. We can hope to be free at last from a perplexing psychoanalytic legacy.

It is hard for us to consider the world without Freud. Ideas such as the unconscious, the dream-work, the deep-seated or latent meaning of mental phenomena, the symptomatic symbolization

of conflict, among many others, form and leaven our intellectual daily bread. Our emotional and theoretical heritage is unimaginable without Freud's key ideas, such as the importance of the child to an understanding of the adult, the systematic introduction of sexuality into psychic life, civilized morality and its discontents, or the uneasy intersection of sexuality and society. Without all these and other discoveries by Freud, we would be trying to breathe in a vacuum. Yet we have grave reservations about some Freudian theories, such as penis envy in women, the death drive, frustration as a rule of therapy, and the universal Oedipus and castration complexes.

For a long time we have been torn between gratitude to Freud for having ushered us into the mysteries of the psyche and our growing awareness that theoretical as well as clinical difficulties prevent us from giving him our unquestioning loyalty. Among several others, the following questions have emerged: Can we follow Freud even though in 1897 he set out to replace his initial hypothesis of real traumas with a hypothesis of instinctual fantasies? What are we to do when our respect for the idea of psychoanalysis requires our fidelity to Freud's project and yet, at the same time, we are sure that the application of some of his constructs, such as symbolism in dreams or the successive stages of infantile psychosexual development, is ill-advised? For us the solution to this dilemma is to return to Freud's texts in our own personal way and try to grasp why some of his conceptions compel and repel us by turns. In the course of our study, quite to our astonishment, we have found internal rifts throughout Freud's system of thought.

In other words, we have come to view Freudian psychoanalysis as threatened from within because it combines daring, even revolutionary methods of inquiry with a tendency to restrain questions. Freud's greatest discoveries—the importance of the sexual element, the dream-work, the paths of symptom-formation—lead

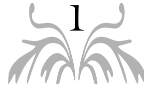
him to clinical and theoretical impasses. An internal demon of sorts is at work here. The most fully productive and most genuinely original of Freud's ideas also seem to ensnare their creator. Ultimately we need to find an answer to the question: Why is it that in Freudian psychoanalysis narrow-minded practices threaten to overwhelm the spirit of openness?

We are returning to classical psychoanalytic themes—the dream, trauma, seduction, reality, fantasy, sexual repression, and psychoanalytic doctrine applied to literature—because the contradictions are not marginal; they involve Freud's most fundamental, most visible, and most frequently studied theories. In examining the paradoxes of basic psychoanalytic ideas, we perceive over and over again that Freudian theory inevitably fractures. The daily work of both analysts and students of psychoanalysis is impaired by this.

Our aim is to measure the individual paradoxes and demonstrate that, taken together, they form a network of mutually exclusive methodological ambivalences within Freud's thought. Our instances of Freudian contradiction all exhibit the same feature: analytic tools affording unique insight are merged with concepts and techniques that block the progress of understanding. We believe that neither the theoreticians nor the practitioners of psychoanalysis have thus far fully grasped the scope and sources of the internal fissures in Freud's edifice. Most analysts have tacitly chosen certain directions of the theory as the legitimate representatives of Freud and Freudianism. We want to restore the situation as it was prior to any such implicit choices, so that we may see the contradictions plainly and discuss them freely, so that they will no longer operate underground, secretly spreading their mystifying effects.

Needless to say, ours is a fundamental critique of Freudian doctrine. We call for a complete renewal of psychoanalysis. We wish

to rouse and sustain the efforts of those professionals and scholars who consider it crucial to preserve psychoanalysis but who also realize the necessity of rethinking it from its foundation. However, we differ from critics who gainsay or seek to eliminate Freudianism by turning to nonpsychoanalytic methodologies. Rather than debate the scientific or nonscientific status of psychoanalysis, we propose to apply the standards of internal coherence only, treating Freud's ideas as self-contained entities that stand or fall on the merits of their own consistency. We are convinced that the malaise surrounding Freud's legacy since the early 1950s is not primarily a result of his riding roughshod over scientific standards, but rather a symptom of the deep-seated and pervasive contrarieties of his thought, clinical practices, and institutional organization. Though intensely critical of Freudian doctrine, we remain ardent advocates of the methods of psychoanalysis as a privileged way of understanding human beings and their creations. We maintain that psychoanalysis can contribute fundamental insights, provided that the internal methodological fractures of Freud's thought are recognized so that it becomes clear which facets of Freudian theory (and of its descendants) fully promote—and which endanger—the freedom of psychological inquiry.[1]



1

Dream Interpretation: Free Association or Universal Symbolism?

