BEFORE BABEL: REFLECTIONS ON READING AND TRANSLATING FREUD

BY ERAN J. ROLNIK

The author offers some thoughts on reading and teaching Freud, on translating Freud, on translation in general, and on a possible kinship between translation and the psychoanalytic process. His reading of Freud’s works, and the years he spent translating them into Hebrew and editing Hebrew editions of his writings, have made a deep and salient impression on his personal psychoanalytic palimpsest. The author began this labor prior to his psychoanalytic training and has no doubt that, to this day, the experience greatly shapes not only his attitude toward Freud himself, but also the nature of how he listens to patients and the way he thinks and writes about psychoanalysis.

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Psychoanalysts are sometimes asked to single out specific instances or experiences from their lives that have played a seminal role in the formation of their analytic identity. Some see a clear connection between their psychoanalytic work and their life histories. Few analysts would leave out their own personal or training analysis when reflecting on the development of their professional identities. Others would point to their acquaintance with an influential teacher or supervisor as the watershed in

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the evolution of their professional outlook. For yet other analysts, there is a mythological patient, a treatment that remains etched in memory as a turning point in the analyst’s self-perception as an analyst. There are also those for whom a particular text continues to resonate in their psychoanalytic language, still shaping how they think and work.

Of course, the identity of every psychoanalyst is a product of cross-fertilization and grafting. It cannot be epitomized only by the analyst’s conscious appreciation of a particular theoretical paradigm. My reading of Freud’s works, and the years I spent translating them into Hebrew and editing Hebrew editions of his writings, made a deep and salient impression on my personal psychoanalytic palimpsest. I began this labor prior to my psychoanalytic training, and I have no doubt that, to this day, the experience greatly shapes not only my attitude toward Freud himself, but also the nature of how I listen to my patients and the way I think and write about psychoanalysis.

As psychoanalysis evolved, the reading of the Freudian text acquired significance beyond the ordinary transmission of scientific knowledge. Reading Freud became a social activity that psychoanalysts engaged in long before they began to analyze patients or to perceive themselves as expert listeners. Although reminiscent of the traditional Judaic method of the examination and exegesis of sacred texts with a study partner, reading and interpreting Freud has had far-reaching consequences for the evolution of the discipline and cannot be dismissed as purely scholastic. The tension between orthodoxy and heresy, between partisans and dissidents, informed both the writing of some of Freud’s essays and the way in which his acolytes received them.

Moreover, soon enough it became evident that those who wished to consider themselves “Freudians” must accede to a never-ending process of identity formation. In a way quite unprecedented in the history of science and ideas, the institutionalization and professionalization of the new discipline were followed immediately by its popularization and stigmatization. People who had never read a line written by the Viennese physician felt either terribly repelled by him or madly attracted to him. It was as if Western civilization had much more than a need for a new
theory of man; it had a place marked out for a Freud-like individual, a preconception that awaited its fulfillment. Once a person who insisted on playing this historical role begun to publish his ideas, an overdetermined drama of unique proportions began to unfold.

For those who counted themselves among his followers, the situation was even more complex than for those whose relationship to his teaching was entirely projective, structural, or instrumental. Almost each and every piece of new theory that Freud introduced into his system could potentially break out of the frame of his previous work. Being a Freudian thus meant much more than following a young man’s journey from dissecting the gonads of eels to dissecting his own dreams, from the first topography to the second topography. It was not enough to understand his preference for the couch and technique of free association, or to accept the centrality of the psychosexual unconscious, the oedipal configuration, or even the dual theory of drives. Being a Freudian meant immersing oneself in the life journey and body of writing of a single person and giving oneself over to its idiosyncrasies, its twists and turns. By following the workings of the mind of a single person struggling to give meaning to phenomena at once both familiar and unaccounted for, private and public, the analyst-to-be prepared herself for the task of following her own mind and the mind of her patients.

In what, then, are psychoanalysts in our time indulging themselves and subjecting their students to during the many hours spent reading Freud over the course of their professional lives? Is it a rite of passage? An act of veneration? A prolonged psychoanalytic bar mitzvah inflicted by the tribe’s elders upon members of the younger generation to ensure obedience? Can the value of Freud be reduced, as modern science would have us believe, to the question of the “validity” of his assumptions, or even to the so called “relevance” of his theories to contemporary psychoanalytic discourse? Quite the opposite, I maintain.

As a science, psychoanalysis is unusual in that it cannot afford to adopt a crude teleological notion of progress in which it “forget[s] its founders” (Whitehead 1929, p. 108). In this sense, it resembles humanistic disciplines, such as philosophy or history, which grow through a constant study and reevaluation of their own canonical texts. In the same way that one cannot philosophize without knowing the history of phi-
losophy, it is impossible to understand one’s patients analytically without having a good knowledge of Freud.

