

## TRANSFERENCE: A CLICHÉ?

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### 1. The Cliché

1. When the investigating subject is revealed to be implicated in the subject-matter under investigation, a certain resistance often makes itself felt. Such a reaction is of course not surprising, especially when what is being destabilized concerns the very frame of reference within which knowledge generally tends to be evaluated. The prefix co- contained in the Latin word from which *cognition* derives implies a togetherness that entails a minimal distance as well as proximity. Yet even today reflection on the “with-” that is contained in the “co-” of “cognition” suggests that the latter is more *complex* than is often considered. Heisenberg’s “uncertainty principle” is a good illustration of how cognition becomes more complex when the conditions under which it is produced, including the cognitive apparatus, is included in the “equation”. It is no wonder, then, that when something similar is acknowledged outside the realm of mathematical physics, where its effects are less measurable – for instance in the Humanities and Social Sciences – this can evoke strong resistance. The resistance that emerges when the question of the conditions under which knowledge is produced is included in the cognitive process itself can be regarded as a symptom both of the lack of a “principle” capable of measuring the effects of uncertainty, and at the same time an effort to preempt such uncertainty.<sup>1</sup>

2. In psychoanalytic discourse this phenomenon of resistance has undergone intense study, from the start. And it has made itself felt not just as a force intruding from without – from the medical-scientific community for instance – but also as one that is active from within.<sup>2</sup> This interlacing of

1 I have noted elsewhere that the German expression Heisenberg used to describe his discovery has been translated into English in a very approximative manner: Heisenberg did not speak at all of a “principle” but of a “relation”; and the term he used to describe it was not “uncertainty” but “fuzziness”: “*Unschärferrelation*”.

2 An instance of such an analysis can be found in a critic who was never directly influenced by Freud, although his writing is in many ways extremely Freudian, namely Paul de Man, who, in a well-known article, “The Resistance to Theory”, argued that this resistance came not merely from the outside, but was at work from the inside as well, so that “the resistance to theory” had to be understood together with a resistance of theory to reading as an emphatic encounter with alterity. See: Paul de Man, *The Resistance to Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, 3-20. A similar move is made by Jacques Derrida in his book, *Résistances de la psychanalyse*. Paris : Galilée, 1996, in which the interrelation between resistance to psychoanalysis and resistances of psychoanalysis is elaborated (9) (*Resistances of Psychoanalysis*, translated by Peggy Kamuf, Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

analyst and analysand has been particularly evident with respect to a key psychoanalytic concept, that of “transference”: in German, *Übertragung*. In their *Vocabulaire de la Psychanalyse*, Laplanche and Pontalis note that “The French word ‘transfert’ (transference) does not properly belong to psychoanalytic vocabulary”. The same could be said perhaps even more emphatically of the German word Freud uses, *Übertragung* (although not necessarily of its English equivalent). Of course, if one asks just *which* terms used by Freud do “properly belong” to psychoanalysis, the answer is relatively few: Oedipus complex, castration anxiety or complex, Libido, pleasure principle, death drive – perhaps some others. But in most cases the words used by Freud – including those just mentioned – are borrowed from what used to be called “ordinary language”, i.e. non-specialized discourse. This is particularly true of the word for transference, *Übertragung*, which apart from its general meaning of effecting a change of place, can also signify a *transmission* of radio or television, or a process of contagion, or a “transposition” as distinct from a translation. The text you are reading was first written in French, then revised (*übertragen*) in German and finally reworked again in the process of being transposed into English. In German therefore, one distinguishes between a translation, an *Übersetzung*, and an *Übertragung*, since the latter implies a much greater degree of alteration and transformation, moving in the direction of what in English might be called an “adaptation.”<sup>3</sup>

3. In *The Interpretation of Dreams* Freud notes that words furnish ideal material for the process of distortion upon which the dream articulation depends: the dream is first of all a distortion of an unconscious wish, which undistorted cannot be granted access to conscious memory. But this is only the first part of the dreamwork, which must then distort the original distortion so as to make the dream seem to conform to the expectation of (self-)consciousness; this distortion of the distortion, which Freud calls “secondary elaboration” (*sekundäre Bearbeitung*), tries to give the distorted dream-wish the form of a logical-causal sequence of events, a continuous and transparent story. Words are ideal elements to be processed in this way, Freud observed, because of their overdetermination. On the one hand words are expected to have a coherent and unified meaning, which allows them to be recognized as words. On the other hand, they are inevitably overdetermined: they never mean simply one thing, even if conventions allow us to consider them in most situations as essentially univocal. This is particularly true, then, of the word *Übertragung* itself, which will grow and expand to cover the essence of the psychoanalytic process of analysis

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3 The English “adaptation” suggests that the process of revision is one of assimilating the text to the new, target language or medium (a book is “adapted for the screen”, for instance). An *Übertragung* stresses more transformation than the goal which determines it.

and therapy.

4. The ambiguity that this word has in ordinary German comes to assume a more contradictory aspect as Freud employs it to describe the dynamics at work in the analytic session, and in particular, in the relation between analysand and analyst. One is therefore justified in employing another word that does not entirely belong to psychoanalytic discourse, but that came to take on a distinctive signification in Freud's writing, namely the word *ambivalence*. The ambiguity of *Übertragung* in ordinary German thus became somewhat more precise in acquiring a highly ambivalent function in psychoanalytic therapy. It designates both the particular "resistance" (*Widerstand*) – another term borrowed from ordinary language, which here refers specifically to situations of conflict – that the analysand develops against the progress of analysis and its personification in the analyst, while at the same designating the major means by which this resistance can be overcome. It is what Derrida will later call, echoing Plato, a *pharmakon*: a necessary aide but also a formidable obstacle to the success of the analysis. And indeed, it is only because it constitutes an obstacle that it can be used to overcome the resistances it calls forth.
5. Finally, to complicate matters a bit more, Freud introduces two further distinctions that complicated the meaning of the term. He split the term into "positive" and "negative" transference, depending on the nature of the feelings and thoughts projected onto the analyst, and also came to see transference as a two-way street: not just directed by the analysand at the analyst but evoking a response from the analyst in the inverse direction. This latter form he labelled "counter-transference", *Gegenübertragung*, although the term is somewhat misleading since it was not an alternative to transference but merely another form of it.
6. Transference: positive, negative, counter – all of this presupposes that we have some idea of what transference for Freud actually involved. Before engaging in a discussion of transference as Freud used the term, it may be useful to focus for a moment on the two components of the word: the prefix, trans- (*über-*), and the root, -ference (*-tragen*). German has a certain advantage over English in the formation of concepts since the words it uses generally resonate in ordinary language, which is less the case in English, where the word components often stem from the Latin, a language with which most English-speakers are unfamiliar. Thus, trans- may retain certain ordinary-language echoes, but -ference in most cases will not. This is not the case in German, where the root-word is *tragen*, a verb very much in common use. It is this that allows German to distinguish sharply between *Übersetzung* (translation) and *Übertragung* (transfer or transference). There is an interesting difference here between the two root words involved that can be illuminating for the