We shall quote two series of passages drawn from *The Interpretation of Dreams* and some other works by Freud. These passages indicate a fundamental methodological discrepancy, as Freud seems to be moving in two contrary directions. He attempts to understand dreams based on the dreamer's free associations, and at the same time he provides a catalog of stable and universally applicable meanings or symbolic equations, rendering the dreamer's personal associations superfluous. The Freudian theory of dream interpretation combines an attempt to hear personal meanings with the use of universal symbolism. The search for the unique poetics of individual dreams collides with the restrictions that predetermined interpretations place upon their meaning.

(1A)

> The second of the two popular methods . . . might be described as the "decoding" method, since it treats dreams

as a kind of cryptography in which each sign can be translated into another sign having a known meaning, in accordance with a fixed key. Suppose, for instance, that I have dreamt of a letter and also of a funeral. If I consult a "dream-book," I find that "letter" must be translated by "trouble" and "funeral" by "betrothal" . . . A thing in a dream means what it recalls to the mind—to the dream-interpreter's mind, it need hardly be said. An insuperable source of arbitrariness and uncertainty arises . . . [Footnote:] The technique which I describe in the pages that follow differs in one essential respect from the ancient method: it imposes the task of interpretation upon the dreamer himself. (I, 97–98)

(1B)

When we have become familiar with the abundant use made of symbolism for representing sexual material in dreams, the question is bound to arise of whether many of these symbols do not occur with a permanently fixed meaning, like the "grammalogues" in shorthand; and we shall feel tempted to draw up a new "dream-book" on the decoding principle. On that point there is this to be said: this symbolism is not peculiar to dreams, but is characteristic of unconscious ideation, in particular among the people, and it is to be found in folklore, and in popular myths, legends, linguistic idioms, proverbial wisdom and current jokes, to a more complete extent than in dreams. (I, 351)

(2A)

In the case of the decoding method everything depends on the trustworthiness of the "key"—the dream book, and of this we have no guarantee. (I, 100)

(2B)

Incidentally, many of the symbols are habitually or almost habitually employed to express the same thing. (I, 352)

(3A)

My procedure is not so convenient as the popular decoding method which translates any given piece of a dream's content by a fixed key. I, on the contrary, am prepared to find that the same piece of content may conceal a different meaning when it occurs in various people or in various contexts. (I, 105)

The dream-content, on the other hand, is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value . . . we should clearly be led into error. Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me . . . we can only form a proper judgment of the rebus if . . . we try to replace each separate element by a syllable or word that can be represented by that element in some way or other. (I, 277–278)

Analyses show us . . . a change in the *verbal expression* of the thoughts concerned . . . the outcome of the displacement may in one case be that one element is replaced by another, while the outcome in another case may be that a single element has its *verbal form* replaced by another . . . The advantage, and accordingly the purpose, of such a change jumps to the eyes. A thing that is pictorial is, from the point of view of a dream, a thing that is *capable of being represented:* it can be introduced into a situation . . . A dream-thought is unusable so long as it is expressed in an abstract form; but

when once it has been transformed into pictorial language, contrasts and identifications of the kind which the dream-work requires, and which it creates if they are not already present, can be established more easily than before between the new form of expression and the remainder of the material underlying the dream. . . We may suppose that a good part of the intermediate work done during the formation of a dream, which seeks to reduce the dispersed dream-thoughts to the most succinct and unified expression possible, proceeds along the line of finding appropriate verbal transformations for the individual thoughts. Any one thought, whose form of expression may happen to be fixed for other reasons, will operate in a determinant and selective manner on the possible forms of expression allotted to the other thoughts, and it may do so, perhaps, from the very start—as is the case of writing a poem. . . In a few instances a change of expression of this kind assists dream-condensation even more directly, by finding a form of words which, owing to its ambiguity, is able to give expression to more than one of the dream-thoughts. In this way the whole domain of verbal wit is put at the disposal of the dream-work. There is no need to be astonished at the part played by words in dream-formation. Words, since they are the nodal points of numerous ideas, may be regarded as predestined to ambiguity; and the neuroses (e.g. in framing obsessions and phobias), no less than dreams, make unashamed use of the advantages thus offered by words for purposes of condensation and disguise. (I, 339–341)

(3B)

Steps, ladders or staircases, or, as the case may be, walking up or down them, are representations of the sexual act.

