A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses


Review by William I. Grossman, M.D.


The discovery of the manuscript of one of Freud's lost metapsychological papers has understandably excited a great deal of scholarly interest. Although it has little to say to modern clinicians, the publication of the 1915 draft of the twelfth metapsychological essay, "Overview of the Transference Neuroses," provides a useful critical edition of an important transitional work in the development of Freud's thought. Like other works Freud excluded from his collected writings (On Aphasia, 1891) or discarded (the Project), this paper contains a systematic presentation of ideas that were not discussed so directly again. This is true, at least, for the latter part of the paper, which consists of the kind of "daringly playful fantasy" Freud considered a part of the mechanism of scientific creativity. It is in this section that he presents his "phylogenetic fantasy" that gives the American edition its name.

As a whole, the paper marks a turning point in Freud's thought. Like the other metapsychological papers, it updates and summarizes his theories to that time. In addition, as part of Freud's large and largely unpublished correspondence with Ferenczi, this paper fits into the context of an intense personal relationship, in the same way that the Project (1895) belonged to the relationship with Fliess. For this reason, the "Overview" and the editor's informative essay will be indispensable for anyone interested in examining Freud's life and creativity. On the other hand, since most of the correspondence is unavailable, efforts to interpret the personal significance of this paper for Freud will, at best, be severely compromised, and at worst, merely daring fantasies.

In her critical essay, discussing the biographical context, the work context, and the historicoscientific context in which the paper was written, the editor, Ilse Grubrich-Simitis, begins the enormous task of placing this work in perspective and offers some clues to the questions of why Freud might have written this paper and why he did not publish it. She is appropriately cautious in view of the limited information thus far available.

The published version of "Overview of the Transference Neuroses" is a draft, a sketch that is partly notes, partly outline, partly statements of intention, and, in addition, sections that have a finished form. The fair copy of the work, to which Freud alludes in a note to Ferenczi, appears to have been lost or discarded.

At the beginning of the paper, Freud quickly compares anxiety neurosis, conversion hysteria, and obsessional neurosis with respect to repression, anticathexis, substitutive and symptom formation, relation to sexual function, regression and disposition. Freud viewed this as essentially a review of old material and thought the reader would be
bored. In this section, the draft contains many abbreviations and fragmented sentences. Freud is seen here writing without adornments, giving neat and succinct statements summarizing his views on neurosogenesis. Some of these remarks on the role of the ego, the drives, and objects have at times a modern ring, although not long afterward, there were major changes in theory. Freud's discussion and review should be a useful addition for clarifying his basic concepts of the metapsychology of neurosis, despite the fact that the draft itself contains obscurities.

When Freud comes to the sixth of the factors mentioned above, disposition, he writes not only of the disposition to each neurosis in the individual, but the disposition to each neurosis laid down in the prehistory of mankind. As he says succinctly, "When the constitutional factor of fixation comes into consideration, acquisition [is] not eliminated thereby; it only moves into still earlier prehistory, because one can justifiably claim that the inherited dispositions are residues of the acquisition of our ancestors" (p. 10). He goes on to suggest that the transference neuroses and the narcissistic neuroses appear in the life of the affected individuals in the following time sequence: anxiety hysteria—conversion hysteria—obsessional neurosis—dementia praecox—paranoia—melancholia-mania. However, the fixations underlying these disorders, Freud says, are laid down in the reverse order; namely, the fixations of the narcissistic neuroses occur earlier than the transference neuroses. Freud recognizes that the picture is somewhat more complex, and he discusses it. He arrives at the conclusion that psychoanalysis has something to contribute here to the understanding of human evolution. The order of appearance of the mental disorders in the lives of individuals corresponds to the order of the laying down of their phylogenetic fixations as a consequence of the experiences of the primal horde before, during, and at the end of the Ice Age.