Psychoanalysts read Freud for as many reasons as there are to undergo analysis and recommend it to one’s patients. I assume we read Freud first and foremost because it keeps us attuned to the unconscious; it provides us a hands-on experience with both the discovery of the unconscious and the resistances that this discovery evokes. It further links this historical discovery, and the discoveries that followed it, to our daily business of listening analytically to patients and to ourselves.

Reading Freud, I would argue, like reading no other text in the psychoanalytic body of writing, keeps us in touch with our internal analytic object, the essence of which has been defined by Wille (2008) as an inquiring, questioning attitude directed toward introspective and interactional knowledge as a source of inner change; as trust in an unstructured, unconscious communicative process; and as trust in the analytic setting. Freud’s writing is intimately linked to the art and practice of analytic listening. Furthermore, Freud—the Freud imago—occupies a unique place in each analyst’s internal object world.

For the founder of the talking cure, thinking—indeed, surviving mentally—meant first and foremost writing. Freud did not “write up” his ideas; he wrote in order to know what he was thinking about. As he worked in parallel on several essays at a time, Freud’s atelier resembled that of an artist, with several unfinished canvases stretched out next to each other, waiting for the muses and whims of the master to allow their completion. Ideas and dilemmas confronted while working on one essay were often caught in midair before reaching the (exceptionally large) sheet of paper, and their flow redirected into another unfinished text, where they settled into the company of other ideas. Some ideas were thus cut short and contained as miniatures within a relatively limited discursive frame, while others awaited their expression within an entirely new context. One occasionally has the feeling that a given text was suddenly hijacked by a train of thoughts that seemingly sprang out of an entirely different creative or theoretical impetus.

“I was depressed the whole time,” Freud wrote to Ferenczi on January 2, 1912, as he worked on one of his technical papers, “and anesthetized myself with writing—writing—writing” (Freud and Ferenczi
On July 3, 1929, while vacationing in Berchtesgaden, he wrote to Eitingon that sheer boredom had made him start writing a piece about culture (Civilization and Its Discontents, 1930) (Freud and Eitingon 2004). His most complex metapsychological works were completed within a few weeks, while clinical papers sometimes took years. And then there was, of course, his magnum opus, The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), which was never really completed; Freud constantly revisited and reworked it, each new edition fatter and more heavily annotated than its predecessor.

The thought of what Freud (who had a keen eye for technology) might have done with a blog or website should send shivers down the spines of all those who complain about the volume of his writing. In most cases, the final versions of his papers still exhibit the characteristics of a draft or outline, crafted into a “final” version with theoretical content and mental process bound tightly together by the power of his prose (Mahony 1987a). Fortunately, Freud seldom had to put up with any editorial constraints—as he had his own psychoanalytic publishing house from early on—so we can rest assured that the final appearance of the printed text reflected the writer’s own decisions. Some of these decisions, from the point of view of today’s editorial standards, seem quite outrageous.

Consider, for instance, the frequent movement from the main text to the footer that some of his papers require the eye to follow. Some footnotes, as in the description of the Wolf-Man’s case (Freud 1918), are a full two pages long, straining the endurance of even the most patient reader in a way that only years of listening to free associations could prepare him for. Or perhaps the other way around? By that I mean that reading Freud prepares the clinician to follow the drift—the kind of loose listening that Freud advised the analyst to adopt. These detours and creeks in the Freudian text may even negate it or put forth an idea that the main text seems almost reluctant to take up.

How characteristic a pattern of movement this is for psychoanalysis, in which a basso ostinato, an unusual choice of a word, or perhaps even a sudden bodily sound can disclose the true pulse beneath the flow of associations (Ogden 1999). This is also the reason why the reading of Freud can train the ears even of those who recoil from his theories of the
mind. One need not like or fully understand a Freudian text in order to
benefit from it. Reading Freud is as useful in our trade as the practicing
of scales is for a pianist. I would like to elaborate a little on the idea of
Freud’s writing being part of each analyst’s identity, or—as I prefer to
call it—part of each analyst’s internal analytic object (Rolnik 2010; Wille
2008).

The evolution of a creative psychoanalytic mind is never a dispassionate
intellectual enterprise. It is a laborious, emotional process in
which one must work through a thicket of transference attachments
to former analysts, supervisors, and idealized theoretical propositions
(Rolnik 2008). One may love, hate, admire, or fear psychoanalysis. One
may idealize it, project various archaic fantasies into it, or have difficul-
ties with the necessity of mourning some aspects of our selves that have
been invested in it. The analyst’s faith in psychoanalysis, his tolerance for
the uncertainties and ambiguities that are part and parcel of the analytic
perspective on life, is only partially contained by the particular analytic
school or theory with which the analyst tends to identify.

Freud transferences, either positive or negative, make up a substancial
portion of our internal analytic object. These transferences are best
worked through within the context of reading Freud. I want to address
a specific form of reading to which Freud himself was very much at-
tuned—the reading of a text performed by a translator who labors to
transfer it to another language.