(I, 355)

All elongated objects, such as sticks, tree trunks and umbrellas . . . may stand for the male organ . . . Boxes, cases, chests, cupboards, and ovens represent the uterus, and also hollow objects, ships, and vessels of all kinds. (I, 354)

Children in dreams often stand for genitals; and indeed, both men and women are in the habit of referring to their genitals affectionately as their "little ones." Stekel is right in recognizing a "little brother" as the penis . . . To represent castration symbolically, the dream-work makes use of baldness, hair cutting, falling out of teeth and decapitation. If one of the ordinary symbols for a penis occurs in a dream doubled or multiplied, it is to be regarded as a warding-off of castration. (I, 357)

I shall now append a few examples of the use of these symbols in dreams, with the idea of showing how impossible it becomes to arrive at the interpretation of a dream if one excludes dream-symbolism, and how irresistibly one is driven to accept it in many cases. (I, 359)

Symbolism is perhaps the most remarkable chapter of the theory of dreams. In the first place, since symbols are stable translations, they realize to some extent the ideal of the ancient as well as of the popular interpretation of dreams . . . (L, 151)

Symbols allow us in certain circumstances to interpret a dream without questioning the dreamer, who indeed would in any case have nothing to tell us about the symbol.
(L, 151)

For when, with experience, we have collected enough of these constant renderings, the time comes when we realize that we should in fact have been able to deal with these portions of dream-interpretation from our own knowledge,

> and that they could really be understood without the dreamer's associations. (L, 150)

(4A)

> There is, in the first place, the universality of symbolism in language . . . Moreover, symbolism disregards differences of language; investigation would probably show that it is ubiquitous—the same for all peoples. (MM, 98–99)

(4B)

> Indeed, dreams are so closely related to linguistic expression that Ferenczi has truly remarked that every tongue has its own dream-language. It is impossible as a rule to translate a dream into a foreign language . . . (I, 99)

Considered in its broad outlines, the Freudian doctrine of dream interpretation hardly leads one to suspect methodological disparities. Freud postulated that dreams have a meaning that is relevant to the dreamer's psychic life. Dreams are in part incomprehensible to dreamers, hence the need to interpret them, to find their latent meaning and to make this available to dreamers, allowing them access to hitherto unreachable regions of their own psyches, and thereby giving them control over their own house. The form in which the dream appears upon awakening disguises its genuine signification; the dream is a game of hide-and-seek that dreamers play in and with themselves (the wish versus censorship). Dreams provide the "royal road," according to Freud, to uncovering those internal conflicts from which consciousness has backed away (repression).

The originality of Freud's overall understanding of dreams is strengthened by his interpretive premise: dreams are not to be taken at face value. Freud devised specific techniques for reading

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dreams; the centerpiece of the technique consists in gathering private information (free associations) from dreamers about the manner in which they unwittingly disguise their own deep-seated purpose. Dream interpretation implies then a form of reading that, with the dreamer's help, undoes distortions, expands condensations, puts displacements back in their place, and sets enigmatic visual images into comprehensible words. Freud calls the various processes of deformation the dream-work, collecting under this name the linguistic and formal procedures that initially render the dream's genuine content inaccessible.

The Interpretation of Dreams (1900) underwent continual change. By 1923, when Freud's complete works *(Gesammelte Schriften)* appeared for the first time, he had expanded the original 543 pages of the book by an additional 185 pages. The additions do not constitute revisions, properly speaking, since the text of the first edition is retained in its entirety; rather, there are shifts of emphasis and to some extent complications of the initial theoretical argument. In 1900 Freud considers the essential novelty of his techniques to be the privileged role he gives dreamers in the interpretation of their own dreams. This argument becomes increasingly snarled as Freud introduces, over the period from 1909 to 1914, the idea of universal dream symbolism. Here are two simultaneous and incompatible Freudian positions: dream interpretation requires the dreamer's participation; the interpretation of dreams has no need for the dreamer's contribution.

