

Some introductory notes on *Civilization and its Discontents* – Draft paper

Kate Briggs

Lacan Circle of Melbourne, STUDY DAY, 21 MAY 2011

In the first chapter and outline of *Seminar VII*, Lacan refers to *Civilization and Its Discontents* as “an indispensable work, unsurpassed for an understanding of Freud’s thought and the summation of his experience. It illuminates, emphasizes, dissipates the ambiguities of wholly distinct points of the analytical experience and of what our view of man should be – given that it is with man, with **an immemorial human demand**, that we have to deal on a daily basis”.¹ This was written in 1959 and Lacan was presumably referring to mankind, yet he also notes that “it is, in brief, very strange that analytical experience has if anything stifled, silenced, and evaded those areas of the problem of sexuality which relate to the point of view of feminine demand”.² The tension between Freud’s views on sexual difference and the aggressiveness he identifies as the “greatest hindrance to civilization” runs as an undercurrent throughout his essay, the objective of which is to separate psychoanalysis from an ethics based on religion and the promise of consolation. In *Encore* Lacan states he was revisiting *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* and it is from this perspective that we might seek to consider both the tragedy of human experience (comprising our reactions to mortality and ‘the death drive’) and contextualise the discussion of the oceanic feeling or feminine jouissance, in reply to the question of which Freud’s essay began. To this end I’ll begin with the correspondence between Freud and Romain Rolland in which this question was framed.

I

Freud sought out Rolland, who was a writer of novels and biographies, in February 1923 by sending a “word of respect from an unknown admirer”³. Their correspondence is striking for its intensely cordial sentiment of mutual admiration that is particularly passionate on Freud’s part, and the pathos of their statements about being near the end of life. Freud’s cancer was first diagnosed in the same year (1923, I’m not sure which month), and in their letters we see sketched the concerns Freud addressed in his later work. We get a sense of his sentiment when in March, 1923, he wrote to Rolland:

“That I have been allowed to exchange a greeting with you will remain a happy memory to the end of my days. Because for us your name has been associated with the most precious of beautiful illusions, that of love extended to all mankind.

I, of course, belong to a race which in the Middle Ages was held responsible

¹ Lacan, J. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book VII. 1959-1960*. Trs. Dennis Porter. London: Routledge, 1982. P. 7.

² Lacan, J. *Seminar VII*, P. 9.

³ Freud, S. cited Parsons, W. B. (1999) *The Enigma of the Oceanic Feeling. Revisioning the Psychoanalytic Theory of Mysticism*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press. P. 19.

for all epidemics and which today is blamed for the disintegration of the Austrian Empire and the German defeat. Such experiences have a sobering effect and are not conducive to make one believe in illusions. A great part of my life's work (I am ten years older than you) has been spent [trying to] destroy illusions of my own and those of mankind. But if this one hope cannot be at least partly realized, if in the course of evolution we don't learn to divert our instincts from destroying our own kind, if we continue to hate one another for minor differences and kill each other for petty gain, if we go on exploiting the great progress made in the control of natural resources for our mutual destruction, what kind of future lies in store for us? It is surely hard enough to ensure the perpetuation of our species in **the conflict between our instinctual nature and the demands made upon us by civilization.**

My writings cannot be what yours are: comfort and refreshment for the reader. But if I may believe that they have aroused your interest, I shall permit myself to send you a small book which is sure to be unknown to you: Group psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, published in 1921. Not that I consider this work to be particularly successful, but it shows a way from the analysis of the individual to an understanding of society.

Sincerely yours

Freud⁴

So began their exchange of books. In June the next year, Freud wrote that Rolland's book on Mahatma Gandhi would accompany him on his vacation and how "When I am alone in my study, I often think of **the hour that you gave me** and my daughter here, and I imagine you again in the red chair which we set out for you. I am not well. I would gladly end my life, but I must wait for it to unravel. My cordial wishes for you and your work."⁵

In January 1926, his deference has tones of exaltation:

"Unforgettable man, to have soared to such heights of humanity through so much hardship and suffering!

I revered you as an artist and apostle of love for mankind many years before I saw you. I myself have always advocated the love for mankind not out of sentimentality or idealism but for sober, economic reasons: because in the face of our instinctual drives and the world as it is I was compelled to consider this love as indispensable for the preservation of the human species as, say, technology.

When I finally came to know you personally I was surprised to find that you hold strength and energy in such high esteem, and that you yourself embody so much will power".⁶

⁴ Freud to Rolland, March 4, 1923 in Parsons, p. 171.

⁵ Freud to Rolland, June 15, 1924 in Parsons, p. 172.

⁶ Freud to Rolland, January 29, 1926 in Parsons, p. 172.