It was common in the past to liken the work of psychoanalysis to a
translation of the psyche’s text (Amati-Mehler, Argentieri, and Canestri
1993). Freud frequently employed the verb translate to indicate the pro-
cess of objective interpretation of unconscious material. The metaphor
may not speak to some, who perhaps see little resemblance between the
interactions of two persons as it occurs in the analytic setting and the
work of a person transferring a written text from one language to an-
other. Yet all of us function as translators, at least for ourselves, when we
read texts of the type that Freud left us. When texts of his of a certain
kind are read, the reader inevitably tries, consciously or not, to get to the
root of what the author intended, to uncover the way he understood the
terms he chose. The reader seeks to track Freud’s process of choosing
the best word to designate what he wanted to say.
The act of reading and the act of translating complement one another, and Freud, who felt more at ease sharing his writing process with his readers than sharing the therapeutic process, invited this type of microscopic translational reading even from readers who were not engaged in translation in the classic sense of the word, and even from those who read him in German.

Reading Freud is not like meeting up with an old acquaintance. Even years of exposure to the psychoanalytic climate will not dull that strange but refreshing sense of the singular that accompanies the encounter with Freud. His “idiotic” writing (as one of his high school teachers termed it) can surprise even his veteran readers. Yet it is not the substance of the texts that protects them from obsolescence. The only way to explain this sense of otherness is to consider Freud’s use of words.

The process of reading and translating Freud is psychoanalytic in the sense that it re-creates the analysand’s struggle to verbalize and communicate a lexicon of meanings that is by nature private, nonverbal, and idiosyncratic. This is the tension between the unconscious and conscious, between the world of object-representations and that of word-representations, where we are all suspended. In one, there are objects and affects with no names, and in the other, there are words that grope for the object-representations they were once connected to. It is the tension between primary and secondary process thinking, a tension that Freud’s extraordinary writing preserves, illustrates, and neutralizes, all at the same time.

Sometimes reading Freud is like being reminded of a dream. One moment it is sharp and vivid, and the next baffling and hazy. Just as there is no one way to interpret a dream, so is there not just one way to translate Freud. In fact, one characteristic of a meaningful text is that it may be reconstrued again and again and a new translated work built on its ruins. A good text is worthy of more than one translation, and a person who values a text has no better way of showing it respect than to retranslate it (Borges 1934).

Translations are by nature less durable than the source texts they attempt to capture, one reason being that processes of linguistic change often precede other changes that occur in our lives. Sometimes translators have difficulty accepting the fact that they are producing a snapshot
of a particular moment in language—the target language—and that they are recording a specific instant in the text as it encounters and is transmitted into a different language.

Gadamer (1960) spoke of a “fusion of horizons” (p. 305) between the reader and the text. He argued that people have a “historically effected consciousness” (p. 301) and that they are embedded in the particular history and culture that shaped them. Thus, interpreting a text involves a fusion of horizons in which the translator finds the way to articulate the text’s history with his own background. It is the invisible hand of the translator that facilitates this fusion and the experience of understanding that it brings. Translators may achieve this either elegantly or heavy-handedly—for instance, by tempering the text, or by burdening it with their own apologetic or peevish footnotes.

Reading Freud in translation requires the reader to place no small measure of fundamental faith in the translator’s ability and intentions. Readers of translations are well accustomed with the experience of shifting uncomfortably in their chairs, knowing that they would not have chosen to use this particular word in this particular place. It could not possibly be, they think, that the author whom they have become acquainted with in the previous pages would write such a sentence. Readers cannot provide any proof for such an assertion, since the original of the text is not available or accessible to them. But the minute they become aware of the translator’s presence in the text, they cannot avoid muttering from time to time that the translator seems to have missed something.

Some texts have the power to resist even the worst translators, while others will constantly proclaim her presence—or, worse still, her betrayal. With still other texts, all is lost in translation. In other words, a translation cannot be judged only on its aesthetics or on its faithfulness. There are many other criteria, which are often inherent in the translated text and the type of dialogue that we have with it. Psychologically, these moments of discomfort, experienced by the reader as the translator’s failure or betrayal, reflect the yawning abyss between our transference to the translated text and the translator’s transference to the source. The German word for to transfer—übertragen—also means to translate, meaning that even the word Freud chose to designate this psychological
phenomenon bears a connotation of translation as a transfer of meaning in space and time.

Some linguists argue that our perceptions of the world are determined largely, if not entirely, by the structure of our mother tongue. This sort of linguistic determinism is advocated by Edward Sapir (Mandelbaum 1949) and Benjamin Lee Whorf (1956), and has had an impact on structuralist psychoanalysis. It posits a linguistic relativity in which the structure of language influences the manner in which a person understands reality and behaves with respect to it. But it is no small matter to accept the essentially pessimistic and alienating nature of the sweeping claim that we are the prisoners of a single language. To accept this view is to privilege the formal component of language over its content. More significantly, it implies that there can be no real dialogue between speakers of different languages. If Whorf was right, the readers of a translated text labor under an illusion. They need not a better translation but an entirely different consciousness if they are to be able to comprehend the text.