question of transference more generally. “*Setzen*”, cognate with English “setting” places the emphasis on the move from one fixed place to another: from an original, for instance, to its “translation”, which is generally understood as the original simply set in another place. *Tragen* is different. To “bear” or “carry” involves a relationship not just to movement but to that which is moved, which is assigned something like a corporeal weight: to bear up or endure a tribulation, for instance. Where this connotation can lead is exquisitely exemplified by the verse of Celan that so fascinated Derrida: “Die Welt ist fort/Ich muss Dich tragen”. (“The World is gone/ I must carry you”). Derrida is no less fascinated by another English expression that has no equivalent in French: to *bear witness*. Again, the movement of “bearing” or “carrying” is defined by that which it displaces – and which in so doing it also transforms. This transformation goes so far as to constitute the “bearer” or “carrier” in its singular subjectivity, at least in the reading of Celan’s verse by Derrida:

I am alone with the other, alone to him and for him, alone for you and to you: without world. Immediacy of the abyss that involves me in the other everywhere where the “I must” – “I must carry you” – carries the day forever against the “I am”, over the *sum* and over the *cogito*. Before being, I carry, before being me, I carry the other. I remain before, owing (*devant*), indebted and owing before you and to you [...] Always singular and irreplaceable, these laws or these injunctions remain untranslatable. [...] Violent sacrifice of the passage beyond: *Übertragen: Übersetzen*. (Derrida 2005, 161-162)<sup>4</sup>

7. In Derrida’s reading of Celan, the transport-translation-transference defines the obligatory debt to the other that constitutes in its wake the self, the “me” or I. Freud of course is far from arguing as much. But he nevertheless moves in this direction by stressing the constitutive relationship of the movement of *Über-tragen*, carrying-over from childhood into the present situation of analysis: this movement of transference creates the possibility of the I coming to the singular tension of itself as another, but only by first losing itself in its projections.

8. At first sight, however, everything looks very different. However, from the start, Freud insists that transference must be understood as a dynamic process. His first major effort to elaborate the notion bears indeed the title, “On the Dynamics of Transference” (1912).<sup>5</sup> And yet if dynamics

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4 Translation modified – SW. Derrida’s French is truly “untranslatable”: « Je suis seul avec l’autre, seul à lui et pour lui, seul pour toi et à toi : sans monde. Immédiateté de l’abîme qui m’engage envers l’autre parcours où le « je dois » – « je dois te porter » – l’emporte à jamais sur le « je suis », sur le *sum* et sur le *cogito*. Avant d’être, je porte, avant d’être moi, je porte l’autre. Je reste devant, en dette et devant à toi devant toi [...] Toujours singulières et irremplaçables, ces lois ou ces injonctions restent intraduisibles [...] mais elles ne sont pas moins universelles. *Je dois traduire, transférer, transporter (übertragen) l’intraduisible [...] Violent sacrifice du passage au-delà : Übertragen : Übersetzen »* (Derrida 2003, 76-77).

5 S. Freud, “On the Dynamics of Transference”. *Standard Edition*, XII, 97-108.

involves not just movement but also change, what stands out in Freud's initial description is that this change conceals a fundamental stasis. What Freud, with respect to the progress of the analytic therapy, will designate as its "arresting": its *Stockung*.

9. Freud describes the process as involving the projection of a libidinal investment that has previously remained unsatisfied upon the present figure of the analyst. Like the word itself, Freud acknowledges that the process it is called upon to designate can be considered as being "entirely normal and understandable". What is striking, however, is that he then resorts to a word and figure that he otherwise will never again use in his published writings, by comparing transference to a "cliché":

Let us not forget that every individual, through the concomitant action of a natural predisposition and of facts having taken place during his childhood, has acquired a distinctive way (*eine bestimmte Eigenart*) of living his love life, which is to say, the amorous conditions he sets, which drives he satisfies, and which aims he pursues. The result is, so to say, a cliché (or sometimes several), which, during the course of life regularly repeat themselves, imprinting themselves anew as often as the exterior circumstances and the nature of the accessible loved objects permit and which certainly are also not fully insensitive to recent impressions. (Freud 1999, 99-100)<sup>6</sup>

10. I have retranslated the Strachey translation, which however calls for comment: the crucial and surprising word used by Freud to sum up the characteristics of the transference process is, in German, "*Klischee*": which recalls the English, "cliché". The follow-up sentence however shows that Freud is thinking not just of the most current – in German as well as in English – use of that word, namely as a worn-out stereotype – but also as a technical process of typographical reproduction, involving plates that preserve the imprint of a set sheet of type. The cliché thus involves a form of transmission: it is "regularly repeated" (*regelmäßig wiederholt*) and is reprinted anew (*neu abgedruckt wird*). It can be noted that Freud avoids the reflexive term in both cases: the cliché does not repeat itself (*sich wiederholen*) nor does it reprint itself (*sich neu abdrucken*) but is rather defined through a process of repetition and reprinting that lacks an active subject.

