Some Sources for a Slip in a Translation by Freud

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ABSTRACT

Among Freud's papers, we find instances in which Freud describes the "psychopathology of everyday life" as he found it in himself and in others. "A Religious Experience" (Freud, 1928) contains examples of both kinds. In addition, this paper contains a slip of which Freud appears to have been unaware. Freud's paper interprets a religious conversion described in a letter written to him in English. In the translation of this letter into German, Freud inserted material that was not present in the original. He mentions another slip he made in speaking about the letter. These slips and some associated details in the paper indicate persisting unconscious conflict. The content of these slips and details points to an association with Freud's childhood anxiety dream reported in The Interpretation of Dreams (Freud, 1900). Freud's associations and discussion of that dream lead to the Philippson Bible of his childhood, which provides additional connections to the paper of 1928.

ONE OF THE REMARKABLE FEATURES of Freud's writings is the constant interplay between his analyses of self-observations that could be applied to his patients, and his analyses of patients that could be applied to his self-understanding. Freud's use of his analysis of his own mental processes as examples of the principles and concepts he was attempting to explain was explicit from his earliest writings and into his old age. Sometimes, disguised as a case, he was revealed only later by his students. His prolific correspondence also increased the openness of his self-revelation. The extent and nature of Freud's liberal offering of his mental processes has no equal, suggesting the idea that he is the true "case specimen" of psychoanalysis. He has left his mind to be studied for the benefit of mankind.

That this was at least one of his motives and that it involved a never-ending conflict is suggested by numerous remarks and analogies with which he accompanied his Interpretation of Dreams (1900). While it is plausible to think that some of his concepts, such as censorship, were derived from the conscious aspects of the conflict over self-disclosure, other slips and intrusions into Freud's sublimatory efforts indicate persisting unconscious conflicts at work. Those occurrences provide interesting examples of the ideas Freud was expounding played in counterpoint to the manifest message of the papers in which they occur. The following discussion of Freud's (1928) paper, "A Religious Experience" examines a work in which we can see evidence of an active conflict and can recognize some of its sources. In addition, it provides further justification for those who explore Freud's life, and the problems of translation.
"A Religious Experience" has had a curious history. As far as I know, Freud never referred to it in his published works or in the many letters he wrote around the time it was published. Surprisingly, there is no reference to the paper in Freud's letters on religion to Pfister (Freud, 1909-1939). Of course, it is possible that comments will be found in unpublished correspondence. That the paper is seldom cited by other authors, even those writing on psychoanalysis and religion, probably reflects the view that it has little to add to Freud's other important work of the period on religion, "The Future of an Illusion" (1927). Jones (1957) mentions the paper in passing as "a short account of a simple case of religious conversion which an American doctor had related to him [Freud]" (p. 142).

Freud's (1928) paper interprets a religious conversion described in a letter written to him in English. The paper is interesting because, in translating this letter into German, Freud both abbreviated the letter and inserted material into the translation that was not present in the original letter. The editor's introduction to the essay in the Standard Edition says "there is reason to suppose" that the letter quoted in the first English translation (1929) was taken from a copy of the English autograph of the letter. (Of course, the following discussion depends on the correctness of this assumption.) He adds that the differences between the English and German versions are trivial. This is correct as far as the intended purpose of the paper is concerned. However, these differences are of importance for students of Freud and of translations of his work. Successive English versions of the paper introduced further small modifications in the translation that made the English version more consistent, while obscuring the traces of Freud's slip. The missing parts of the letter may, of course, have some unknown relevance to the following discussion.