Of course, this relativist school has many opponents. They point out that relativism is not consistent with the considerable evidence for deep preverbal and prelinguistic strata shared by the speakers of all languages. But as dismal and controversial as this school of linguistics might seem to psychotherapists, I maintain that, as translators and readers, we should not be too quick to join the opposition, which sees language as tantamount to an empty vessel that can be filled with any idea. In this latter view, the differences between languages are insignificant compared to the metalinguistic functions common to every language. Therefore, they maintain, every language can say everything, if its speakers know how to use it properly, and every human experience can be expressed in every language.

But Freud has an original answer of his own to the relations between language and consciousness—one that he illustrates in his own writing. He does not allow his translators to get caught up in metaphysical speculations on the possible meanings of translation and interpretation. He presents them with challenges that require responses.

Many writers have remarked on the unique hermeneutic challenge that Freud’s writing presents even to those who read him in the original
German (Habermas 1971). Notably, Freud is not the only German writer whom German speakers sometimes prefer to read in English translation. Freud in translation gets under the reader’s skin a little less than he does in German. He is a bit more transparent. Something of the inscrutability of his writing is neutralized, and this can make it easier to read. It is still Freud, but not as intense.

Freud in German is a less convenient target for criticism than the Freud familiar to readers of the English Standard Edition of his works. He is elusive and tentative no less than he is categorical and authoritative. Phallic, feminine, and downright polymorphous in his manner of discourse, he baffles no less than he enlightens. No sooner has he formulated a theoretical conclusion than he may launch a counterattack against his ostensibly incontrovertible inference, undermining its validity. By the time the reader has finished reading one of these lengthy sentences, he can no longer be certain which of the evidently contradictory meanings is actually being endorsed by Freud—the thesis or the antithesis.

While I do not subscribe to the position that Freud’s major achievement was a linguistic or literary one, the connection between, on the one hand, the structure and some of the unique characteristics of the German language, and, on the other, psychoanalytic theory and even technique, are worth exploring. The German language—and by this, I mean not only its formal shape, but also the metaphorical world intertwined with that structure—made it easier for Freud to formulate and conceptualize his ideas, even if we acknowledge that he used the language as if it were his personal preserve.

Every person who speaks more than one language has had the experience in which one language, not necessarily his mother tongue, lends itself more readily than the other language to expressing a certain mood or idea. These moments, when our thinking transgresses the boundaries set by one language by invading the territory of another language, are always interesting. In general, we seek psychological explanations for the phenomenon, which are always abundant (dissociation, identification, displacement), but sometimes the language has its own will and uses us for its own purposes. We are prisoners of its vocabulary and syntax.
While I have no doubt that psychoanalysis can be understood and communicated in many languages, it seems to be particularly at home in German. Perhaps I should qualify this statement by limiting it to Freudian psychoanalysis, and argue as well that not only the translations of Freud but also the foundational texts of other therapeutic schools have been shaped by their cultural-linguistic contexts. It might be better to rephrase this admittedly rather unsettling thought, which subverts Freud’s claim to the universality of his system, as a question: can Freud’s theory be sustained by a language other than German? Can the canonical texts of the founder of psychoanalysis be translated without reinventing psychoanalysis (Bettelheim 1983; Mahony 1987b, 2001; Ornston 1992)?

I think that most of Freud’s readers have already been convinced that one can think in a Freudian way in all kinds of languages, and that every language contains a Freudian kernel that can be cultivated in a manner appropriate to the special linguistic and historical conditions of the time and place in which the founder of psychoanalysis is called upon to convey his message.

One of the best-known and best-loved statements about translation is attributed to Cervantes. In Don Quixote (1605), he likened translating from one language to another to gazing at a tapestry from the reverse side, where all the loose threads and knots are visible. Who can argue with the great Spaniard that life might be nicer if we could always read books in their original languages?

But reading a text in translation is not only a drawback. It offers readers a number of advantages. A translation not only distances us from the original, being as it is a blurred reflection of it, but also permits us an intimate acquaintance with the raw materials from which the text is composed. A translation lays bare a text’s hidden structures, the stitches that the author uses to hold together his arguments, the tricks she employs, and the snares she sets for her readers. Freud is well known for laying traps all around the reader, ready to catch him at every step.

The translator himself has mixed feelings about the way he scrounges through the source text. On the one hand, it provides him with a sense of being profoundly close to the writer, but there is also something voyeuristic and intrusive about it. Often, translators find it difficult to look
directly at a source text for a long time after they have completed their work on it.