At least from the available correspondence collected by Parsons (1999) and published as an appendix to his book, Rolland's tone is admiring and flattering yet calmer, more restrained than Freud. For example, in May 1926 he writes Freud a birthday greeting: "Dear Friend, With all my heart I share with those who celebrate your birthday. May the power of your mind pierce the night of life for a long time to come! And for you, peace of the body and joy of thought! Please give my respectful remembrance to your daughter, and believe in my affectionate admiration. Romain Rolland."⁷ Within a week Freud replies:

"Dear Friend,

Your lines are among the most precious things which these days have brought me. Let me thank you for their content and your manner of address.

Unlike you, I cannot count on the love of many people. I have not pleased, comforted, edified them. Nor was this my intention; I only wanted to explore, solve riddles, uncover a little of the truth. This may have given pain to many, benefited a few, neither of which I consider my fault or my merit. It seems to me a surprising accident that apart from my doctrines my person should attract any attention at all. But when men like you whom I have loved from afar express their friendship for me, then a particular ambition of mine is gratified. I enjoy it without questioning whether or not I deserve it, I relish it as a gift. You belong to those who know how to give presents.

With my warmest wishes for your well-being

Your devoted

Freud⁸

This theme of Freud's ambition as it is tied to the question of love will reappear in the Open Letter he wrote to Rolland on the occasion of the latter's seventieth birthday some ten years later in 1936, which is published as 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis.' There Freud considers the derealization he experienced on the Acropolis as an ego defence, a disavowal of the oedipal ambition whose sentiment is conveyed in a comment Napoleon apparently made to one of his brothers as he was crowned Emperor: "What would *Monsieur notre Père* have said to this, if he could have been here today?"⁹

It was then in December 1929 that Freud received the letter in which Rolland refers to the oceanic feeling:

Your analysis of religion is a just one. But I would have liked to see you doing an analysis of *spontaneous religious sentiment* or, more exactly, of religious *feeling*, which is wholly different from religion in the strict sense of the word, and much more durable.

What I mean is: totally independent of all dogma, all credo, all Church

⁷ Rolland to Freud, May 6, 1926 in Parsons, p. 172.

⁸ Freud to Rolland, May 13, 1926 in Parsons, p. 172-3.

⁹ Freud, 1936, 'A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis', PFL 11, p. 456.

organization, all Sacred Books, all hope in a personal survival, etc., the simple and direct fact of *the feeling of the 'eternal'* (which can very well not be eternal, but simply without perceptible limits, and like oceanic as it were).

This sensation, admittedly, is of a subjective character. But it is common to thousands (millions) of men actually existing, with its thousands (millions) of individual nuances, it is possible to subject it to analysis, with an approximate exactitude.

I think that you will classify it also under the *Zwangsneurosen*. But I have often had occasion to observe its rich and beneficent power, be it among the religious souls of the West, Christians or non-Christians, or among those great minds of Asia who have become familiar to me and some of whom I count as friends. Of these latter, I am going to study, in a future book, two personalities who were among our contemporaries ... [his biographies of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda were to appear in 1929 and 1930] and who revealed an aptitude for thought and action which proved strongly regenerating for their country and for the world.

I myself am familiar with this sensation. All through my life, it has never failed; and I have always found it in a source of vital renewal. In that sense, I can say that I am profoundly 'religious' – without this constant state (like a sheet of water which I feel flushing under the bark) affecting in any way my critical faculties and my freedom to exercise them- even if that goes against the immediacy of the interior experience. In this way, without discomfort or contradiction, I can lead a 'religious' life (in the sense of that prolonged feeling) and a life of critical reason (which is without illusion)...

I may add that this 'oceanic' sentiment has nothing to do with my personal yearnings. Personally, I yearn for eternal rest, survival has no attraction for me at all. But the sentiment I experience is imposed on me as a fact. It is a *contact*. And as I have recognized it to be identical (with multiple nuances) in a large number of living souls, it has helped me to understand that that was the true subterranean source of religious energy which, subsequently, has been collected, canalized and *dried up by the Churches*, to the extent that one could say that it is inside the churches (whichever they may be) that true 'religious' sentiment is least available.

What eternal confusion is caused by words, of which the same one here sometimes means: *allegiance* to or *faith* in a dogma, or a word of god (or a tradition); and sometimes: a free *vital upsurge*.

Please believe, dear friend, in my affectionate respect.

Romain Rolland »¹⁰

Roland's biographies of Ramakrishna and Vivekananda appeared in 1929 and 1930. In *The Life of Vivekananda*, he "addresses the epistemology of mystical experience arguing that Kant's analysis – that 'the structure of the mind precluded the kind of direct, unmediated contact with the noumenal realm the mystics often claimed to intuit' "had already been predicated and ...surpassed" by Vedantic philosophers some centuries

¹⁰ Rolland, R. letter to Freud December 5, 1927, in Parsons (1999) p. 173-4.

earlier.¹¹ I can't go further into this without reading Rolland's books (which I haven't yet done) but it interesting to note that in positing "an isomorphic relation between the external and internal world",¹² Rolland writes "What is the 'function of the real' of which scientific psychology claims to be the standard bearer" or that it seeks to address. This would of course be the central point of Lacan's reading in *Seminar VII*, his concentration on the *Project*, the shift in terms from narcissism and the boundary of the ego as Freud depicts things to the role of signifiers and that which escapes representation.