Rather than being resolved, the contradiction grows more acute over the years with successive editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams* and with Freud's numerous writings elsewhere on the same subject. Thus in the 1914 edition Freud strengthens his initial position, stating that his technique "imposes the task of interpretation upon the dreamer himself" (I, 98) with the result that the dreamer's associations are what allow the dream to acquire its meaning. At the same time, and in sharp disharmony

with that point, Freud inserts, also in 1914, a new fifty-page-long section on representation by universal symbolism in dreams. "When we have become familiar with the abundant use made of symbolism for representing sexual material in dreams, the question is bound to arise of whether many of these symbols do not occur with a permanently fixed meaning, like the 'grammalogues' in shorthand; and we shall feel tempted to draw up a new 'dream-book' on the decoding principle" (I, 351). The two diametrically opposed orientations cannot help colliding. On the one hand, Freud wants to connect dreamers with themselves through their personal free association to their dreams; on the other hand, he ushers dreamers into a world of fixed and universal meanings. The juxtaposition of the two methodologies is striking in this passage from *The Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (1916): "In this way we obtain constant translations for a number of dream-elements—just as popular 'dream-books' provide them for *everything* that appears in dreams. You will not have forgotten, of course, that when we use our *associative* technique constant replacements of dream-elements never come to light" (L, 150).

Without entering here into the details of the fluctuating proportions of each of these two methodologies in Freud's work between 1900 and 1939, we would like to point out their essential differences. The inquiry into the personal psychic sense of dreams cannot be compatible with reliance on a catalog of invariable and universally valid meanings. The irreducible distinction between the two methods is this: symbolism imposes meanings that (1) are independent of and (2) preexist individual dreamers, and that (3) are not the dreamer's personal creation. The problem reaches well beyond the theoretical contradiction. Once symbolism becomes an option, it can easily influence dreamers and lead them to produce association in support of the expected meaning. A severed tree symbolizes castration, says the interpreter. The dreamer will respond with his implicit approval: Yes, when I was

little, a vicious boy attacked me with his jackknife. The analyst will have provoked associations in keeping with his or her use of universal symbolism. Yet castration, the symbolic meaning of a felled tree, may have inhibited the personal association attached to the particular element of the dream. For example, the association may be: our genealogical tree has been impaired, a branch of the family has been shrouded in mystery and gotten lost. Here symbolism may have eclipsed, if not erased, the dreamer's personal context.

We will consider more closely an example of Freud's use of symbolism:

> Steps, ladders, staircases, or, as the case may be, walking up or down them are representations of the sexual act . . . A little time ago I heard that a psychologist whose views are somewhat different from ours had remarked to one of us that, when all was said and done, we did undoubtedly exaggerate the hidden sexual significance of dreams: his own commonest dream was of going upstairs, and surely there could not be anything sexual in *that*. We were put on the alert by this objection, and began to turn our attention to the appearance of steps, staircases and ladders in dreams, and were soon in a position to show that staircases (and analogous things) were unquestionably symbols of copulation. It is not hard to discover the basis of the comparison: we come to the top in a series of rhythmical movements and with increasing breathlessness and then, with a few rapid leaps, we can get to the bottom again. Thus the rhythmical pattern of copulation is reproduced in going upstairs. Nor must we omit to bring in the evidence of linguistic usage. It shows us that "mounting" [German "steigen"] is used as a direct equivalent for the sexual act. We speak of a man as a "Steiger" [a mounter] and of "nachsteigen" ["to run after",

> literally, "to climb after"]. In French the steps on a staircase are called "marches" and "un vieux marcheur" has the same meaning as our "ein alter Steiger" ["an old rake"].
>
> (I, 355)