Freud tried out many metaphors to clarify for himself and his readers the role of the psychoanalyst. He termed the analyst a *surgeon*, a *tour guide*, a *secular priest*. His array of metaphors also included the therapist as *translator*. Yet this metaphor is an exceptional one in Freud’s hands because it is of dual significance: it serves both when he speaks about the psychic apparatus, and when he speaks of the mechanism of healing. In other words, the translating psyche is the object of the work of translation assigned to therapist and patient. And good translation has a healing effect (Loewald 1960).

This makes it possible to consider the subversive effect that psychoanalytic theory can have on a concept such as the *original text*. The translation process includes transformation—first and foremost, the translator’s translation of the linguistic and psychic space in which the original text was written. In translating Freud, one must cast off the dichotomous view that identifies the language in which the text was written with the “source.” The reason is that the text in its original language is itself no more than an attempt to translate something—a thought, a feeling, an experience (Laplanche 1991, 1997).

Because of the view that the original text, in encountering another language, ceases to be a source and itself becomes a new translation of some sort of hidden enigmatic language, we commonly speak of this process in historical terms. We say that a translator needs an acquaintance with the cultural world in which the text was created, and so on. But it seems to me that the attempt to break down the space in which texts are composed into the historical and linguistic factors in operation there is an oversimplification of the creative process.

For this reason, I do not accept the distinction between *translatable* works and *untranslatable* ones. In every translation—not just of poetry, but also of, say, a pun or a metaphor—something gets lost, and something else is created in its place. In fact, attempts to bring the target language in line with the original are not only frustrating; they lead to the creation of something entirely new. Sooner or later, the contours of the unbridgeable gap between the two languages come into view, forming a
kind of mental-linguistic no man’s land. If the existence of this gap or space is acknowledged and not smudged, it can become a presence in the new text in surprising and unexpected ways.

In December 1896, Freud wrote to his friend Wilhelm Fliess that “the failure of translation” was what was known in clinical terminology as “repression” (Freud 1896, p. 235). Freud meant that the act of translation is what enables impressions and experiences originating at different stages of life to undergo a transformation that enables them to make the passage between the three mental systems that predate consciousness: the nervous system, which receives the original stimulus; the unconscious; and the preconscious.

The concept of translation also serves Freud in later writings, in which he defines the role of the analyst as a translator of unconscious material into materials that can find a place in consciousness. In one of his final works, he wrote:

Every science is based upon observations and experiences arrived at through the medium of our mental apparatus. But since our science has as its object that apparatus itself, the analogy ends here. We make our observations through the medium of the same perceptual apparatus, precisely by the help of the breaks in the series of mental events, since we fill in the omissions by plausible inferences and translate them into conscious material. In this way we build, as it were, a conscious complement for the unconscious mental processes. The relative certainty of our mental science rests upon the binding force of these inferences. [1940, p. 39]

In the first two sentences of this passage, Freud reminds his readers of the unique difficulty of the psychoanalytic process, in which the object of inquiry, the psyche, is also the means with which it is studied. Note his choice of the metaphor of translation to describe the therapeutic act. Translation is described here as an action in which unconscious material undergoes a transformation in which it approximately fits in with conscious material. In other words, the unconscious source and the material that makes its way into the conscious mind do not perfectly match. It is the psychoanalytic version of the question of the relation between source and translation.
This question not only touches on the limitations of translation; it also requires a reexamination of the source-translation dichotomy. In the therapeutic context, it is possible to see how the act of translation, while transferring a meaning from one mental sphere to another, above and beyond its impact on consciousness, changes the source. That is, it changes the object of translation even before it reaches consciousness and takes on its new translated form. An analytic interpretation does not have to be comprehensible to the analysand, or to arouse his resistance, in order to produce a change in unconscious material, in the atmosphere in the room, or in the transference.

Heidigger once attributed all the ills of Western thought to the way in which Roman Latin gulped down Greek philosophy, taking over Greek words without fully appreciating their original meanings. There are translators who seek to give their readers the illusion that the text was written originally in the target language. My view, however, is that a language is not a neutral vessel that can take in and equally sustain every idea. I therefore do not believe that my role as a translator is to paper over the identity of the original text. On the contrary, it sometimes seems to me that I need not protect the reader from the background noise produced by the encounter between language and content. Freud’s own writing is full of such noise, and as an exegetist of unparalleled skill, he is not deterred by it and in general makes no effort to camouflage it.

The English *Standard Edition* translation of Freud’s works by James and Alix Strachey is notable for the translators’ effort to dampen this noise, to explain Freud and protect him when he is unclear or simply confused. Freud had no compunctions about asserting a thing and its opposite; the Stracheys went out of their way to hide that.