In *Encore* Lacan would state that "Mysticism isn't everything that isn't politics. It is something serious, about which several people inform us – most often women, or bright people like St John of the Cross, because one is not obliged, when one is male to situate oneself on the side of [those all inscribed in the phallic function]".¹³ In Freud's time, people around Charcot and others were trying, he says, to reduce mysticism "to questions of cum (affaires de foutre). If you look closely, that's not it at all. Doesn't this jouissance one experiences and yet knows nothing about put us on the path of ex-istence? And why not interpret one face of the Other, the God face, as based on feminine jouissance?"¹⁴ Stating that these "mystical jaculations are neither idle chatter nor empty verbiage", his *Écrits* being "of the same order. Thanks to which, naturally, you are all going to be convinced that I believe in God. I believe in the jouissance of woman insofar as it is extra".¹⁵ The key point being that it is extra to, "produced thanks to the being of signifierness" that has it's locus in the Other which "is also where the father function is inscribed, insofar as castration is related to the father function".¹⁶

We shall return to this key point in Lacan's reading of Freud, here let us note that eighteen months after getting this letter Freud wrote to Rolland (in July 1929) that his remarks about the oceanic feeling had left him "no peace." Freud comments that he has written the draft of an essay that makes "a starting point of this remark; I mention this "oceanic" feeling and am trying to interpret it from the point of view of our psychology. The essay [he says] moves on to other subjects, deals with happiness, civilization and the sense of guilt; I don't mention your name but nevertheless drop a hint that points toward you. And now", he continues, "I am beset with doubts whether I am justified in using your private remark for publication in this way... My essay could be given another introduction without any loss; perhaps it is altogether not indispensable."¹⁷ Rolland has in effect put Freud to work and replies that he is honoured to learn that the letter he'd written at the end of 1927 had prompted Freud "to new researches and that in a new work

¹¹ Parsons, (1999), p. 71.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Lacan, J. *On Feminine Sexuality. The Limits of Love and Knowledge. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book XX. Encore. 1972-1973.* Ed. by Jacques-Alain Miller. Trs. with notes by Bruce Fink. New York and London: Norton, 1998. P. 76.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁵ Ibid., pp.76-77.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 77.

¹⁷ Freud, letter to Rolland, July 14, 1929, in Parsons (1999), p.174.

you will reply to the questions I had posed you”.¹⁸ He is happy to be cited though doesn’t remember what he wrote exactly, commenting that it would have been written while he was beginning his studies on Indian mysticism (some eighteen months ago), the three volumes of which were due to be published in a few months time. He comments that since 1927 he had been able “to delve deeply into that ‘oceanic’ sentiment” finding innumerable examples “not only among hundreds of our contemporary Asians, but also in ...the ritualistic and multi-secular physiology which is codified in treatises on yoga...while reading, for comparison, some of the great mystics of Europe and particularly those of the Alexandrian epoch, those who lived in the West during the 14th century – not to speak of the considerable work of Abbé Brémond on French mysticism during the 16th and 17th centuries- I was surprised to observe once again, that...the East and the West...are branches of the same river of thought.”¹⁹

Freud, replying three days later, insists that he can’t accept Rolland’s permission before asking him to reread the letter of 1927 which he encloses with the demand that Rolland return it: “I possess so few letters from you that I do not like the idea of renouncing the return of this, your first one. I am not normally a hunter of relics, so please forgive this weakness.”²⁰ Now it wasn’t the first letter he’d received from Rolland and we imagine that by this time he’d already accumulated a number of the over two thousand Greek, Roman and Egyptian antiquities in his collection; one might say that he was indeed a collector of relics. Freud goes on to say he was glad Rolland’s book will appear before his, asking him not to expect from his

“any evaluation of the ‘oceanic’ feeling; I am experimenting only with an analytical version of it; I am clearing it out of the way, so to speak.