The religious experience Freud examines was that of an American doctor who had been impressed with Freud's statement in a published interview—that he gave no thought to the question of the survival of personality after death. The doctor wrote of a personal experience that had overcome his own doubts about religion, and he hoped it would do the same for Freud. Characteristically, Freud replied with ironic humor that he had never had similar experiences and that, in view of his age, if God did not hurry, Freud would remain to the end of his life "an infidel Jew." He then remarked that he was still waiting for the result of the prayers being offered to help him achieve the "faith to believe" (Freud, 1928, p. 170). Proceeding with his intention to interpret the experience in terms of "emotional motives," Freud notes the lack of logic on which the conversion is based. To him, the incident described by the doctor did not seem superficially so unusually evil as to call for the doctor's indignation against God, and his subsequent conversion. Freud quotes the description of the precipitating event as follows:

One afternoon while I was passing through the dissecting-room my attention was attracted to a sweet-faced dear old woman who was being carried to a dissecting-table [S. E., p. 169; italics added].

Eines Nachmittags hielt ich mich gerade im Sezierraum auf, als die Leiche einer alten Frau hereingetragen und auf einen Seziertisch gelegt wurde [G. W., p. 393, italics added].
A number of questions arise in Freud's German translation of the letter. As is common in the "psychopathology of everyday life," the omission of a phrase accompanies the addition of another phrase. Freud's addition of the detail that the body was placed on the dissecting table is the more important for my discussion, but the omitted reference to the woman's facial expression is relevant, too.

The doctor continued, stating that his prior doubts about the doctrines of Christianity were confirmed, for "... if there were a God he would not have allowed this dear old woman to be brought into the dissecting-room" (S. E., p. 169). As he meditated on his decision to stop going to church, a voice spoke to his soul, urging him to reconsider. His spirit replied, demanding certainty that "the Bible was the Word of God." Subsequently, he said, "God made it clear to my soul that the Bible was His Word" and "revealed Himself to me by many infallible proofs." He called on Freud as a "brother physician" to look into the matter with an open mind.

In response to this challenge, Freud questions the importance of the event to the doctor. He writes:

> God, as we know, allows horrors to take place of a kind very different from the removal to a dissecting-room of the dead body of a pleasant-looking old woman [S. E., p. 170; italics added].

> Wie bekannt, lässt Gott noch ganz andere Greuel geschehen, als dass die Leiche einer alten Frau mit sympathischen Gesichtszügen auf den Seziertisch gelegt wird [G. W., p. 394; italics added].

Again, the translator deletes Freud's addition of the same detail, but this time removing the body even further from the table than the original letter. The first English translation (1929) has Freud's comment repeating in this passage the words of the doctor's letter.

In both instances, then, Freud writes that the woman's body is placed on the dissecting-table. In one case, he interpolated something the writer of the letter has not written. In the other case, the translators of Freud's own words deleted Freud's interpolation.

It soon becomes evident that Freud's repeated addition of this detail is evidence of an active conflict, for he goes on to say that once, in another context, he interpolated something into the doctor's letter, although not in translating. The interpolation into the German version of the letter is thus a second intrusion of Freud's own preoccupations after the following was corrected:

> ... the explanation ... actually crept into my recollections of the facts themselves. Once, when I was referring to my pious colleague's letter in the course of a discussion, I spoke of his having written that the dead woman's face had reminded him of his own mother. In fact these words were not in his letter... But that is the explanation irresistibly forced on
us by his affectionately phrased description of the 'sweet-faced dear old woman' [in English in the original]. Thus the weakness of judgement displayed by the young doctor is to be accounted for by the emotion roused in him by the memory of his mother [S. E., pp. 170-171].

At this point, we can see that Freud's explanation of the doctor's conflict may have considerable relevance to some conflict of his own involving some thoughts about his own mother. (In letters to Lou Andreas-Salomé and Ferenczi written close to the time the paper was written, Freud mentioned his concern about his mother's failing health ([Freud and Salomé, 1972, p. 172]; (Grubrich-Simitis, 1986, p. 271].) At the same time, we observe that the successive translations have tended to minimize the intrusions.

In the next sentence, Freud mentions a problem of translation, possibly another of his unconscious allusions to his error and conflict. Since the translation was not relevant in the English version, the phrase was modified in 1929 and eliminated in the Standard Edition:

And since one cannot rid oneself of the bad psycho-analytic habit of finding proofs in all kinds of minutiae that are also capable of less deep-seated explanations, one will also remember that later the writer addresses me as 'brother physician'—an expression not easy to paraphrase [1929, p. 3; italics added].

