

On Death-work

The expression 'death-work' immediately calls to mind, by analogy, some familiar Freudian terms.

The first is *dream-work*: it signifies a group of operations that transforms quite diverse raw materials 'delivered' by the body, by thoughts, by the day's 'residues', so as to manufacture a product: a series of images tending towards a narrative form in which fairly indefinite chains of representations are intertwined at nodal points.

Next is *work-of-mourning*: a complex process that no longer bears on ideas, but on the object incorporated in the ego's envelope – in its container; a process, then, which is intrapsychical in the strong sense of the term and about which it has been said that its finality was to 'kill the dead'.

Lastly, what was throughout the most general definition of *Trieb*, the drive: a *constant demand for work* imposed on the psychical apparatus and the complex modalities of this apparatus's response to what constitutes a 'foreign body' to it, while compelling it to function – the very object of analysis.

In fact, the relation between death-work and these modes of psychical work is, as we shall see, more than analogous. However, I do not intend to embark upon a study of the whole here, merely to set forth some (rough and uncertain) guidelines along a path constantly threatening to give way under one's feet.

First, let us posit that death-work was at work in Freud and that he was able to transcribe it theoretically – at the cost of great difficulties and contradictions – only because it never ceased being active in him. If death were only at work in a man at the moment which, for him, marks the cessation of his life, there would be nothing to say about Freud's death other than that it was exemplary: it has been called stoical. On the other hand, if death is insidiously present behind the most diverse masks, often silent, sometimes noisy, but always active along the paths of existence, then Freud can be said to have been totally taken by it.

In my view the theme of death is as basic to Freudian psychoanalysis as is the theme of sexuality. I even believe that the latter was largely accorded a more prominent role in order to conceal the former. Both

came out as transformed by Freud's works, by the *work of the theoretical apparatus*, as the drives are transformed by the work of the psychical apparatus.

As regards Freud's attitude towards death (the man and the thinker were singularly linked, as should be the case with all psychoanalysts), one can sketch out three stages.

First stage: death as felt by the body, the *soma*, let us say, or, better, as represented by a mute character in a picture.

Second stage: death as thought of or, better, as represented in terms of a drama on the multi-level space of the psychical scene.

Third stage: death as enacted or, better, as acting in the depth of being in what I would call the 'psychical body', as a recurrence of elementary processes which look organic.

With reference to the first stage (which unfolded roughly from 1890 to 1895), Max Schur's book *Freud: Living and Dying* (1972) presents facts which are not all new, but which produce a striking impression on the reader because of their *insistency*.

What was Freud suffering from during those years? What did he complain about to Fliess, his faraway friend, ear-and-nose specialist, and grandiose and somewhat nutty theoretician of periodicity? The clinical table is heterogeneous but entirely organized by the figure of Death (like those pictures of 'Vanités' in which the mere grey presence-absence of a macabre shadow tarnishes the lustre of the most precious and coveted objects).

What does this picture contain? A mixture of 'psychical' systems, of an obsessional kind, and of organic symptoms of the anxiety-neurosis type.

A few brief examples:

Freud was very preoccupied about the date of his death and he always foresaw it prematurely (a means of attempting to stave it off: he wanted it to come in *his own time*, not in its own time; a process that also betrays a wish for immortality, for a non irreversible time). He gave himself deadlines and, to determine them, made calculations according to the law of periodicity invented by Fliess, which, let it be noted in passing, associates the determination of sexual cycles to that of illnesses. This notion of periodicity re-appeared in Freud's work in the shape of a repetition compulsion.

The question 'By what are we, as individuals, lived?' which Freud answered in various ways although always through transindividual reality, might find its immediate implicit answer in a phrase like 'we are lived by death'. The term 'survivor' comes up repeatedly

in his writings: Freud was a survivor, his place was between two deaths.

These preoccupations were combined with superstitious fears concerning names and numbers: unmentionable names, baneful numbers, bearers of death? Fifty-one, for example, was a number to be feared; his fifty-first birthday (twenty-eight plus twenty-three Fliesian cycles) was for a long time a critical date for him, until it was replaced by another. In short, he was possessed by 'necrological bookkeeping' (to take up an expression by Michel de M'Uzan).