How remote from me are the worlds in which you move! To me mysticism is just as closed a book as music. I cannot imagine reading all the literature which, according to your letter, you have studied. And yet it is easier for you than for us to read the human soul!”²¹

Freud tries to explain and rationalise this feeling that is foreign to him; Rolland admonishes him. “I can hardly believe that mysticism and music are unknown to you...Rather, I think that you distrust them, because you uphold the integrity of critical reason, with which you control the instrument. As for me, since birth I have taken part in both the intuitive and the critical natures, I do not suffer from a conflict between their opposing tendencies...”²² This is the nature of the exchange between them. The rupture between rationality and intuition or experiential knowledge articulated here is taken in different directions by the two men- Freud made it the basis of his critical theory while Rolland maintained it was an unnecessary and unsustainable division, raising the question of what it was defending against and indeed stating that such “invisible forces ...act in secret when they are not made manifest by explosions in broad daylight”.²³ Having read

¹⁸ Rolland, letter to Freud, July 17, 1929 in Parsons, p.175.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Freud, letter to Rolland, July 20, 1929 in Parsons, p. 175.

²¹ Freud, letter to Rolland, July 20, 1929 in Parsons, p. 175.

²² Rolland to Freud, July 24, 1929, in Parsons, p. 176.

²³ Rolland to Freud, May 3, 1931, in Parsons, p. 178.

Civilization and its Discontents when it was published, Rolland quietly takes Freud to task, insisting that the oceanic feeling “is a psychological fact, [and] a vital trait of” his character,²⁴ reiterating his previous comments that the feeling “has nothing to do with ... personal yearning”²⁵; in other words, the feeling is not based on need.

Freud responds to this:

“You answered my pleasantry with the most precious information about your own person. My profound thanks for it.

Approaching life’s inevitable end, reminded of it by yet another operation and aware that I am unlikely to see you again, I may confess to you that I have rarely experienced that mysterious attraction of one human being for another as vividly as I have with you; it is somehow bound up, perhaps, with the awareness of our being so different.”²⁶

Freud’s discourse to Rolland, laced with identification and dissemblance, is touched by a transference he had difficulty in naming. How might this be evident in the first of the essays in which he’d written in response to Rolland?

II

Civilization and Its Discontents opens with reference to the common misapprehension that power, success and wealth are standards of measurement for what is ‘of true value in life’, these we might note as phallic attributes or standards of measurement. “It is impossible, Freud writes, “to escape the impression that people commonly use false standards of measurement- that they seek power, success and wealth for themselves and admire them in others, and that they underestimate **what is of true value** in life. And yet”, he continues, there “are a few men” whose

“greatness rests on attributes and achievement which are completely foreign to the aims and ideals of the multitude [and who are nonetheless admired]One of these exceptional few calls himself my friend in his letters to me. I had sent him my small book that treats religion as an illusion, and he answered that he entirely agreed with my judgement upon religion, but that he was sorry I had not properly appreciated the true source of religious sentiments. This, he says, consists in a peculiar feeling, which he himself is never without, which he finds confirmed by many others, and which he may suppose is present in millions of people. It is a feeling which he would like to call a sensation of ‘eternity’, a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded- as it were, ‘oceanic’. This feeling, he adds, is a purely subjective fact, not an article of faith; it brings with it no assurance of personal immortality, but it is the source of the religious energy which is seized upon by the various Churches and religious systems, directed by them into particular channels, and doubtless also exhausted by them. One may, he thinks,

²⁴ Rolland to Freud, May 3, 1931, in Parsons, p. 177.

²⁵ Rolland to Freud, Dec 5 1927, in Parsons, p. 174.

²⁶ Freud, letter to Rolland, May 1931, in Parsons (1999), p.178.

rightly call oneself religious on the ground of this oceanic feeling alone, even if one rejects every belief and every illusion.

The views expressed by the friend whom I so much honour...caused me no small difficulty. I cannot discover this 'oceanic' feeling in myself. It is not easy to deal scientifically with feelings."²⁷

The narrative of Freud's essay unfolds over eight chapters, beginning as he notes to Rolland with some comments on the oceanic feeling in order to interpret it, experiment "with an analytical version of it" and clear "it out of the way".²⁸

Chapter 1 therefore compares the past of a city, Rome, with the past of the mind: "The fact remains [he writes] that only in the mind is such a preservation of all the earlier stages alongside of the final form possible...thus we are perfectly willing to acknowledge that the 'oceanic' feeling exists in many people, and we are inclined to trace it back to an early phase of ego-feeling. The further question then arises, what claim this feeling has to be regarded as the source of religious needs. To me the claim does not seem compelling. After all, a feeling can only be a source of energy if it is itself the expression of a strong need."²⁹

Chapter II addresses science, art and religion as forms of sublimation and techniques of living; he refers to 'the religion of the common man'.