11. As cliché, transference is defined through repetition, transmission and reprinting. But they are not the same thing. Repetition is far more general and also far more abstract; reprinting presupposes a localization and a materialization, an engagement with external factors. Transmission points ahead to the future. Hence Freud goes on to qualify his description by adding that this process goes on only "insofar as the external conditions and the nature of the accessible love-objects permit it", and that this externality involves temporal no less than spatial factors: "[...] which certainly is also not

<sup>6</sup> Translation modified—SW.

fully insensitive to recent impressions”. The cliché is a means of preserving, repeating and transmitting such “recent impressions” as well as more distant experiences, conscious or not.

12. That Strachey chooses to translate *Klischee* as “stereotype plate” is thus fully justified, and yet it effaces the relation to the English cognate, which is no less relevant to Freud’s purpose. *Klischees* are also clichés, i.e. eminently repeatable, “stereotypical” but non-pathological symbols. As always with Freud, neurotic phenomena are merely extensions or variations of so-called normal ones. Here, it is the repetition and reprinting of what Freud will describe as “archaic images” – Strachey renders them as “prototypes” but loses the visual connotation that, as we will see, is essential to the argument. Which is why Freud gladly adopts a term coined by Jung to describe that which is repeated in and as the cliché, namely an “*imago*”. What distinguishes the repetition of the *Klischee* qua transference from the more familiar processes of habituation and routinization is first of all that its iterations are largely unconscious, although as such they reflect the peculiar, singular *Eigenart* – *way of being* – of the person involved. And second, that those iterations are directed at another – the analyst. As Laplanche and Pontalis define the *imago*, what is “transferred” in the transference is “an acquired imaginary scheme, a static cliché through which the subject addresses someone else” (196).

13. To conclude this brief survey of Freud’s initial account of transference, we see that it displays a complexly ambivalent structure: it both impedes the progress of the analytic therapy – as noted Freud speaks of it as causing a *Stockung* – but also makes that progress possible. It is both “the strongest instrument of resistance” to analysis and its “most powerful lever” (367). But the latter obtains only when the transference is recognized as the projection of a repressed past experience onto the present figure of the analyst. In other words, only when the present experience is recognized as other than itself – which is to say, as *significant* – can it make room for a future that would be different from the past.

## 2.

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14. I want to suspend for the moment this discussion of the notion of transference in Freud in order to turn to another thinker who perhaps more than any other deserves to be considered as his predecessor, namely Nietzsche. Freud knew or at least suspected the enormous debt that psychoanalysis had toward Nietzsche. But instead of assuming it and exploring its ramifications, he preferred to avoid the German thinker in order, as he wrote in a “Self-presentation” of 1925, “to

preserve my freedom of spirit (*Unbefangenheit*)”.<sup>7</sup> The German word I have rendered as “freedom of spirit” is actually more negative: it suggests something like “non-captivation”, an anxiety of influence that Freud acknowledges but does not resist. As we will see, such an anxiety was not at all unfounded. For the convergence of Freud’s thought with that of Nietzsche – indeed, the way it repeats it – is indeed striking. It covers many different aspects, but here I will limit myself to those that are more or less directly associated with the notion of “transference”.

15. In the years following the publication of *The Birth of Tragedy*, i.e. from 1872 to 1875, Nietzsche compiled a large number of notes, written in the aphoristic style that was to become his hallmark, which for a time he thought would be published in a book entitled “The Book of the Philosopher”. These notes dealt with the relation of philosophy, language, art, science and culture more generally, but Nietzsche never got around to compiling them into a single publication. In early editions of Nietzsche’s collected writings, *The Book of the Philosopher* did exist, although today it is not counted among the unpublished “works” of Nietzsche.<sup>8</sup> In these notes Nietzsche not only frequently mentions “drives”, (*Triebe*), the unconscious and desire, but also, as we will see, *Übertragung* (transference), as both noun and as verb. Indeed, a major part of these notes can be considered to constitute a reflection on transfers of all kinds, but above all, those involving language, as well as what are called “the senses”. There is a remark in the notes that summarizes one of their dominant arguments: “The philosopher”, Nietzsche writes, “is caught up in the nets of language” (*Der Philosoph ist in den Netzen der Sprache eingefangen.*) It should be noted that the word used by Nietzsche here to describe the relation of the philosopher to language has the same root as the word used by Freud to justify his avoidance of Nietzsche: *fangen*. Freud seeks to preserve his *Unbefangenheit*, a certain lack of captivity, while Nietzsche describes the capture of “the philosopher” in and by the “nets of language”. While sharing with Freud the conviction that reality was driven by forces that went far beyond human self-consciousness, Nietzsche considered those forces to be less mental or psychic than linguistic. His training as a classical philologist marked his thinking throughout, but especially in its earlier stages, the period during which he was working on *The Book of the Philosopher*. The word that names transference in German,

7 Freud’s “avoidance” of Nietzsche could be assimilated to the defensive gesture he designates as “isolating”. Nietzsche is not “repressed” – not omitted or attacked – but “isolated” in the sense of being acknowledged and then simply left alone – without allowing any of the many aspects in which he anticipated Freud’s major insights and even language to be elaborated.

8 To my knowledge, the only publication available today under the title, *Das Philosophenbuch*, is a bilingual French paperback edition; the corresponding English edition bears a very different title, namely *Philosophy and Truth*. See: Nietzsche, *Le Livre du philosophe: études théorétiques*. Traduit et annoté par Angèle K. Marietti, Paris : Aubier-Flammarion, 1969, 9-35; *Philosophy and Truth*, presented and edited by Daniel Breazeale, Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 1979. English translation modified throughout and given by section numbers in body of text.