All the same, these symptoms did not take on the form of an obsessional neurosis. In a way, it is quite the opposite. For in these superstitions, in these more or less obsessive preoccupations, it is the *body* that was directly concerned, attacked, threatened; the body in its different parts. Here, the *head*. Conscious and even hyperconscious death anxiety, *Todesangst*, directly assails the body with a minimal of psychical mediation – of transposition, of displacement, and of fantastic working out. Death does not talk!

Another part, another organ: the *heart*. I would like to quote one letter among many others (18 April 1896): 'It was then', he wrote, in a hasty and bizarre jumble of words which cannot be rendered in translation, 'that the great cardiac disturbances occurred: violent arrhythmia, perpetual rapid heartbeats a heavy, oppressive feeling, a burning sensation in my left arm, a little dyspnoea – very slight and perhaps hinting at an organic cause. All this in fits, that is, happening two or three times a day, prolonging itself and accompanied by a psychical depression which is manifested by ideas of dead people and of farwells, and which replaces a normal hyperactivity.'

The German word *Malereien* evokes, more than 'visions', the idea of painting, of a painted picture. Freud was not the one to see death: one cannot look death in the face. He felt himself under its gaze. If the proper watching distance ceased to be maintained, then he would be precipitated towards it, after each part of his body, and not his body as a whole, had been subjected to its ascendancy.

Even his famous and persistent tobacco intoxication, a veritable addiction, should be linked to death anxiety. When Freud mentions *abstinence* to Fliess, one should read not sexual abstinence (which he put up with perfectly well, as far as we know) but abstinence from tobacco. Forbidding him to smoke, as Fliess persisted in doing, was the equivalent of forbidding him any intellectual activity! Not that the two became confused; but he found in his addiction more than a stimulant to this activity; it was a necessary condition to it. On the one hand the arousing and quieting of excitation, in the mouth and the

respiratory tracts are coupled repeatedly in that zone, thus keeping it at one level; on the other hand, however, intellectual activity, which Freud defines as a 'psychical complication', this activity with which his life will become ever more synonymous, interposes constantly renewed mediations between excitation and the return to the point of departure.

I shall not pursue an inventory of the ills of this period: recurrent migraines, fatigue, nasal suppurations, intestinal disorders (Freud goes as far as giving a name to his intestines – Conrad) I would just like to make two points.

1. Freud's symptoms evoke something that was one of his principal nosographical, etiological, and theoretical interests: the *actual neuroses*; his interest in this remained lively even when he had the model of the *psychoneuroses* entirely at his disposal. A point that has not been stressed enough is the remarkable convergence of certain, particularly French, contemporary theories of the so-called psychosomatic affections – a theory that draws inferences from a firm distinction between conversion and somatization – and on the other hand, the 'old' Freudian theory of the actual neuroses. The word 'actual' connoted two things, hence its importance: the existence in the present of the conflict and its actualization in the soma, its non-symbolization, which implies the prevalence of economic factors.

One can make this first stage of Freud's attitude towards death correspond to the first level of the organization of a neurosis in which the soma takes charge of everything.

2. The disorders Freud complained of were largely a part of his relationship with Fliess: he would send him 'detailed reports of sickness', he called him his 'healer', his 'supreme judge'. He was ill with Fliess, by Fliess, for him, from him. Well, we all know the story. We also know that he was to break away in one and the same painful move from his Other (need it be said with a capital O?) and was to gain access to the unconscious meaning of his symptoms, of all symptoms.

Then, with *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), the second stage began, the one we are most familiar with. Dreams demanding dramatization, the putting of sequences in the form of images, allowed Freud to move about in a new space, a genuinely psychical one this time, that of a shadow show of which he became both the theatre and the producer. The rule of telling everything presupposes, if not the representation of everything at least that everything can be articulated or decomposed into elements. The work of unconscious ideas, bound and unbound by the flow of associations, corresponds to the work of

interpretation which binds and unbinds in another way, which discovers or constructs the subject's fantasy and history.