Chapter III generally discusses dissatisfaction with the existing state of civilization. Explaining the recurrent idea that indigenous peoples traditionally had a simpler, happier life, Freud notes that "it was discovered that a person becomes neurotic because he cannot tolerate the amount of frustration which society imposes on him in the service of its cultural ideals, and it was inferred from this that the abolition or reduction of those demands would result in a return to possibilities of happiness".³⁰ He then identifies the task of defining what led to the development of civilization, by what its course has been determined.³¹

By chapter IV, the rift between love and civilization seems unavoidable. Here he makes some infamous comments on "sublimations of which women are little capable". Women, he writes, "soon come into opposition to civilization and display their retarding and restraining influence- those very women who in the beginning, laid the foundations of civilization by the claims of their love...The work of civilization [requires] instinctual sublimations of which women are little capable."³²

²⁷ Freud, S. (1930) Civilization and Its Discontents. *The Pelican Freud Library* Volume 12. Translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey. Edited by Albert Dickson. Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1985. P. 251-2.

²⁸ Freud, letter to Rolland, July 20, 1929 in Parsons, p. 175.

²⁹ Freud, S. (1930) Civilization and Its Discontents. Pp. 259-260.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 275.

³¹ Ibid., p. 287.

³² Ibid., p. 293.

We might note that Freud here was expressing sentiments of his time. Durkheim, in the *Division of Labour in Society* (1893) similarly wrote that “Woman is less concerned than men in the civilizing process, participates less in it and draws less benefit from it. She thus resembles certain characteristics found in primitive culture.”³³ (Durkheim thus assumed that women were immune from anomic suicide, overlooking the data at his disposal.) Yet a generation later in 1931 Freud makes similar moves with regard to the role of the superego in women. He returns to the question of female sexuality noting the difference between masculine and feminine paths through the Oedipus complex, for while the internalisation of the paternal agency is induced by a boy's narcissistic “interest in preserving his penis”³⁴ and “initiates all the processes that are designed to make the individual find a place in the cultural community”,³⁵ in girls the castration complex does not end, it rather induces the Oedipus complex and “the motive for the demolition of the Oedipus complex” as he'd already noted some years earlier “is lacking”.³⁶ In 1933 he similarly writes that:

Fear of castration is not, of course, the only motive for repression: indeed, it finds no place in women, for though they have a castration complex they cannot have a fear of being castrated. Its place is taken in their sex by a fear of loss of love, which is evidently a later prolongation of the infant's anxiety if it finds its mother absent.³⁷

Femininity, according to Freud, is defined by the wish for a child as a phallic substitute (that is sought through the father) and jealousy toward the mother. That there is no motive for the dissolution of the oedipal complex of the girl leads him to conclude:

I cannot evade the notion (though I hesitate to give it expression) that for women the level of what is ethically normal is different from what it is in men. Their super-ego is never so inexorable, so impersonal, so independent of its emotional origins as we require it to be in men. Character-traits which critics of every epoch have brought up against women – that they show less sense of justice than men, that they are less ready to submit to the great exigencies of life, that they are more often influenced in their judgments by feelings of affection or hostility – all these would be amply accounted for by the modification in the formation of their super-ego which we have inferred above. We must not allow ourselves to be deflected from such conclusions by the demands of the feminists, who are anxious to force us to regard the two sexes as completely equal in position and worth.³⁸

³³ Durkheim, E. *The Division of Labour in Society* [1893] Halls, WD, trans. London, England: Macmillan, 1984. P. 192.

³⁴ Freud, S. (1931). Female Sexuality. *PFL* 7. P. 376.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 375.

³⁶ Freud, S. (1925b, 342)

³⁷ Freud, S. (1933) *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. *PFL* 2 , “Anxiety and Instinctual Life”, p. 119.

³⁸ Freud, S. (1931). Female Sexuality. *PFL* 7. P. 342.

Freud's description of the superego as the heir to the dissolution of the Oedipus complex raises a number of questions, as does the idea that sublimation is the displacement of the drive from a sexual aim without material loss of energy. A girl child does not fit easily into his account and the question of the ravaging effects of the superego in women is left more or less unexplained.

In *Seminar XX*, Lacan states he is working that year on what

“Freud expressly left aside: *Was will das Weib?* “What does woman want?” Freud claims that there is only masculine libido. What does that mean if not that a field that certainly is not negligible is thus ignored. That field is the one of all beings that take on the status of woman”.³⁹

“if libido is only masculine, it is only from where the dear woman is whole, in other words, from the place from which man sees her, that the dear woman can have an unconscious. And what does it help her do? It helps her, as everyone knows, make the speaking being, who is reduced here to man, speak, in other words- I don't know if you have noticed this in analytic theory- it helps her exist only as mother...this unconscious, what can we say of it, if not to sustain with Freud that it doesn't leave her sitting pretty?”⁴⁰

And lastly, “When I say that woman is not-whole ...it is precisely because I raise the question ...of a jouissance that, with respect to everything that can be used in the function phi x, is in the realm of the infinite.”⁴¹

Now to return to *Civilization and its Discontents*, in chapter IV, Freud notices that perhaps “it is not only the pressure of civilization but something in the nature of the [sexual] function itself which denies us full satisfaction and urges us along other paths.”⁴² In earlier works such as “Civilized” Sexual Morality and Modern Nervous Illness” (1908) he began by emphasizing that this sexual energy couldn't legitimately find satisfaction given the demands of society or social life, so an individual must “choose” between sublimation and symptom formation, though the relation between aspects of this choice remain theoretically unresolved. By the 1920's Freud recognizes that something in the drive is itself neither amenable to satisfaction nor able to be sublimated; it remains beyond the pleasure principle as the persisting tension of a constant force. The critical difference between the satisfaction demanded and “that which is actually achieved” (1920a, 315) finds its most ferocious use in the agency of the superego, as a pure form of the death drive.