It is difficult to escape from the bad psycho-analytic habit of bringing forward as evidence details which also allow of more superficial explanations—and I am tempted to recall the fact that my colleague addressed me as a 'brother physician' [S. E., p. 171].

Kann man sich von der Unart der Psychoanalyse nicht frei machen, Kleinigkeiten als Beweismaterial heranzuziehen, die auch eine andere, weniger tiefgreifende Erklärung zulassen, so wird man auch daran denken, dass der Kollege mich später als brother physician [italicized English in the original] anspricht, was ich in der bersetzung nur unvollkommen wiedergeben konnte [G. W., p. 395; italics added].

That is, Freud says he can give only an incomplete rendering in the translation, and, in fact, does not try at this point to translate it. Perhaps in calling attention to the importance of small details, Freud is unconsciously pointing to his conflict in this paper. Another small detail is that nowhere in the paper does Freud tell us why he thinks the phrase "brother physician" is significant. Its importance for Freud is perhaps hinted at in the material I shall mention later in connection with the interpolations in translation.

Freud goes on to explain the doctor's experience. Again, the alteration of a detail in translation may have some significance—not for the meaning of the manifest message in the paper, but for our recognition of the source of Freud's struggle with unintended
interpolations and omissions. Here the important point is the interpolation of a phrase in parentheses.

_The sight of the naked body (or one which was just going to be exposed) of a woman who reminded the young man of his mother ... [1929, p. 3]._

_The sight of a woman's dead body, naked or on the point of being stripped, reminded the young man of his mother [S. E., p. 171]._

_... Der Anblick des nackten (oder zur Entblössung bestimmten) Leibes einer Frau, die den Jüngling an seine Mutter erinnert ... (G. W., p. 395; italics added)._

In passing, we can see that Freud's German original and the 1929 translation mention only a _naked_ body and have a phrase in parentheses. The _Standard Edition_, however, mentions a _dead_ body, and the parentheses are removed.

In summary, Freud interpolated into his translation of the doctor's letter the detail of the woman's corpse being laid on the dissecting table, and subsequently referred to this act again. These errors in Freud's account were modified in the English translation, presumably to have the text conform to the original letter. In addition to these slips, Freud mentions another slip in speaking about the doctor's story. He then noted a problem in translation, but this was modified and then eliminated in the English translations. Although emphasizing the importance of details, he mentions a detail whose significance he never explains. Finally, the parentheses were removed by the translator of the _Standard Edition_ (but not of the _International Journal_) from a phrase which did not appear to require them.

We have at least two sets of problems. The first, relating to the issues involved in translating Freud's work into English, I shall not discuss. The second, however, involves the sources and motives for Freud's errors. These become, if not transparent, at least coherent when we compare Freud's translation of the doctor's letter with his report of one of his own dreams:

_But I remember one [anxiety dream] from my seventh or eighth year, which I submitted to interpretation some thirty years later ... [In] it I saw my beloved mother, with a peculiarly peaceful, sleeping expression on her features, being carried into the room by two (or three) people with birds' beaks and laid upon the bed [1900, p. 583]._

This account emphasizes the facial expression, and contains both the detail that Freud inserted into the doctor's letter and the use of the parenthetic phrase. Of course, it _was_ a mother whose body—dead as Freud supposed—was being carried in and laid on the bed/table. The doctor's description of his experience bears a resemblance to Freud's dream, which, even if it is a screen memory (see Rosenfeld, 1956; Anzieu, 1986), deals with childhood anxiety about his mother which may have been reactivated at the time he
wrote the paper, as noted. The significance of the expression "brother physician" may
derive its importance for Freud from the associations he reported in connection with the
dream. Freud thought the dream picture was taken from illustrations to the Philippson
Bible, representing an Egyptian funerary relief. Another association referred to a boy
"who I am inclined to think was called Philipp" (1900, p. 583). Philipp was the name of
Freud's older half-brother who was older than Freud's mother (Krüll, 1986) and was quite
important to Freud as a target for displaced oedipal rivalry and hostility (Freud, 1887-
1904, p. 271); (1901); (Shengold, 1971). So much for an appeal to Freud's brotherly
feelings!