Death ceases to have a direct grip over the body. It is internalized. It spreads out, losing impact. In changing space, it changes meaning. One no longer sees it as a threat from the outside against which one can but vainly attempt to protect oneself, but as a *wish* orientated towards the possessor and rival: a rival with many shapes but a wish that wholly concurs with the Oedipal structure. The immediate bite of conscious death anxiety is transformed into repressed desire and into the (unconscious) guilt of the survivor.

It will be remembered that Freud was able to say about his book on dreams that it was a piece of his self-analysis, his reaction to the death of his father.

How can one avoid comparing this admission to another later and more intimate one? 'Now that my mother is dead, I can die.' An admission which could be taken to mean: how could I, the beloved son, bear having to announce my own death to my mother, the single figure of the Three Fates, in which she who gives birth, she who loves and she who destroys are combined? There lay the encounter with the uncanny, in those 'caskets' where the secret of Freud remains hidden.

For one cannot but be astonished at seeing the fate reserved by Freud for death anxiety at this high point of psychoanalysis, and from then on. At least on a theoretical level (for in his life it was a different matter), he resolutely rid himself of it by effecting a complete reversal.

Death anxiety is reduced to a mask, no more than a form among others (weaning, separation) of castration anxiety, which he turned into a pivot for all losses of the object, and behind which, and I quote, 'no deeper secret would be hidden'. 'In the unconscious, there is nothing capable of giving content to our concept of destruction. I hold firmly to the idea that death should be conceived of as an analogon to castration anxiety.'

These lines were written in 1926 (*Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety*, 1926d) over five years later than *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920g) in which the idea of the death instinct was expounded, and ten years later than the essays on mourning and on narcissism which nonetheless hinted that the most intense anxieties could be related to systems and oppositions other than those of castration and difference (ego/non-ego, outside/inside, unity/fragmentation, oceanic feeling/annihilation feeling, elated self/withdrawn self, completeness/emptiness).

Two remarks, here. This 'I hold firmly' surely reveals Freud's wish: if only the whole matter could be settled by the Oedipus, and by

a conquering Oedipus without having to mention the attempted murder of the Oedipus-child, and by forgetting that, parricides apart, the suicides of Oedipus and Jocasta are the price of transgression.

As regards the assertion Freud reiterated so often that 'our unconscious cannot imagine our own mortality', this is surely a denial. At any rate, a curious 'oversight' for someone who was able to recognize the function of the double and perceive so many symbolic figurations of death in dreams or tales, such as disappearance, mutism, the hidden and Cordelia's pallor. Unless we are to take the phrase 'the unconscious does not know the negative' as meaning: it does not know the negative because it *is* negative, opposing itself to the supposedly full positivity of life. And it is the negative to the extent that its very constitution as a heterogeneous system is correlative to the loss, absence and negation of the object of satisfaction.

The fact remains that death, thus apparently dismissed, showed up again in his work, decentering a construction that its author nevertheless considered complete – and with what impetus this reappearance took effect! It took shape in a double drive against nature and against the law, in that inconceivable concept, unless it be the one to conceive us – the death instinct.

This is the third stage, which also seems to me to correspond to a specific dimension of our clinical experience. The first stage, as I have said, consisted of actual neuroses, of non-symbolizable soma. The second stage, the one in which analytical method and models apply *par excellence*: so-called classical neuroses, in which the psyche is a metaphor of the body – of the body as a nervous system; the network of representations in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (nervous, railway, or linguistic) were substituted for the *Project's* neuronal paths. The introduction of the death instinct as referent or as primal myth confronts us with another problematic which 'narcissistic personalities' and 'borderline cases' are making us increasingly aware of. In this instance, the psyche becomes a body. 'What does that mean?' becomes 'what does that want?'. Death is no longer localized in consciousness or in the unconscious, it is at the very roots of the unconscious. It is no longer the property of one psychological instance, but the principle of 'discord' in each one of them. It is a-topia. It is no longer speech but silence, cries or fury. If Freud admitted that 'it is extremely difficult to form a more or less concrete idea of the death instinct', is it not because he had met with the most radical form of 'negative-work'? On this side of, or beyond the imaginable, the representable, and should we say the analysable? Yes, if analysis

implies – ἀναύειν – the primary inscription of sense-giving and minutely localizable elements.