Chapter V and VI: “If civilization imposes such great sacrifices not only on man's sexuality but on his aggressivity, we can understand better why it is hard for him to be

³⁹ Lacan, *Seminar XX*, p. 80.

⁴⁰ Ibid, p. 98-99.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 103.

⁴² Freud, S. (1930) *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 295.

happy in that civilization”.⁴³ He recounts his path to the elaboration of a death drive, noting the resistance the idea has met even within analytic circles and even his “own defensive attitude when the idea of an instinct of destruction first emerged in psychoanalytical literature, and how long it took before I became receptive to it.”⁴⁴

Chapter VII: superego- key point that frustration unleashes aggressiveness; recourse to myth of the prehistoric father: “We cannot get away from the assumption that man’s sense of guilt springs from the Oedipus complex and was acquired at the killing of the father by the brothers banded together” (p.324).

“Whether one has killed one’s father or has abstained from doing so is [not decisive...] One is bound to feel guilty in either case, for the sense of guilt is an expression of the conflict due to ambivalence, of the eternal struggle between Eros and the instinct of destruction or death. This conflict is set going as soon as men are faced with the task of living together.” (325) “what began in relation to the father is completed in relation to the group” (326).

Chapter VIII: finale- “the price we pay for you advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt” (327), this guilt being a “topographical variety of anxiety’ that coincides with fear of the super-ego. Religions capitalize on this point - which he notes he’d “failed to appreciate elsewhere” (329) - by claiming “to redeem mankind from this sense of guilt, which they call sin”.

The increased sense of guilt that appears “in place of an unfulfilled erotic demand” (332)- that as Lacan would say, one is guilty of giving up on what one desires- is explained, says Freud, because “the prevention of erotic satisfaction calls up a piece of aggressiveness against the person who has interfered with the satisfaction..[and] this aggressiveness has ...to be suppressed in turn...When an instinctual trend undergoes repression, its libidinal elements are turned into symptoms, and its aggressive components into a sense of guilt” (332). While individual development seems to be produced by the interaction of the egoistic urge toward happiness and the communitarian urge of altruism, these descriptions are superficial; the real issue and driving force to content with is the destructive demand of the superego.

The conflict between our drives and the demands made upon us by civilization overlooks the extent to which the later produce the former; the idea of “an immemorial human demand.”

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* Freud had noted an intimate partnership in the convergence of the compulsion to repeat and an immediately pleasurable satisfaction of the drive. If he states that only rarely “can we observe the pure effects of the compulsion to repeat, unsupported by other motives”,⁴⁵ this imperceptibility of the death drive, its

⁴³ Ibid., p. 306.

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 310, 311.

⁴⁵ Freud, S. (1920). *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*. PFL 11. P. 293.

opacity to any kind of representation, except in its association with the sexual (life) drives or binding by the superego becomes a defining principle, its most striking attribute. Thus:

One portion of this force has been recognised by us, undoubtedly with justice, as the sense of guilt and need for punishment, and has been localised by us in the ego's relation to the super-ego. But this is only the portion of it which is, as it were, psychically bound by the super-ego and thus becomes recognisable; other quotas of the same force, whether bound or free, may be at work in other, unspecified places [1937, 242-3].

In this paper which incidentally is cited by Jones as Freud's 'most valuable contribution' for the practising analyst [1957, III, 269], he states that the 'distribution, mingling and defusion', of the two primal drives cannot be thought of as "confined to a single province of the mental apparatus, the id, the ego or the superego" and are "the ultimate things which psychological research can learn about". [1937, 243]

A year later in the last, unpublished *Outline of Psychoanalysis* we find a similar statement of the problem:

it remains a question of the highest theoretical importance, and one that has not yet been answered, when and how it is ever possible for the pleasure principle to be overcome. The consideration that the pleasure principle demands a reduction, at bottom the extinction perhaps, of the tensions of instinctual needs (that is, *Nirvana*) leads to the still unassessed relations between the pleasure principle and the two primal forces, Eros and the death instinct [1940 [1938], 434].