*Übertragung*, also designates linguistic transformations such as metaphor and metonymy. However, Nietzsche is far from limiting these processes to language: in the notes of these years, he sees it at work in the process of what is called sense-perception, and above all, in the particular sense that is traditionally privileged over all others, the sense of sight:

A primal phenomenon is: to refer the stimulus felt in the eye to the eye (itself), i.e. to refer to the senses a sensorial excitation. In itself, what is given is solely an excitation: to feel this as the action of the eye and to call it “seeing” is a causal inference. [...] *To feel a stimulus as an activity*, something passive as active, is the first causality-sensation. The inner connection of excitation and activity transferred (*übertragen*) to all things. [...] i.e. we presuppose causality everywhere, because we ourselves *continually experience* such alterations. (Nietzsche 1979, §139)

16. A sensation considered as an “alteration” of a previous state through contact with something coming from without – a “stimulus” or “excitation” – is interpreted as though it were the result of a subjective action. The mechanism of such an interpretation is transference: the internal sensation is “transferred” – Freud will also say “projected” – upon the thing itself, as an object of “sight”. The feeling of being altered is thus interpreted as an act of vision reflecting a change in the external thing that is perceived. “Causality” is what defines the sequence as emanating from the subject, considered to be an active “seer” rather than a passive receiver of impulses.
17. Why should such a process produce the notion of causality? Although Nietzsche will not come up with a definitive answer during the years when he is compiling these notes, the response he will arrive at later is already implicit in many of his earlier remarks, such as the following:

The only way of mastering (*bezwingen*) multiplicity is to make genres, e.g. calling “bold” a large number of ways of acting. We explain them to ourselves when we bring them under the rubric, “bold”. All explaining and knowing is actually nothing but making such rubrics. – Now with a bold leap: a multitude of things is brought under one hat when we consider them to be the countless acts of a single quality [...] Here we have a transference (*Übertragung*) [...]. (Nietzsche 1979, §141)

18. Every synthesis, all unification, each institution – all of which constitute the indispensable conditions of a cognition, are thus ultimately the result of a transference that transforms the variety of things and experiences into “acts of a single quality” and subject:

The concept “pencil” is confounded with the “thing” pencil. The “it” of synthetic judgment is false, it consists of a transference (*Übertragung*), two distinct spheres are juxtaposed, between which an equation (*eine Gleichung*) can never take place. (Nietzsche 1979, §152)

19. In other words, the copula “is” that links predicates to subjects ontologizes what is actually a



heterogeneous relation of distinct things.<sup>9</sup> An “equation” – which in English as in German is based on the word “equal” (*Gleich – Gleichung*) – is not possible. The word “like” (*gleich*) does not establish equivalence but rather something more akin to an *equilibrium*, which consists of the relation of distinct and unequal elements. This tendency to assimilate the incommensurable affects not merely the relation *between* different things but the self-identity of these things themselves. For Nietzsche the “qualities” attributed to them and which allow things to differentiate and identify themselves, are not intrinsic to them but rather functions of spatial-temporal relations, which he will later thematize under the notion of “perspective”:

Qualities entail only relations. A determinate body is equivalent to so and so many relations. Relations can never be the essence but only the consequences of essence. A synthetic judgment describes a thing according to its consequences, i.e. essence and consequence become identified, i.e. a metonymy.

Thus, a *metonymy* lies at the essence of synthetic judgment: that it is to say it is a *false equation*. (Nietzsche 1979, §152)

20. And:

All qualities are originally only unique (*einmalige*: one-time) actions, then in like cases frequently repeated, finally habits. (Nietzsche 1979, §1539)

21. Qualities are singular events, that are then repeated until they can be considered homogeneous and self-identical. But the process that makes this possible is essentially linguistic and rhetorical, a *metonymy*, by which a spatial-temporal juxtaposition – a “consequence” – is treated as though it were essentially the same.

22. Metonymy, like metaphor, is a form of linguistic transference. But it need not operate exclusively with words or in language. It also informs the dominant conception of sense-perception and extends to the conception of bodies no less than that of language. The word that Nietzsche uses to summarize this effect of transference is *tropes*, and this is also what distinguishes his approach from that of Freud:

Our sense perceptions are based, not upon unconscious inferences, but upon tropes. The originating procedure is to seek out some likeness between one thing and another, to identify like with like. *Memory* lives by this activity and practices it continually. The originating phenomenon is therefore conflation [of one thing with another] (*Verwechslung*). (Nietzsche 1979, §144)

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9 A similar argument is developed by Heidegger with regard to the copula in his *Introduction to Metaphysics* and is further elaborated by Derrida in “The Supplement of the Copula” in *Margins of Philosophy*, translated and annotated by Alan Bass, University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1982, 177-205. Derrida’s essay begins with a discussion of the same arguments of Nietzsche that we are rereading here, and a central section of his essay is entitled “Transference”.

23. Here we have to stop for a moment to consider a problem in translation. The word used by Nietzsche, *Verwechslung*, is tied to the root word, *Wechsel*, change or exchange. The prefix, Ver-, adds the sense of a mistake or miscarriage, a false exchange. The “originating phenomenon” is therefore an exchange that is “false” not simply because it takes one thing for another but because it is unaware of doing so. And it is unaware because the conventional attitude construes exchange as an exchange of equivalents, of things with the same value. It is the misconstruing of exchange that thus emerges as the “originary” phenomenon: exchange is regarded as implying equality or sameness, whereas what is really involved are events that are incommensurable precisely insofar as they are singular. Identity is formed in perception as in understanding not by recognition of the same but by forgetting or ignoring differences. One finds a similar phenomenon (i.e. “like”, but not identical!) in Freud’s notion of repression, which early on, in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is described as a kind of “avoidance”:<sup>10</sup> a representation is excluded from consciousness (actually from self-consciousness<sup>11</sup>) and replaced by another, less problematic one. An exchange has taken place, but all that is registered consciously is the result, which is taken in isolation from the process that produced it. In a later work, *Inhibition, Symptom, Anxiety* (1925) Freud will even accord to the notion of “isolation” a status similar to that of repression: by focusing on something to the exclusion of its context, ramifications, genealogy, isolation can allow disruptive memories, thoughts, perceptions and desires access to self-consciousness without unduly perturbing the latter’s drive for unity and consistency. Nietzsche had already anticipated such a move: “Through isolation certain conceptual sequences can become so vehement that they absorb the energy of other drives. Thus, for instance, the drive to know (*Erkenntnistrieb*)” (Nietzsche 1979, §154). Freud, for his part, noted that it was difficult to distinguish the pathogenic dimension of “isolation” from what he called the normal thought-process of “concentration”, which he acknowledged was at the core of everyday purposive activity. Both Freud and Nietzsche were thus aware that it is only through a process of exchange, circulation and transference that things acquire the appearance of self-identity. But for both this remains an appearance that hides a more complex dynamic involving relations of force.