In this instance, Freud sets up an inventory of dreams with analogous content and goes on to interpret them uniformly with his own key (here a sexual one) without having recourse to the dreamer's spontaneous associations. Freud justifies the fixed and stable meaning of the dream images on two distinct levels. First justification: the rhythm of climbing up and down the stairs resembles coital movements. He obtains the key here by equating two ideas. Second justification: idiomatic expressions in German and French use images of mounting and walking to denote sexual content. Let us take the example of the French idiom *un vieux marcheur* (literally "an old walker"), whose sexual connotation is quite obvious: an old rake or a dirty old man. In the Freudian interpretation, the dream image, a staircase, disguises the expression *un vieux marcheur* in the well-known and conventional sense, hence the dream indirectly refers to sexual intercourse. Very well. There is apparently nothing to object to here. But did Freud not say earlier that popular dream books were useless precisely because "everything depends on the trustworthiness of the 'key'—the dream book, and of this we have no guarantee" (I, 100)?

Despite his categorical rejection, Freud forges his own keys, believing that he is setting them on an unfailingly solid foundation. "The distinction between dream-interpretation of this kind and interpretation by means of symbolism [in popular dream books] can still be drawn quite sharply. In the case of [the popular] symbolic dream-interpretation the key to the symbolization is arbitrarily chosen by the interpreter; whereas in our cases of verbal disguises the keys are generally known and laid down by firmly established linguistic usage" (I, 341). In Freud's eyes, sym-

bolism is justified so long as it relies on meanings established by convention; it seems to follow that accepted meanings are by definition universally valid and applicable to all. But does convention or accepted meaning guarantee the permanent stability of keys? The dream image of going up a steep path, for example, can refer to one's efforts to reach a specific goal or to the toil of life in general. Similarly, a staircase can make us think of delayed reaction (as in the French idiom *avoir l'esprit de l'escalier*, "to be slow with repartee") or, alternatively, of professional incompetence (as in the colloquial French idiom *le coiffeur fait des escaliers dans les cheveux de sa cliente,* literally, "the hairdresser is making staircases in his client's hair"). Freud's technique, reliance on "the evidence of linguistic usage," cannot vouchsafe a dream's permanent symbolic meaning.

If psychoanalysis has any authority at all, in our opinion, it is the willingness to welcome people into their own personal creations. And quite often Freud did not think otherwise. But just as often he sought to found the authority of psychoanalysis on universally accepted forms of expression. "Symbolism is not peculiar to dreams, but is characteristic of unconscious ideation . . . and it is to be found in folklore, and in popular myths, legends, linguistic idioms, proverbial wisdom and current jokes, to a more complete extent than in dreams" (I, 351). So the dream image showing a man climbing the stairs is said to be reliably translated every time, with the help of the common French idiom *un vieux marcheur*, as a dream of coitus. In sum, Freud hoped to draw up a universally trustworthy glossary of conventional meanings or symbols. Here we must raise the fundamental question: Is Freud attempting to reveal by dream analysis the dreamer's inalienable and personal psychic patrimony, or to recover a historical, cultural, and linguistic heritage that is allegedly known and commonly used by all? Is it possible to maintain that personal meanings coincide with universal ones?

Consider the dream image of a man walking along a path and

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the attendant free association that focuses on the French expression *un vieux marcheur.* The psychoanalytic procedure need not seize upon the conventional use of this expression as the center of the entire explanation of the dream. This would be tantamount to declaring the idiom a ready-made sexual key, a procedure that might compromise our understanding of the dreamer's personal situation—perhaps, in this case, entirely devoid of sexual overtones. Listening to more of the associations, the analyst may begin to wonder: Who is being called a *vieux marcheur*? Under what circumstances? Why is the dreamer using precisely this characterization when speaking of his dream? Despite its obvious conventional meaning, does the idiom have to be broken down into its constituent parts? What does it mean for the dreamer to walk or not to walk?

The situation emerges little by little. For a long time, the patient has participated in an arrangement *(un vieux marcheur)* he now wants to back out of. Years ago, he let himself be included in a secret agreement he no longer wishes to honor. The dream marks a turning point; the dreamer reviews his entire life on this occasion. The expression *un vieux marcheur* signals an internal and nearly conscious exclamation, I will no longer go along with this kind of arrangement! The pejorative irony of the term *un vieux marcheur* underscores the patient's self-criticism as regards his own past. The complete individual meaning of the dream image showing a man walking along a path and of the free association to *un vieux marcheur* can be rendered as follows: I sense that I am no longer going to follow that path; I renege on this shady old agreement; I am going to set out on a new path.