Now, although the New York Times (19 July 1988, citing an article in Lancet) could unabashedly offer the headline "Gallbladder Risk Tied to Ice Age Ancestors," psychoanalysts are likely to cringe at similar claims for the transference and narcissistic neuroses. That Freud did not publish this essay suggests that, in a more critical moment, he may have had a similar reaction. Or, perhaps, despite his wish to have psychoanalytic reconstruction contribute to other fields of enquiry, he anticipated the critical reception this particular line of thought has always elicited. In any case, he borrowed heavily from it later in other contexts and, as is well known, insisted on his Lamarckian stance to the end. Grubrich-Simitis's discussion of this aspect of Freud's thought in the light of current biological thought provides a useful beginning to a reconsideration of the issues. In her essay on "Metapsychology and Metabiology" she cites both L. Ritvo and F. J. Sulloway, whose extensive investigations provide an understanding of the importance of the idea of the inheritance of acquired mental traits in Freud's time.

It is necessary to remember that we do not really know just what Freud had in mind when writing about the "inheritance of memory-traces of the experience of our ancestors" (p. 98). In the Project, following a Darwinian line of thought, as he said, he suggested that impermeable neurones were indispensable to human survival and were bound to survive themselves. As far as I know, he never suggested another, more detailed mechanism for the hereditary transmission of the adaptations of one generation to the next. The entire
issue of mental heredity and the inheritance of dispositions was, of course, important to
Freud from the beginning of his work on hysteria because of the emphasis on organic
predisposition in the contemporary theories of mental illness. Early on in his work, Freud
had insisted that the opposition between heredity and environment, disposition and
accident, had to be replaced by a model in which there was a repetitive interaction
between these factors. The "complemental series" was the crudest form in which this
model of adaptation was expressed. In works such as the Introductory Lectures (Freud,
1916–1917) and Beyond the Pleasure Principle (Freud, 1920), written soon after the
"Overview," we find Freud continuing to work on the problems of development and
adaptation in relation to the individual and the species. The same model was used for
both, and the principles of evolution were equated with the principles of development.
Evolution was, for Freud, individual development written large.

While it can be maintained that Freud was Darwinian in his belief in the evolution of
mental traits, his enthusiasm for Lamarck led to a plan to write with Ferenczi a work on
Lamarck and psychoanalysis. The idea emerged not long after the "Overview of the
Transference Neuroses" was written. His most daring idea, exposed only in letters
(Freud, 1917), was that unconscious ideas were the source of adaptation through changes
in both one's own body and in the external world: "... the 'necessity' that according to
him [Lamarck] creates and transforms organs is nothing but the power of unconscious
ideas over one's own body, of which we see remnants in hysteria ... This would actually
supply a psycho-analytic explanation of adaptation; it would put the coping stone on
psycho-analysis" (pp. 261–262). Of course, without the "inheritance of acquired
characteristics," the idea of some unconscious influence on somatic processes hardly
seems strange today.

Freud expresses his views on the construction and inheritance of dispositions in naive and
provocative ways, depending on how the reader is inclined to interpret him.
Occasionally, however, he hints at the complexity of his conception, as when he says:
"Both higher development and involution might well be the consequences of adaptation
to the pressure of external forces ..." (Freud, 1920, p. 41). This idea about evolution has
its counterpart in the idea of adaptive regression in mental development. A modern
molecular-biological explanation employs a similar idea of loss of capacity to account for
what appears to be the inheritance of acquired adaptations (Danchin, 1980).

There are many more things to be said about this essay of Freud's, as literature, history,
and science. Works like the "Overview" are important in filling out the picture of Freud's
ideas on the recapitulation of structures from one epoch to another phylogenetically and
ontogenetically, and even biologically and cosmically, as in Beyond the Pleasure
Principle (Freud, 1920).

Were it not for the unforgivable omission of an index, this would be a model for future
critical editions of Freud's work. A Phylogenetic Fantasy provides the reader with a
transcription of the German manuscript, an English translation, and a facsimile of the
manuscript. In addition, the introductions and notes of both the German editor, Ilse
Grubrich-Simitis, and the translators, Axel and Peter T. Hoffer, discuss obscurities in the
manuscript and the translation and offer cross-references to related works, in the tradition established by the Standard Edition. The editor's scholarly essay completes the edition.

REFERENCES
FREUD, S. 1895 Project for a scientific psychology S. E. 1
FREUD, S. 1916–1917 Introductory lectures on psychoanalysis S. E. 15 & 16
FREUD, S. 1920 Beyond the pleasure principle S. E. 18