24. To sum up, then, it was only through a process of repetition, which ignores the differential singularity of actions and events that compose it, that conceptualization and cognition can take place. The question that emerges from this is: Why should there be such a strong tendency toward assimilation, toward reducing the other to the same, in the first place? Without actually addressing

10 S. Freud, SE II/III, chapter VII, “Repression”, in Freud: *Complete Works in One Volume*, ed. Ivan Smith, eBook edition, 2002/2007/2010, 1026.

11 I cannot elaborate it fully here, but I take Freud’s notion of the Unconscious to be a form of Consciousness, and what he opposes it to, to be Self-Consciousness. I will return to this later.

this question in his notes of the 1870s, Nietzsche's remarks do contain hints of what will later constitute his main response to it:

The philosopher does not seek truth, but rather the metamorphosis of the world into human beings: he struggles for the comprehension of the world through self-consciousness. He struggles in view of an assimilation [...]. (Nietzsche 1979, §151)

25. Nietzsche introduces here a perspective that can also be found in psychoanalysis, particularly in Freud's later writings, but with a different emphasis. Both Freud and Nietzsche criticize "the philosopher" for seeking to impose a coherence and unity of meaning on a world that is riven and driven by conflicts. But Nietzsche's critique goes further: he links the effort of the philosopher to a certain concept of man – a tendency to anthropomorphize – which in turn projects on the world a certain sense of "self-consciousness". Freud, by contrast, does not in most of his writings distinguish clearly between "consciousness" and "self-consciousness" – although it is clear from a close reading of his texts that when he speaks of the "unconscious", it is with respect to self-consciousness and not consciousness in general. The unconscious is a form of consciousness, not its mutually exclusive other. What it does exclude is a certain *self*-consciousness, which presupposes the consciousness of the self as a unity. Unconscious processes, as with the dream-work or repression, have the essential qualities of consciousness: intentionality, goal-directed etc. They cannot be made conscious because they would disrupt the *unity* of intentionality associated not with consciousness per se, but with the unconscious.

26. When Freud writes of "the unconscious" what he is referring to are representations and mechanisms that cannot be made the object of conscious thought – i.e., that cannot be conceived of according to the law of non-contradiction. This is why he invokes the insensitivity to contradiction as the primary characteristic of the unconscious;<sup>12</sup> what he means by "conscious" on the contrary is precisely the opposite: non-contradiction and stability, which in turn imply self-identity. Later on, after the shift to the "second topology" of I, Trans-I and it, Freud will closely associate such consciousness with the Ego.

27. But this association is already at the core of Nietzsche's reflections – not in the 1870s, but in the notes written some ten years later and which will be published posthumously under the title, *The Will to Power*. For it is in these texts that Nietzsche most persistently poses the question of why the tradition of thought and of action, which he associates with Western philosophy and

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<sup>12</sup> "In sum: absence of contradiction (*Widerspruchslosigkeit*), primary process (mobility of cathexes), timelessness and replacement of external reality through psychic reality are the characteristics (of) the system Unconscious". "The Unconscious", *Complete Works*, 3010.

“metaphysics” as well as with science, should emphasize assimilation over difference, stability over change, being over becoming? His response to this question turns around a critical theory of the Western Ego. It is under the influence of this Ego that transference becomes a machine to produce identities and to reduce alterities: in short, a machine designed to preserve and expand its constitutive misrecognition of its own heterogeneity, partiality, and exclusions. The Ego allies itself with a certain scientific spirit (epitomized for Nietzsche in Social Darwinism with its notion of evolution as adaptation and self-preservation). The following fragment from *The Will to Power* (using the original numbering to simplify referencing, as distinct from the chronological renumbering that is now current) indicates the direction in which Nietzsche’s critique of the Ego points:

If our Ego is for us the sole being, which serves as model for our conception of being in general, very well! Then there will be much space to doubt if what we have here is more than a perspectival illusion – an apparent unity that encloses everything as in a horizon. The evidence of the body reveals an enormous multiplicity [...]. (Nietzsche 1968, §518)

28. The contrast between the perspective of the Ego and the “evidence of the body” sets up an alternative that Nietzsche will develop throughout his work, with increasing intensity as the years progress. It can be read together with the following short passage: “If there is only one sole being, the Ego”, and if every other being is construed along this model – [...] if on the other hand the Ego reveals itself to be something in a state of becoming: then [...]” (Nietzsche 1968, §519) The “perspective” of the Ego described in the first passage is thus by no means to be taken as the truth of the Ego, which can reveal itself not as a self-identical model for being as such – Nietzsche’s version of Heidegger’s “forgetting of being”. Rather as the concluding phrase (and many other observations) indicate, the Ego itself can be revealed to be “in a state of becoming” and thus subordinate to time, space and history in a way not so different from the “multiplicity” of the body. On the other hand, the unitary perspective of the Ego first described, which Nietzsche viewed as increasingly dominant, would insist on an assimilation that requires the devalorisation or repression of the body, given the “enormous multiplicity” that it entails. Hence, following the perspective of an autonomous Ego, identity must be conceived as radically distinct from the body to which it finds itself bound.