Once more: it is doubtful whether everything can be mimicked convincingly in every language. But the translator’s task, as I understand it, is to save swaths of meaning from the original text, to preserve all of the original that can be preserved, without “taming” or “converting” it at any price. As a result, readers of my translations of Freud into Hebrew can expect uncomfortable moments when they discover that some of Freud’s ideas, and his presentation of them, cause the Hebrew language severe digestive problems. On the other hand, there are places in which Hebrew, with its strata of meaning and association, gives itself over to
Freud’s writing, in both form and content. At these moments, it feels as if Hebrew waited long for Freud to come along and pour his ideas into it.

Presumably, future translators of Freud into Hebrew will arrive at entirely different conclusions. Indeed, it is difficult to predict which of the directions in which the Hebrew language might develop in the future would be most amenable to Freud’s German. In any case, it is certainly true that what one translator experiences as opaque and untranslatable may show itself, in the work of another translator at a different time, as a challenge that the Hebrew language can meet.

One of the plethora of unique linguistic characteristics of Freud’s writing, well integrated into his ideas, is the smooth conversion that German allows between verb, noun, and adjective—conversions that enable Freud to incorporate primary process thinking in a discussion conducted according to the rules of secondary process thinking. In his case studies of Dora (1905) and the Wolf-Man (1918), it is easy to confuse Freud’s secondary narrative with the primary narrative, in which he allows his patients to tell their own stories. Freud, it should be noted, seldom used quotation marks in presenting material spoken by his patients or other interlocutors.

As Mahony (1987a) noted in his painstaking study of Freud’s writing, German is a very dynamic language that contains many terms for movement and passage, allowing Freud to almost spontaneously coin terms such as *transference*. It appears as a simple verb, morphs into a noun, and then is inserted into the narrative as a modifier. He makes rapid and sudden transitions between tenses (especially past and present) of a kind that English seldom allows. But they are very characteristic of Freud’s writing and of the psychoanalytic process itself—and Hebrew welcomes them.

Freud’s writing is often choppy. Here, too, Hebrew does a good job of conveying Freud’s German. In Hebrew, it is much more acceptable to write incomplete sentences, while standard English style views them as improper in expository prose. Hebrew can contain tension between the descriptive scientific language and the dense figurative and metaphorical language used by Freud—a man whose single award in his lifetime was the Goethe Literary Prize. His almost frantic changes of metaphor
give Freud’s writing a poetic cast, and also allow him, with surprising ease, to construct sentences saturated with heavy theoretical weight that common sense and other unconscious resistances would make it difficult for the reader to grasp.

Two characteristics of the work of translating Freud that show themselves to be especially useful are the ability to “submit” to the text and a readiness to “compensate” it for the unavoidable insult that the translation commits. When the act of translation becomes an act of decipherment, when the translator’s field of vision becomes filled with a single sentence for too long, the time has come to let go, to permit the sentence to elude our understanding, and to share this experience of misunderstanding with the reader through our translation. This, however, entails a certain paradox, as we have to reenact and capture in words that which eluded the source text.

As I observed earlier, it is not unusual for Freud to resort to hyperbole or to make an assertion and then contradict it in the same breath, aided by the fact that German displays an exceptional ability to allow a single word to bear two almost entirely contradictory meanings. Taking the original title of Walter Benjamin’s “The Task of the Translator” (1923)—Die Aufgabe des Übersetzers—as an example, one could argue that part of the aufgabe, the task, is the ability to aufgeben, to allow the text to remain in places in which it repels attempts to translate it.

I would add to this ability to let go a willingness to compensate the translated text for the damage it suffers through translation. I do not mean only compensation for the meanings that get lost because of the paucity of appropriate vocabulary or a lack of syntactic structures that can do justice to the original (I do not believe that it is the psychoanalytic vocabulary that presents the greatest difficulty to Freud’s translators—the unique syntactic structures that appear in his writings are much greater challenges). My intended subject is rather the phonetic and musical injuries that the translation inflicts on the text. Freud’s writing is poetic, and as such it swings the translator back and forth between phonetic and semantic translation. In other words, it forces him to score the text as if it were a musical piece and to hover between a translation that privileges the sound of the word and one that prefers its precise meaning.
In certain instances, it is hard to know which is more important to Freud: the way the sound of one word evokes another word, or the word’s literal meaning. I am referring not only to word games and the sounds characteristic of the descriptions of dreams and parapraxes, but also to the structure of sentences. Freud is said to have been intolerant of music, but there can be no doubt that, as a writer, he constantly listened to his words and attributed the greatest importance to their music. That is why comparing translations of Freud is much like comparing translations of poetry: more than bringing us closer to the truth hidden in the original text, it rescues the text from the disambiguation that a single translation imposes on it. A comparison of different translations restores the work’s dialogic qualities and opens up new possibilities of meaning.