This equation of the pleasure principle and the death drive in terms of the reduction of tension is merely the last reported instance of the difficulty that runs throughout its trajectory. If Freud appeared to overlook the very ascription of 'the pleasure principle' to two distinct operations- "an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure" [11, 275], the hypothesis is haunted by the contradiction of attempting to maintain a distinction between the pleasure principle and the death drive, as the *beyond* of that principle, when the objective of the latter is also ascribed to a decrease in tension. The contradiction involved in attempting to separate sexual and death drives, when both are defined as disruptive of the ego which he maintains instigates the repression of the infantile drives, is evident in the difficulty Freud had in assimilating the theory of the death drive with that of infantile sexuality. The revisions made to the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* testify not only to the importance of that work, but to the difficulty Freud had in integrating the 'last theory', the 1924 version of the death drive with the earlier outline of sexuality. If in contrast to the earlier revisions in the reeditions of 1910 and 1915, additions which as Laplanche notes "simultaneously preserve the original organisation of the work and open it up to later discoveries" [1985, 8], that of the death drive is with the exception of footnotes only minimally inscribed *within* the text. A contradiction equally evident in the *Outline* of 1938, as Freud stated above. Thus beyond the bio-cosmic terms of the elaboration, the crossing of the ascription of sexual drives from a subversive to a preservative function presents a number of difficulties. Not only are we required to investigate what might be meant by the sexual, ego and self preserving

drives that are ascribed with the function of binding psychic energy, but we need perhaps to distinguish between the phenomena of aggression and destruction attributed to the death drive 'according to its aims' and characterised by the effect of 'unbinding'.

The causal impasse haunting Freud's attempt to define the interplay of bodily and social experience must be sought within the binary terms of the explanatory series of primary and secondary processes, unbound and bound energy, unbinding and binding, sexuality and the ego, the death drive and Eros. The genealogy of these pairs of opposites takes the form, writes Laplanche, "of a strange chiasmus whose riddle we, as Freud's successors, are beginning to decipher". [1985, 124] This figure "by which the order of words in one clause is inverted in a second clause" [OED] is not only identifiable in earlier attempts to designate the function of binding in the relation between representation and the drive, which serves as a constitutive principle in the definition of the unconscious, but again in regard to the question of the primacy of sadism or masochism which in the aftermath of 1920 are reversed. If the repetition compulsion formulates the question of how the ego is subjected to pain rather than the homeostatic principle of unpleasure, it is a question that had already received considerable attention in the essays 'Instincts and their vicissitudes' (1915), 'A child is being beaten' (1919), and 'Mourning and Melancholia' [1917, (1915)]. It is possible to identify in these earlier essays of 1915 and 1919 the theory of primary masochism which was not spelt out until 1924. As these essays prefigure the introduction of the theory of the death drive, we might note that the theory is not a 'discovery' but a reaffirmation, raised in specific relation to the issue of fantasy. What delayed then its elaboration, what propelled it into bio-cosmic terms? Reference to the germ plasma theory is prefigured in the essay 'On Narcissism' and with regard to the formation of the ego. If Freud's formulation of the death drive is an attempt to designate the effraction of the limit constituted by the ego, it is necessary to consider how that limit is organised and what functions are ascribed to it. As the issue of traumatic infraction is central to both the metabiological and metapsychological dimensions of his argument, it is on this issue that we shall focus in an attempt to make sense of the hypothesis. The question of the death drive and representation is on the one hand figured in the question of fantasy and the negative therapeutic reaction which are associated with the non-symbolisable, and on the other in the question of psychosis as 'a pure culture of the death drive', in either case of what might appear to remain outside the scope of analytic intervention.

The non-symbolisable far from being the rationale on which the hypothesis may be denied is that which the death drive seeks to depict and indeed to explain. This is what Lacan addresses in *Seminar VII*.

The section headings of the seminar, introduced by Jacques-Alain Miller, run as follow: "Introduction to the Thing", "The Problem of Sublimation", "The paradox of *Jouissance*", "The Essence of Tragedy" and "The Tragic Dimension of Analytical Experience". We might indeed read *Civilization and Its Discontents* in terms of these threads, articulating as they do, Lacan's ordering of the key question of transgression.