Whatever the personal motives (mourning) or collective motives (the hecatomb of the Great War, which had not yet been given a number, and which made a corpse of Reason) which may have pushed Freud to propose a principle going beyond the coupling pleasure principle/reality principle without any decisive clinical proof, it is clear that these pages (I have in mind the essay written in 1920), so close in their movement, not in their style, to associative discourse, are sustained throughout by a *demand* for thought, analogous to a desire that irrepressibly seeks out the path of truth: 'It's as though I'm obliged to believe it.'

This path was not followed by disciples of the time, or else it was diverted in another direction, in my opinion, by those who, like Melanie Klein, seemed to be profoundly committed to it while focusing the death instinct on the object (external or internal), thus reducing it to a force aiming at *destroying* this object.

Everything about this notion is disturbing: its speculative air (which Freud admitted), the coupling of the terms instinct and death in just one word *Todestrieb*. Instinct was until then associated with self-preservation, with life, above all with sexuality, but it was now associated with death – death, traditionally associated with the cessation of life and attributed to the expected but *denied* intervention of an outside agent. But what is concerned here? The desire for death, or the death of desire? And how can one tolerate the assertion, itself repetitive, that 'every being dies necessarily from internal causes'? (Was this an oblique message to psychoanalysis, that entity conceived, made and maintained alive by Freud, an admission of his disillusionment as to the creative abilities of its members, the pre-sentiment that the death instinct would turn against the psychoanalytical edifice, against its Eros?)

The term 'instinct' is also awkward here. Where is one to find the source, the object and the aim of the death instinct? Which are its delegates? Which representations and which affects?

There lies the error made as much by those who refute the death instinct as by those upholding it on the grounds of a *desirado*, as opposed to a *libido*: they act as though it were a question of a particular form of instinct, and they then seek to establish what *represents* it: – Is it aggressive and destructive behaviour (which Freud could bear out), above all self-destructive, or is it a state of apathy?

– Is it unrestrained violence or the temptation of nirvana (each generation finding or rediscovering its own)?

– Is it an overabundance, an excess of excitation inducing a devastating acting out, or a scarcity of excitation inducing the feeling of non-existence, a void of thoughts and of affects?

– Is it for Narcissus, a fascinated self-sufficiency or an omnipotent and raging hold over the object?

– Is it zero or infinity?

So many possible apprehendable *figures*, but ones which threaten to make us lose what is essential in Freud's intuition: the death instinct asserts itself in a radical *unbinding process*, a process of *enclosure* that has no aim but its own accomplishment and whose repetitive nature is the sign of its instinctivity. This is a process that no longer has anything to do with conscious death anxiety but which *mimics death* in the being's very nucleus, and this led Freud to assign it to the cell, the nucleus of the living being. Then the psyche is no longer a substitutive representative of the body. It is body. The unconscious can no longer be deciphered through its *formations*, in a mobile and articulable logic of 'signifiers', it is realized and immobilized in the logic of the psychical body. This process of functioning has a secondary effect on reality, provoking splittings in the object, in the ego, in every individual or group agency which claims to achieve an ever increasingly embracing unity.

No psychopathological structure is exempted from this unbinding and unchanging force operating at the heart of a more and more limited closed system through a set of increasingly elementary oppositions, like an organism traversed by energies. All one can say is that the frequency of these states or the limits of the analysable has made analysts more receptive to its modes of operation and to its effects. But it is found in the most certain, the most straightforward neurotic organizations, for example, in obsessional neurosis, where mental activity is literally fenced in. Freud had more than a vague feeling about this; one has but to refer to his 'Analysis terminable and interminable' (1937c) particularly to what is said about the 'alterations of the ego' compared to 'anachronistic institutions'.