It is not easy for a translator to find the right path between floridity—the traditional refuge of translators from time immemorial, but also a trademark of Freudian rhetoric—and the colloquialism of personal and relaxed speech that Freud often puts to surprising use. Freud’s constant search for the proper distance or force of voice to support the internal dialogue that he seeks to elicit in his readers makes its presence felt in abrupt shifts between styles of writing and the use of different linguistic registers. Freud’s texts are always aimed at more than one imaginary reader. Sometimes he speaks only to the reader, while at other times he lets the reader listen to his, the writer’s, internal monologue. In still others, the reader witnesses an exchange between Freud and one of his students or adversaries. A single register, suitable for all, cannot serve such varied interlocutors.

Jorge Luis Borges (1934), the Argentine writer, essayist, and poet, once said that he had no way of explaining his great popularity in North America except for the possibility that English translation had considerably improved his style. This can hardly be said of the Standard Edition, which has been criticized right and left—for example, for its choice of terms such as *instinct*, *ego*, *id*, *superego*, *catharsis*, and *empathy*, all of them fundamental psychoanalytic concepts. All these English word choices are quite alien to the German originals.

Another example: Alix Strachey, who collaborated with her husband James on rendering Freud into English, hated the choice of *empathy* to translate Freud’s *Einfühlung*, literally *in-feeling* or *feeling-into*. It is, she said,
“a vile word, elephantine, for a subtle process” (A. Strachey quoted in Meisel and Kendrick 1986, p. 171).

Eventually, however, she surrendered to the dictates of Ernest Jones and accepted the word. Nevertheless, there can be no doubt that the Stracheys, along with Jones—who was the final arbiter of translation questions—were very attentive to the way that Freud had to be translated to render his ideas more palatable to the groups that would determine the fate of psychoanalysis in the Anglo-Saxon world.

There is certainly cause to differ on the word choices made in the Standard Edition, choices that lead many readers to search out psychoanalysis in lexicographic fields rather than in the area of therapy. Another problem is English sentences that, on the one hand, flatten Freud’s rich language, and on the other distance it from common usage. It would have been better not to omit obscure or annoying sentences as the Stracheys did. Furthermore, translators should preserve the original’s paragraph divisions, so singular in Freud’s work, almost no trace of which remain in the Standard Edition.

But all this is inevitable. Better than criticizing the editors of the standard English edition for their desire to enrich psychoanalytic language with pseudoscientific terms is to decry the unfortunate term standard that expedited the canonization of Freud’s works and did the disservice of stamping them with an almost alchemical imprimatur.

The Stracheys and Jones seemed to have been seeking to raise the level of codification in Freud’s language. That is, they sought to create a situation in which the communicative value of the word increases because it is assigned to an agreed-upon concept. Like an Eskimo, whose language offers a range of terms signifying different kinds of snow, and like a musician, who has a technical vocabulary enabling him to name and discuss harmonies and tone relations that are not distinguished by laymen, the psychological therapist would be happy to have a vocabulary that could pinpoint shades of affective meaning and complex psychic processes and phenomena.

Yet in his writing, Freud tried to prevent that. He mocked psychiatrists who coined large numbers of names for mental phenomena, preferring the poetic method of combining familiar words so as to awaken
in his readers as many associations and contexts as he could. He was not eager to exchange these for neologisms.

The considerations that guided the editors of the *Standard Edition* were generally ideological rather than aesthetic, but I believe that it would be exaggerating to claim, as some have, that psychoanalysis is everything that got lost in the English translation. There is considerable hyperbole in the claim that Jones’s desire to give Freud’s work a scientific cast distanced psychoanalysis from the humanist tradition in which Freud was educated. Not only is the distinction between science (*wissenschaft*) and humanism much less sharp in German than in the English tradition, but Freud’s writing always walks the line between the positivist-scientific and humanist-hermeneutic-literary genres. This kind of scholarly prose characterized the writing of many Central European intellectuals of Freud’s time, serving their wish to integrate their classical humanist educations with their commitment to the positivist paradigm that shaped the scientific discourse of the late nineteenth century.

English is, by nature, less tolerant of the ambiguity and tentativeness characteristic of Freud’s German. To the Stracheys’ credit, they were aware of the limitations imposed by casting Freud’s German into Bloomsbury English. This is testified to by the epitaph affixed to the first volume of the monumental translation project:

To the thoughts and words of
SIGMUND FREUD
this their Blurred Reflection
Is dedicated by its contriver,
James Strachey

Every translation involves a paradox of sorts. On the one hand it creates a new wedge between the writer and his ideas, but on the other hand it enriches the target language, tests its boundaries, its flexibility, confronts it with its weaknesses and blind spots. The translation also puts to the test the way in which the language describes and fashions the world of its readers. As a translator, I generally preferred not to weigh down the work with a trail of footnotes chronicling the tribulations of my translation process. The lives of Freud’s readers are difficult enough without that. Freud pitches them back and forth between the body of the
text and its margins, blurring the imaginary boundary between essential and rudimental.