29. If this ego-perspective – that of a radical and atomistic individualism – is historically dominant, Nietzsche nevertheless does not cease his attempts to think alternative possibilities, involving an Ego differently conceived:

The Ego is a hundred times more than a unity in an articulated chain: it is this chain itself, wholly and completely – and the species is only an abstraction extracted from the multiplicity of these chains and from their partial analogy. (Nietzsche 1968, §682)

30. If the Ego itself *is* “an articulated chain” that is in a continual state of becoming, it should be thought as a kind of ongoing transference, “at the same time multiple, changing and permanent”. This movement is not oriented by an effort at self-preservation, but rather by that of constantly trying to exceed itself: *sich überbieten*, a hyperbolic movement (Nietzsche 1968, §488). Although the notion of “exceeding oneself” can be construed in conformity with a logic of self-identity as a mere quantitative change, and although some of Nietzsche’s texts do point in this direction, others suggest that the notion of *Selbstüberbietung* entails a going-beyond the self as it has previously been constituted. This is the difference between the “higher man” and the “over-man”, whereby the prefix *über-*, like “over-” in English, can mean both “above” and “across”, “super-” and “trans-” – and therefore would be better translated as “transhuman”.<sup>13</sup>
31. Although Nietzsche does not use the word “transference”, *Übertragung*, often in his later writings of the 1880s, the movement he describes in his notes of the 1870s resonates with the two aspects associated by Freud with the term: on the one hand, that of projecting an identity upon another, which tends to efface its singular alterity and to assimilate it to a generalizable same; and on the other, the effort to disrupt self-identity as previously constituted. The former projects the past upon the present and the future; the latter refers to the future as a point of departure for something new and different. In both cases the Ego constitutes itself as an after-effect of the kind of transference, *Übertragung*, in which it partakes. And in both cases the Ego may be regarded as split: between a perspective that insists on self-identity, unity and permanence, and another that allows for alteration, multiplicity and change.
32. The subject – a category that Nietzsche criticizes and Freud rarely uses – is caught up in an irreducible conflict, not as the result of purely exterior forces, but because of its culturally inspired tendency to deny its constitutive heterogeneity. In seeking to reinforce itself, it accentuates its own divisions: for “the struggle is in us; never we will treat ourselves as an individual but as a duality, a plurality [...]” (192). However, this struggle turns out to be not entirely interior either, for it always implies a practice of language, and language is never purely inward:

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13 Not however in the teleological scheme in which this term has often been inscribed, with reference also to Nietzsche. But Nietzsche’s transhuman is not going anywhere that could be determined as a goal: it involves the openness to transformation becoming a general characteristic of human being – and beyond. The translation as “transhuman” is worth retaining and defending, insofar as it challenges the equation of “Mensch” with “man” as well as the individuation thereby implied. The transhuman should not be reduced to any form of “man”.

We pose a word there where our ignorance begins, where we cannot look any further, for example, the word “I”, the word “do” (*tun*), the word suffer (*leiden*): they are perhaps the lines of the horizon of our knowledge, but not of truths. (Nietzsche 1968, §482)

33. Here again Nietzsche’s philological background and interest return to delimit the claims of cognition, whether of philosophy, science or ordinary language. For language renders such delimitation both necessary and yet always incomplete – and therefore illusory wherever claims to universal validity are advanced. Language is constituted through the movement of tropes, which are not derivative for Nietzsche but irreducible, since the linguistic process of differential signification is already at work in ostensibly pre- and non-linguistic experience, including so-called “sense perception”. Words, far from designating the essence of objects, mark the limits of our knowledge, and hence the borderline with our non-knowledge. This means that every word functions like a Saussurean or rather Derridean signifier or trace, pointing away from its familiar, recognizable meaning to other possibilities, not covered or sanctioned by convention. This is particularly true of the key words, “I”, “do” and “suffer”: given the borderline between the known and the unknown, activity (“do”) and passivity (“suffer”) cannot simply be opposed to one another. The relative unit of a word’s meaning is assured by convention – which means that the “I” indeed “receives” its verbal horizon from the established state of language in the situation in which it finds itself. That situation however is always both singular and historical. The fact that the I is thereby defined more as a receiver and responder to historical impulses, than as an actor, much less creator, also explains why like Freud, Nietzsche frequently uses the word “*Trieb*” to describe the movement of the Ego. It is “driven” rather than driving. But the drive can never be entirely aimless: it has to follow a certain direction. Hence also the need, recognized by both Nietzsche and Freud, for those drives to be “limited”, which “words” accomplish in part, but only to the extent that their figural-tropic heritage and potentialities are overlooked in favor of their conventional meanings. For such a contradictory process, accomplished by words, it is fitting that an ambiguous word should be the most accurate designation, namely *de-limitation*. Words are de-limiters, for both Nietzsche and Freud. The “lines of horizon” that they trace do not merely enclose but also *expose* to what they exclude.

34. The main resistance to acknowledging the ambiguous necessity and impossibility of such delimitation in the Western tradition is, for Nietzsche as later for Heidegger, retraceable not just to an intellectual but also to a religious tradition. Heidegger will label it “ontotheological” while Nietzsche will identify it mainly with Christianity. Both insist on the indebtedness of a certain

subjectivism – which Nietzsche will associate with the individualist conception of an autonomous Ego – to a religious tradition based on what I have called a “monotheological identity paradigm”: the idea of a supreme being that is unique, sovereign and exclusive. And again, like Heidegger after him, Nietzsche retraces the power of this movement to a certain anxiety. This anxiety is the result of the effort of the Ego first to idealize the autonomy implied in that monotheological identity paradigm and then to try to live up to it: in vain, because as I have previously tried to show elsewhere, the power of this paradigm is in direct proportion to its internal contradictions. To work it must remain unattainably different from the mortal humans who seek to assuage their anxieties by hoping to conform to the paradigm. They thereby find themselves in a double-bind. Were they ever to achieve this goal, the ideal would no longer be an ideal, God would have become mortal, resulting in a situation that in its untenability has precisely determined modern Western European history since the Reformation, if not before.

35. Nietzsche of course says or writes nothing of the sort. Or at least, he does not say this in so many words. But certain passages in his notes are strongly suggestive of such a reading. In conclusion I will discuss two such remarks.