Every psychoanalyst talks about death insinuated into life. And if the psychoanalyst's work has as its goal a psychical space that is not just a surface, but one that has some consistency, some flesh to it, some body, and that acquires some freedom of movement and flexibility, then this implies that he cannot evade the antagonistic work of death, he must go out to meet it.

I should like to conclude with a more general hypothesis: the movements and defences generated by the death instinct have superseded

the conflict between the claims of desire conveyed by sexuality and the forces of suppression and repression. Perhaps it is the death instinct's modalities of realization, in the type of anxious response it elicits that clues to 'civilization's discontent' can be found (the word 'discontent' having become weak and civilization being declined in the plural).

If a psychoanalyst seeks to specify the present social forms assumed by the death instinct, he is at first glance confronted not by the 'problem of formulating a more or less concrete idea of it' but by the burden of the choice! Our books, our newspapers – would it were only them – are full of it without however managing to nullify its forcefulness: the atomic threat, perceived not so much as a real threat but as a concrete metaphor of our own fragmentation (a return to the an-organic state), the cycle of violence and counter-violence, pollution, bondage (and above all what La Boétie called *voluntary servitude*, in the spark of genius characterizing his twenty years, three centuries before we spoke of masochism). Even what may have appeared as constructive in our history – life forces – are now presented as though undermined by the forces of death. One no longer postulates the revolutionary alternative of socialism or barbarism, but barbarism is discovered in the very cells of socialism. The industrial world no longer dares extol its 'boom'; instead, it worries about waste, asking, like one of Ionesco's characters: 'How can we get rid of it?' and one should take this to mean: how can we get rid of men, all of whom are waste as regards the exactions of any social machine that wants only to function and to regulate itself. Proclaimed sexual liberation is abolished in the *Eros Center*, which is already in its very principle a *Thanatos Center*.

Examples of this abound: the disorderly proliferation of big suburban complexes, which in fact create fragmentation: an ever increasing mass of information cutting off the individual from any sensual reality of social communication, robbing him of his creativity; in 'cultural life', the proliferation of esoteric languages no longer referring to anything but themselves: there is an exchange but only *between oneself* – endogamy prevails and the narcissism of small differences triumphs.

But here too – in a collectivity as in the individual – the effectiveness of death instincts can be recognized less in the images we give to them than in their processes, which negate any possible dialectic, since every image can be *reversed* into its opposite. 'Our real necropolises', wrote Baudrillard, 'are no longer cemeteries, hospitals, wars, hecatombs . . . but the cellars and rooms for computers, blank spaces purged of all human sounds [the sounds of Eros], glass coffins'. Very

well, I approve: let's smash the computers! And that makes a vandal out of me, a possibility that a more perfected computer will not fail to insert in its next program! The more closed the system, the more explosive the breaking up. *Enclosing/breaking*: this pair of opposites does not stop repeating itself, a pair which would appear to have no other end than that of generating its own repetition. It should be remembered that Freud considered turning something into the opposite and turning something against oneself as the primary mechanisms of psychical functioning, as prior to the repression of representations and to cultural sublimations.

It is as though the metaphors of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920g) have become, fifty years later, those of our culture. We clamour for 'power to Imagination!' at a time of trauma thereby ruining its chances; we blear after the values of a 'natural life' at a time when the question of survival plagues us. It is conceivable that the new culture of the Self (and no longer the ego cult) is a result of this process. What series of lost illusions does it fail to follow? That of a collective subject, as agent of history; that of a personal subject, bearer and creator of meaning; and lastly, that of a chain of symbolic orders sufficiently structured to confer an identity upon us, were it only an 'I' reduced to a 'grammatical fiction'. Should we take as our new illusion an idolized space of the Self, expanding and retracting alternately, from which all 'creativity' would again emerge?

The analyst of today, at grips with narcissism, the narcissism of his patients, of his colleagues and himself, sometimes has the feeling that what he perceives of the great clamour of the world, patched up with cement and full of cracks, is but the echo of what he hears in his seemingly padded office. Freud said 'I am located on the ground floor or in the basement of the building.' We, with less confidence than he had in the powers of the Architect, will say: at the frontier of death and life, a constantly moving frontier which is drawn only to be erased and re-established elsewhere.