Though seemingly firm in his embrace of symbolism, Freud is not undisturbed by questions. Discussing the issue of verbal ambiguity as used in dreams (see quotation 3A above), Freud wonders, without providing an answer, whether a dream element "is to be interpreted symbolically" or whether "its interpretation is to depend on its wording" (I, 341). Freud vacillates between

the two interpretive viewpoints, but his hesitation seems to us unjustified on the theoretical level. The method that relies on permanent symbolic keys is inadequate to decipher the verbal and affective distortions of a dream's unique, individual meaning. What matters in psychoanalysis is not the evidence of language or of cultural traditions and their customary forms of expression but each person's distinctive signification. The analyst may not subordinate the patient to the accepted, conventional meaning of a set idiom; rather, idioms need to be adapted to what patients are trying to express through them. The analyst's task is to listen to patients, not to situate them in the preconceived field of universal symbolism.

Throughout his long career, Freud rejected, accepted, and nuanced by turns the use of symbolism in dream interpretation. He eschewed its arbitrariness, and yet he would have liked to translate dreams into a stable, authentic, and indisputably universal code. In the successive editions of *The Interpretation of Dreams,* Freud tended to reinforce the authority of symbolism, and yet—here is the crux of the discrepancy—he did not diminish the significance of his discoveries concerning the unique expressive procedures to be found in individual dreams. From 1909 on he laid ever more emphasis on the links between dreams and what he called primeval modes of expression, prevalent in archaic societies. Symbolism seemed to Freud to be the relic of a common archaic heritage—this is why he thought he could certify the universal validity of dream symbolism. "We may expect that the analysis of dreams will lead us to a knowledge of man's archaic heritage, of what is psychically innate in him. Dreams and neuroses seem to have preserved more mental antiquities than we could have imagined possible; so that psycho-analysis may claim a high place among the sciences which are concerned with the reconstruction of the earliest and most obscure periods of the beginnings of the human race" (I, 549)

Freud assigned two disparate functions to dreams. He at-

tempted to situate them in the continuum of the dreamer's individual mental life, and at the same time he wanted to discover in dreams the remnants of ancient or primitive modes of thinking, a kind of innate mental inheritance. Freud understood his task to be the psychoanalysis of specific human beings through their dreams, but he also wanted to see dreams as the medium through which the remnants of universal mental forms, once characteristic of ancient civilizations, live on every night. Consequently, he tried to join the dreamer's variable personal associations with the generalized and invariable associations provided by symbolism.

In our estimation these two orientations are incompatible. Their combination in *The Interpretation of Dreams* makes it an ambivalent book; Freud's innovations gradually merge with the initially discredited method of interpreting dreams by means of ready-made keys. It is as if in the Freudian doctrine of dream interpretation two contrary principles are made to overlap. With his study of the poetic form of dreams (condensation displacement, representation through composite images, overdetermination, and so on), Freud devised an original method of interpretation on the premise that dreams cannot be taken at face value if they are to yield their latent meanings. Freud was seeking precise analytical tools with which to make sense of apparently senseless or disjointed dreams. This type of inquiry into the dream's modes of expression allows the dreamer unlimited freedom. Yet Freud curtails this freedom. By including symbolism, he establishes fixed characteristics that ultimately restrict the dream's potential field of signification, binding it to a set of predetermined contents.

We have drawn up a partial catalog of Freud's contradictory views on dream interpretation. Some readers will ask whether Freud himself was not aware of the difference between his two methods of analysis, individualized interpretation with the aid of free association and fixed translations through universal symbols. We respond that Freud was undoubtedly aware of the diversity of

approaches; several passages in *The Interpretation of Dreams* and the *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* make this quite plain. However, Freud did not draw the necessary logical conclusion, namely that the two modes of interpretation are mutually exclusive. His desire to combine them seems inexplicable to us, since it leads to a fundamental incompatibility that debilitates all of psychoanalytic theory and practice. Those who may think that other works by Freud resolve the methodological paradoxes of dream interpretation will only find more paradoxes—and no way out. It is up to Freud's followers to resolve his contradictions, after first recognizing them as such.[1]