#### A.

36. First:

The inventive force that fabricates categories labored in the service of a need, the need for security, for rapid intelligibility thanks to signs and to sounds, to abbreviations: it is not a question of metaphysical truths when one speaks of “substance,” “subject,” “object,” “being,” “becoming”. It is the powerful, who have made the names of things into laws and among the powerful it is the greatest artists in abstraction who have fabricated the categories. (Nietzsche 1968, §513)

37. If “the inventive force” that is beyond all conceptualization and categorization is driven by “the need for security”, the question must be asked: security of what and from what? It is here that Nietzsche’s critique of the Ego and its influence upon the Self – the Self- of self-consciousness – is especially illuminating. It is the Ego’s impossible *compulsion* to define itself as autonomous, prior to all relation to alterity, that subjects it to constant dangers, the apprehension of which is registered as anxiety and the “need for security”. The need for “rapid intelligibility thanks to signs and sounds, and abbreviations”, suggests that the rapidity demanded here is a defensive response of anxiety informed by the “monotheological identity-paradigm”.

38. What is threatened and what reacts in this way is the compulsion of the Ego to live up to that “paradigm” drawn from the first books of Genesis. However epoch-making this paradigm may be,

it still cannot claim to be universally human. Nietzsche's critique of anthropomorphism concerns therefore not a universal conception of man but a culturally and historically distinct conception of man as created by a single, universal, and exclusive supreme being and in its image.

39. It is not entirely surprising that Nietzsche himself often succumbs to the very anthropomorphizing perspective that he otherwise criticizes. Given that the word "artists" in his vocabulary almost always has a positive value, his assertion that it is "the greatest artists in abstraction who have made the names of things into a law", has to be read critically, as does his aestheticism more generally. For what Nietzsche admires in those "great artists" – what makes them great in his eyes – is precisely their ability to cause others to overlook or forget the very process of "abstraction" that they manipulate. They can do this by appealing to anxiety as "the need for security". But such security only reflects the untenable situation produced by Egos, individual and collective, seeking to free themselves of their heterogeneity and the finitude it entails. In the hands of such "artists", words cease to mark the limits of knowledge and instead are used to legitimate universally valid concepts, which are both morally and aesthetically reassuring.

#### B.

40. The second passage I want to discuss shows the subject "at work", striving to preserve and enhance a unity that it can never achieve; the way it deals with this dilemma is to establish its domination over other subjects:

No subject-"atoms". The sphere of a subject continually *growing* or *diminishing* itself, the center of the system continually *shifting*; in case it cannot organize the appropriated mass, it breaks in two. On the other hand, it can transform a weaker subject, without annihilating it, into its functionary and to a certain degree form a unity with it. No "substance", rather something that strives to strengthen itself; and that only indirectly seeks to "preserve" itself (it wants to *surpass* itself). (Nietzsche 1968, §488)

41. All of the ambiguity of Nietzsche's critique of the subject is in evidence here. The subject is torn between the desire to reinforce itself and its dynamic, unstable nature; it seeks to "organize" like Freud's Ego, but where it fails, it strives to subordinate other equally unstable subjects and to coalesce with them into the unity it cannot assure by itself. In a double and highly ambiguous sense it seeks to "surpass" or "trump itself" (*sich überbieten*): both in strengthening its constitutively split structure, and alternatively or concomitantly seeking to subordinate other subjects to itself as its "functionary". Like a capitalist enterprise – and Walter Benjamin in his fragmentary essay, *Capitalism as Religion* is well aware of the analogy – Nietzsche's subject must expand to survive, because on its own it is fatally flawed.



42. Hence the ambiguous nature of the “will to power”: what it seeks to empower is marked by its refusal to acknowledge its constitutive heterogeneity: its “tropism” if you will. Here we encounter the same ambiguity and ambivalence as with Freud’s notion of transference: it proceeds from a resistance to change, and from a denial of the historicity of the self; and yet as such, it is also constitutes the major possibility of acceding to that history and of transforming the self.

43. As Nietzsche puts it:

The logical-metaphysical postulates, the belief in substance, accident, attribute, etc., derive their convincing force from our habit of regarding all our deeds as consequences of our will—so that the ego, as substance, does not vanish in the multiplicity of change. — *But there is no such thing as will.* (Nietzsche 1968, §488, my italics)

44. The “convincing force” of the conventions of metaphysical thinking including that of an autonomous ego derive their power, which is real, from the “need of security” that haunts that ego – from its anxiety of dissolving “in the multiplicity of change”. If such ego-threatening change is tied to a certain conception of time, then the demand for speed – for rapid intelligibility through signs, sounds and abbreviations – can be seen as an effort to master the threat of time. Today “the greatest artists in abstraction” can be found in advertising and communications: they are the ones who know how to abstract: how to detach words, signs and sounds from their multiple concatenations and give them the reassuring appearance of self-evident and meaningful markers. Ultimately, complexity is reduced to simplicity and objectivity given the appearance of an effect of subjective volition: “weaker subjects” are thus transformed into “functionaries” of a strong subject that allows them to coalesce into what looks like a stable unity. (Nietzsche 1968, §490) As Nietzsche observes: “Formerly the I concealed itself in the herd; now the herd conceals itself at the bottom of the I” (Nietzsche 1968, §226).

### 3.

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45. Let us now in conclusion return to Freud, in order to develop further the struggle between the need for security and the workings of anxiety. I have elsewhere sought to argue that Freud’s celebrated essay, “The Uncanny”, can be read as a final attempt to assimilate anxiety to analytic discourse and above all to its “drive dynamics” centered around “repression” (Weber 2010, 45-62). If “transference” is a term that was imported into psychoanalytic discourse, this is even more appropriate of “anxiety”. Even before his discovery or invention of psychoanalysis, Freud had