I believe it best to confine footnotes to issues that can help readers place the author’s statements in their theoretical, historical, or literary context. Furthermore, lexicographical footnotes impede the absorption of a text in its new linguistic environment. They serve the translator more than they respond to any real need of the reader. I thus advocate compensation. What I mean by that is that I sometimes prefer to translate a given word that has no precise Hebrew equivalent in one way in one place and in another way elsewhere. In this way, I am better able to mark out the range of meaning that the word covers in Freud’s German.

It goes without saying, however, that such an attempt to capture the entire range of a German word used in a specific context by rendering it in several different Hebrew words has a serious drawback. The practice is inconsistent with the necessity of providing Hebrew readers with a standard psychoanalytic lexicon, so foreign to Freud’s free choice of words. His words, especially those he takes from spoken German, are not code words with meanings about which there is a consensus. These words derive their meaning from their context, from the words around them. With Freud, words are much like people. They not only speak with each other, but also sometimes require other words near them in order to know who they are.

Words also have meanings that derive from their pasts, which are not necessarily identical to the meanings that parallel words in other language have gathered up over the course of their histories. In Freud’s case, words he used continued to collect meanings during his half-century of writing, and the only way to grasp the full sense of a word is to gain an acquaintance with Freud’s full œuvre.

But there is another, opposite danger as well. Like famished hunters of meaning, we are liable to load down Freud’s words not only with meanings gained at later stages of his own writing, but also meanings added during the development of the psychoanalytic discourse after Freud. A question today is whether a translator can facilitate the reading of this 19th-century neurologist. Can one use the terms that later emerged to supplement the mechanistic language of drives with which Freud substantiated most of his technical recommendations? What about the lan-
guage of object relations, self psychology, or the interpersonal and relational schools, which entered the psychoanalytic discourse at subsequent stages of its development and enriched psychoanalytic language in a way that makes it possible to translate Freud outside his historical context and render the text more contemporary?

The translation of Freud’s writings into other languages played an important role in the acceptance of psychoanalysis outside the German cultural sphere. Some of Freud’s translators have adopted Hegel’s wish “to teach philosophy to speak German” (Sallis 2002, p. 16). Rather than translate Freud, they seek to “teach” him to write in a specific language or echo a particular psychoanalytic school of thought. The enterprise of translating Freud into Hebrew has seen several attempts at such *translation nationalism* (Venuti 2013) and has mobilized contextualization.

Similarly, translations of Freud into Hebrew done in the 1930s and ’40s used biblical and Talmudic language. More than being prompted by constraints of the language at the time, this was meant to make Freud’s writing part of the canon of Jewish intellectual works then being put into place by the Jewish national movement. Evidence of this can be seen in a letter sent to Freud by Yehuda Dvosis-Dvir, his first Hebrew translator. Dvosis-Dvir supplemented his rendering of *Totem and Taboo* (Freud 1912–1913) with footnotes adducing biblical passages. The purpose, the translator told Freud, was “to strengthen and corroborate your claims, and occasionally cast them in a new light” (see Rolnik 2012, p. 170).

In the introduction he wrote to the first Hebrew edition—published in 1935—of his 1916–1917 work *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, Freud was bold enough to cast doubt on whether Moses and the prophets would have understood the Hebrew version of his works. This did not, however, prevent the judges of the Tchernichovsky Prize from awarding this honor to Zvi Wislavsky for his translation of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud 1901). Praising Wislavsky for his use of Mishnaic and Midrashic language, the judges declared that, had they not known the work was a translation, they would have thought it written in Hebrew by an ancient (Rolnik 2012).

The dilemmas that arose in the work of translating technical writings into Hebrew were heterogeneous, relating to clinical and technical vocabulary, linguistic structures, terms, and idioms, all of which have
advanced considerably over eighty years of psychoanalytic discourse in Hebrew. But during the process of doing my own translations, I realized that these impasses seemed to want to prove to me that my translation would always be affected by the linguistic climate of the clinical practice of the day.

Freud (1923) published his structural model in the same year that Walter Benjamin published his essay “The Task of the Translator” (1923). Benjamin argued that a bad translation is one that tries to carry out the technical function of conveying information by means of bogus precision. Such a translation leaves in only those parts of the original text that are not vital. Good translations, on the other hand, give the original an afterlife (Fortleben), thanks to the fleeting way in which meaning adheres to them.

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The years I spent translating Freud into Hebrew taught me that, paradoxically, just as psychoanalysis should sometimes rest content by conveying to the patient the limitations of the analyst’s understanding (A. Freud 1969), so the good enough translation is not always the most precise or “terminable” one. In fact, a psychoanalytically informed Freud translation is usually an interminable one that, while diligently conveying the original language of psychoanalysis—the language psychoanalysts spoke “before Babel”—also tacitly encourages the reader to search further for his own private language of psychoanalysis.

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