After *Seminar VII* references to *das Ding* drop out of Lacan's work as he further defines the relation between the two facets he had attributed to it: its status as a real object that functions as the "absolute Other" for the subject. Lacan's divergence from the post-

Freudian emphasis on the frustration involved in object relations, particularly with the mother, led to his definition of the *objet petit a*. From the 1950s he had distinguished femininity from maternity, the latter being on the side of phallic signification insofar as it can involve a relation to having on the side of the object. With the definition of the *objet petit a* in *Seminar X* this distinction is defined more precisely. In later work he uses the momentary absence of this object to define the conjunction of sublimation and feminine jouissance as an experience of the absence of a guarantee. Freud's response to the question of feminine sexualization was limited by the solution he found in believing the hysteric's demand for an ideal father. The distance Lacan maps from Freud's version of the Oedipus complex is also the space in which he reinterprets Freud's designation of an either/or choice between sublimation and symptom formation. In *Seminar XIV* Lacan no longer refers to sublimation as a mediating term but argues that the term "allows us to inscribe the basis and conjunction of what is involved in subjective stability, insofar as repetition is its fundamental structure" (SXIV, 22.2.1967). It involves the essential dimension of satisfaction which had, he says, to date remained wholly obscure within psychoanalytic theory. In the 1970s the role of subjective stability is ascribed to the sinthome, that which functions to knot together the registers of the symbolic, imaginary and real, which previously he had simply ascribed to the Name-of-the-Father. He refers to the Name-of-the-Father as but one form of sinthome, revising the normative emphasis given to the Oedipal or symbolic father in earlier work. With the concept of the sinthome, the mechanisms attributed to symptom formation and sublimation coincide, insofar as the *objet petit a* and a primary signifier, S_1 , the mark of identification, are related in the sigma of the sinthome.

The tenor of heroic transgression pervading *Seminar VII* is revised when the sinthome defines a new covenant between jouissance and the signifier. Lacan returned to emphasize the importance of the imaginary, and its effective function where the three registers are plaited together in a Borromean "knot," as a condition of subjective stability. This was a shift from the early fifties when he gave the sense that one could entirely decipher the symptom by filling gaps in the narrative of one's symbolic life. With the sinthome, emphasis falls on a real element of the symptom that remains beyond the symbolic.

IV conclusion

In 1936, Freud wrote 'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis' on the occasion of Rolland's seventieth birthday. He describes the depression that settled upon him and his younger brother with whom he was travelling when at Trieste it was suggested they might visit Athens. There was the same age difference of ten years between Freud and his younger brother and Freud and Rolland, something Freud noticed while writing the letter.⁴⁶ He attributes the derealization he experienced on the Acropolis to a childhood doubt that he would ever be able to 'travel so far' or 'go such a long way' as to see Athens and explains the depression they both felt to the sense of guilt attached to the

⁴⁶ Freud, 1936, 'A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis', PFL 11, p. 448.

satisfaction of having gone so far, “as though to excel one’s father was still something forbidden. ... Our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant much to him. Thus what interfered with our enjoyment of the journey to Athens was a feeling of *filial piety*. And now you will no longer wonder that the recollection of this incident on the Acropolis should have troubled me so often since I myself have grown old and stand in need of forbearance and can travel no more.”⁴⁷ This piety may include a sensitivity to “the limitations and poverty” of their conditions growing up but is it not surely also used here to stand in for the aggressive drive he notices and disavows in an effort of defence.

Every “sublimation is truly specific in function to the nature of the object considered. But as *sinthome*, it has an identical structure. It reveals from the condensation of the drive an object put into service in the unveiling of the real for the spectator or the reader.”⁴⁸ While Parsons writes that “Freud’s only existential apprehension of mysticism came in his disappointing experience of derealization on the Acropolis”,⁴⁹ isn’t the account of this experience rather such an unveiling of the real for the spectator or the reader to whom the essay was addressed. The text is the second essay or published text in which Freud addresses Roland as his interlocutor, a text again written in response to a question that wouldn’t let him rest. The function of the analyst – and Roland appears in this position at times for Freud – is to operate as cause of the unconscious, to produce, identify and open up unconscious signifiers, the primary identifications under which the subject is constituted and stuck, those signifiers which are the subject’s burden in sense of repetition.

The pathos of Freud’s experience is conveyed when in 1955, Lacan was questioned as to whether since “analysis amounts to being a demystification of what was previously imaginary ... once demystification has been accomplished, we find ourselves in the presence of death. All that is left is to wait and contemplate death.” He answered that where Oedipus (at Colonus) says “Am I made a man in the hour when I cease to be?” marks the end of his psychoanalysis. The questioner continued: “Is it between the *I cease to be* [*Je ne suis rien*] and death that whatever is capable of being a substitute for humanism must pass?” He answers “Precisely”.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Freud, 1936, ‘A disturbance of memory on the Acropolis’, PFL 11, p. 456.

⁴⁸ Marie-Hélène Brousse, ‘A Sublimation at Risk of Psychoanalysis’, *Lacanian Ink* 24/25, 2005. P. 72.

⁴⁹ Parsons, W. B. (1999) P. 167. He also points to what must have been Freud’s alarm at being asked to contribute to a “social agenda promoting a mystical, religious psychology” (p. 38).

⁵⁰ Lacan, J. (1954-55). *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II. The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis. 1954-1955.* Trs. Sylvana Tomaselli. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988. P. 214.