written several essays on “anxiety neurosis” and the notion pursued him in his *Interpretation of Dreams*, where he sought to defend the thesis that all dreams are only “wish-fulfillments”. He therefore developed an initial theory of anxiety that construed it as a return of the repressed: the previously bound drive-energies would “return” in a more unbound state, and that produced the feeling of anxiety (which Freud distinguished from fear: the latter having a clear object, whereas anxiety was rather an apprehension addressed at the future, without a clear-cut object in the present). Freud’s predicament in his essay on *The Uncanny* has to do with this relatively indeterminate nature of anxiety. Freud keeps trying to pin down the uncanny by assigning it predicates, related to anxiety – ocular anxiety as a symptom of castration anxiety. But he is forced again and again to recognize that his formula assimilating the uncanny to anxiety – namely as the return of repressed childhood memories, is not specific enough. If the Uncanny involves the anxious return of repressed memories, not every such return is uncanny. If A is B, then not all B is A – this is the formula that drives Freud’s essay, up to its inconclusive but very Nietzschean conclusion. It is constructed on the difference he proposes between what he calls the uncanny of fiction and the uncanny of lived experience. In the uncanny we read or hear of in fiction, everything turns out to depend on the particular *perspective* the reader embraces: a severed hand can be uncanny or comic depending on the position assumed by the reader in regard to it. Ditto with any of the other hallmarks that Freud associates with the uncanny. But what is the position of Freud himself with regard to this problem?

46. At the time he is completing his writing of “The Uncanny”, Freud is just about to pass “beyond the pleasure principle” by reflecting first on the traumas induced by the First World War, and then, on the power of compulsive repetition not just in neuroses, but in the movement of psychic drives. He is about to discover his version of what Nietzsche has already called “The Eternal Return of the Same” (I have discussed this unsatisfactory translation elsewhere<sup>14</sup>). Without being able to even scratch the surface in comparing these two related but very different notions, I will just point to the fact that in both cases they stress an iterative process that is independent of the action or volition of the “subject”, whom it nevertheless profoundly shapes and affects. But Freud’s version goes together with a rethinking of the status of the subject in relation to the Ego, and it is this that drives him to introduce a dramatic and significant change in his theory of anxiety. Previously Freud had as indicated that he thought of anxiety as a return of the repressed in conformity with the so-called pleasure-principle. A thought was repressed because it might cause

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14 S. Weber, *Singularity: Politics and Poetics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2021.

displeasure or pain, and subsequently “returned” not as itself but as a form of free-floating energy. This free-floating energy Freud considered to be anxiety. However, following the same pattern as with the Uncanny, he was gradually forced to acknowledge that not every return of the repressed produces anxiety. Something else was needed to distinguish it: anxiety could no longer be explained strictly in terms of the dynamic of the drives, driven by the pleasure principle. This rethinking culminates in 1925 in Freud’s last major if short book, *Inhibition, Symptom and Anxiety*.

47. In that text, Freud describes anxiety as the recognition of a danger. But “danger” is not simply an objective category: it is always a danger *to something*. In this case, Freud described the danger as a threat perceived by and to the system of the Ego. In short, it was no longer repression and the drives that were the cause of anxiety, but in a certain sense the Ego. As already discussed, the function of the ego as Freud construed it is to mediate between It and Trans-I (aka “superego”) – between demands of the drives and ideals and prohibitions inherited from family and tradition, but also from the so-called “decline of the Oedipus complex” and the “castration anxiety” associated with it. Anxiety is thus firmly situated with respect to Freud’s second topology as a function of the Ego. With respect to the relation of anxiety to repression, Freud seems to reverse his previous position: rather than construing anxiety as an effect of repression, he argues that repression is an effect of anxiety. This apparent reversal in fact has implications that go much farther than simply inverting cause and effect. Rather it tends to call for an entirely new conceptualization of the psyche and in particular of how it comes to be constituted. For in the earlier view, the psyche was largely structured by repression. In the new view, repression, as the result of anxiety, already presupposes something like an Ego – but it has to be an Ego before the individual’s Ego that is the result of repression.

48. Without stating it in so many words, the main implication of Freud’s revised theory of anxiety is that there must be something like an *ego before the ego*, a *proto-ego* (as with primal repression and primal narcissism). But in this case, such an Ur-Ich can no longer be construed in purely *intrapsychic* terms. It has to be in part the result of a transmission, an *Übertragung*, that transcends the individual psyche, while at the same time structuring it. One is thus tempted to think of this proto-ego as existing prior to the formation of any individual Ego.

49. Without being able here to go into detail, I will suggest that this proto-Ego, which would form the basis of that anxiety that according to Freud is what determines specific repressions, is the trace of what I have called the “monotheological identity paradigm” as it has been transmitted through language, culture and conventions – which are not necessarily universal but historically determined.

This collective transmission conditions the development of singular individuals.

50. Such a proto-Ego would therefore be informed by an extremely long-standing tradition transmitted through language (above all, the belief in the unicity of words and the grammaticism of language) and legend, customs and institutions, structures of belief and other conventions – which would draw support from the notion of a world originating from the act of a supreme and self-identical being held to be universal, exclusive and sovereign. In short, the basis of such an identity paradigm would be *the compulsion to believe* that the world is essentially homogeneous, and that heterogeneity is an accidental after-effect.
51. Although both Freud and Nietzsche are very close to adopting such a position, I clearly do not wish to impute it to them – only to suggest that it is an arguable consequence of the positions they do take. Nietzsche, in the texts referenced as in many others, recognized a connection between a view of the universe based on an autonomous, self-contained, sovereign Ego, and a denigration of temporal “becoming” as inferior to a-temporal “being”. Although he tended to see the Ego in anthropomorphic terms, as universally human, he also was sensitive enough to cultural and religious differences to allow room for alternative explanations. As he noted in the *Book of the Philosopher*, parenthetically to be sure: “(Indian critique: even the “Ego” as apparent, not real.)” To be sure, behind such an observation stood Schopenhauer. But this fascination with non-Western religions allowed Nietzsche to name his spokesman in what he considered to be his chief work, after the Persian prophet, Zoroaster. And perhaps a similar desire to relativize the universalist pretensions of Western culture drove Freud to approve the expression of Barbara Low as a synonym for what he called the Death Drive, namely the *Nirvana Principle*. While at the same time insisting that such a principle could never function if it were the only One. Something other was necessary, and Freud called it appropriately enough, Eros or the Drive to Life.

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