Commentators on the dream of the bird-beaked figures have explored the dream's many
connections with Freud's mental life (e.g., Anzieu, 1986); (Grinstein, 1980); (Jones,
1953); (Krüll, 1986); (McGrath, 1986); (Rosenfeld, 1956); (Shengold, 1971), (1972). I
intend only to show some congruences between the contents of Freud's paper and some
background material, not to pursue an analysis of their significance.

One further connection between Freud's paper and the Philippson Bible deserves
mention. This Bible of Freud's childhood was a "revenant" in later life. On his thirty-
fifth birthday, Freud's father gave him a copy of the Bible with a Hebrew inscription.
The ages mentioned in connection with Freud's anxiety dream are closely approximated
in the following lines, extracted from one of the six differing English versions of this
inscription. I have inserted some of the notes to this version into the text:

My dear son Schlomo (Salomo) in the seventh ... [illegible; the
reconstruction "year," which would make the best sense, is not borne out
by the shape of the lettering] of your life the spirit of the Lord began [the
verb is in the wrong gender] to move you [cf. Judges 13, 25] and said to
you: Go, read in my Book that I have written... You have looked upon the
face of the Almighty [cf. Numbers 24, 4, 16] have heard and striven to
climb upwards, and you flew upon the wings of the Spirit. [cf. Psalms 18,
10] ... for the day on which you have completed your 35th year I have had
it [the book, W.I.G.] covered with a new leather binding ... and offer it to
you for a remembrance and memorial of love.

—From your father, who loves you with unending love—Jacob, son of
Rabbi Sch. Freud ... [E. Freud et al., 1978, p. 134].

The doctor's letter to Freud seems to echo this inscription. An inner voice speaks to him
and his spirit replies; God makes it clear to him that the Bible is His Word and has
revealed Himself. The spirit of the Lord speaks to young Freud and he is moved. God
tells him to read His Book. Freud has looked on "the face of the Almighty," says his
father. In his reply, Freud repudiates both the doctor and his father: "He had never
allowed me to hear an inner voice…"

Freud's interpretation of the doctor's conversion parallels in some respects the
interpretation of his own childhood anxiety dream. The interpretation involves an
oedipal struggle and sadistic primal scene fantasies. Freud dates the dream to his seventh or eighth year and its interpretation to approximately thirty years later, close to the two significant ages mentioned in the inscription (Anzieu, 1986, discusses the dating of the interpretation of the dream). Freud concludes that the sight of the woman's body aroused in the doctor an oedipal longing for his mother with hostility to God the father reinforced by sadistic fantasies of the primal scene. However, the doctor submitted to God and the lessons of his childhood, while Freud once more asserted his refusal to submit. As he appears to have done often, he responded to the arousal of his intense emotions with a new creative effort. He concludes his (1928) paper with the thought that "The point which our present observation throws into relief is the manner in which the conversion was attached to a particular determining event, which caused the subject's scepticism to flare up for a last time before being finally extinguished" (p. 172). Freud informs us that this easily explained case is not necessarily a typical conversion, and I have the impression that he doubts that it has any further relevance. Additional evidence, both in the letter itself and from other sources, would need to be supplied to support the view that this apparently hastily written paper was provoked by the strong emotions aroused in Freud by the appeal to religious conversion. Enough has been said, however, to show how "a particular determining event" led to an error in translation.

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Bergmann (1987), whose book appeared after this paper was submitted for publication, recounts a remarkably similar error of Freud's that occurred many years before the one cited above. At a meeting of the Vienna Society in 1909, Freud summarized a story he had read in a newspaper some months before. According to Freud, a young man became engaged following his mother's death. After rescuing another woman from drowning, he broke off his engagement and married the one he had restored to life, a substitute for his mother. Bergmann informs us that there is no mention of a dead mother in the original source of this story, nor did the young man marry the woman he had saved.