

NOTES ON A TRAGEDY

Freud on the Great War

Jayne Svenungsson©

In June 1913, the German Emperor Wilhelm II has been on the throne for twenty-five years. The anniversary is celebrated with great fanfare and the Emperor has personally seen to the staging of the event. Among other things, he has announced that he wishes to be referred to as the “Emperor of Peace” in the dinner speeches. And there is indeed a spirit of peace between the German Emperor and the other monarchs of Europe. Earlier the same spring, Wilhelm II invites to a lavish party celebrating the wedding of his daughter Victoria Louise to Duke Ernst August of Hannover. Among the guests are both the English King George V and the Russian Tsar Nicholas II. “It is in the nature of things,” the *Berliner Tageblatt* reports, “that personal contacts of this kind also make their mark on the political attitude of the cabinets, although only in the sense that on all sides the will to peace is being still more keenly accentuated.”¹

It is not only at the political level that international life is thriving in 1913. Also cultural and scientific cosmopolitanism is in full vigor. In Paris, Igor Stravinsky’s *The Rite of Spring* has its first performance, choreographed by Vaslav Nijinsky. Sitting in one of the boxes is Claude Debussy, in another Gabriele d’Annunzio. In the hall is also Maurice Ravel, shouting *Genius!*, while the majority of the audience is whistling and booing. A meeting place for the international avant-garde is otherwise Gertrude Stein’s salon at 27 Rue des Fleurs. This is where artists and intellectuals from both the New and the Old World meet and discuss, debate or even quarrel. Discussion and debate is also at the center of the Congress of the International Psychoanalytical Association, especially in 1913, which is the year in which the relationship between Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung reaches its final breaking point. Already at the outset, the congress is divided between the followers of Freud and those of Jung, and after the reunion at the Hotel Bayerischer Hof in Munich the two rivals will never meet again.

¹ The quote, like the entire selection of historical anecdotes in this and the next paragraph, is taken from Florian Illies’ ravishing book *1913: The Year before the Storm*, trans. Shaun Whiteside and Jamie Lee Searle, London: The Clerkenwell Press, 2013 (the quote is found on p. 119).

Apart from this discord in the psychoanalytic family—and apart from some worrying tensions at the Balkans which the rest of Europe prefers to repress—it is still peace and concord that are the words for the day. “The Great War in Europe, that eternal threat, will never come,” the American ichthyologist David Starr Jordan imparts in a speech at Stanford University, where he is also the President.²

On June 28, 1914, if we shift the sceneslightly, Sergei Pankejeff takes a long stroll through Vienna. Pankejeff, alias the Wolf Man, has been in treatment with the renowned Dr. Freud since 1910, and he is now about to terminate his analysis. This warm Sunday he is in good spirit and he returns from his walk filled with anticipation for the future and his approaching wedding. But he has scarcely entered the door when the maid hands him an extra with the alarming news: *Archduke Francis Ferdinand and his consort has been assassinated by Bosnian militants!*³ The subsequent chain of events is a famous scenario of falling dominos. Backed by Germany, Austria-Hungary takes a hard line and delivers an ultimatum to Serbia on July 23. Five days later, the ultimatum is followed by a declaration of war. The next day Russia begins to mobilize, and within a week Belgium, France and Britain are also involved in the escalating conflict. Across the continent, the popular support for the war is vast, while at the same time most people are convinced that the war will soon be over and the victory be theirs. This will not, as is well known, be the case. Only a few months later positions are locked and the endless trench warfare is a fact.

How was this bottomless tragedy possible on a continent which hailed peace, and where emperors, artists, writers and scientists spoke warmly of transnational concord? The answer is, of course, that the picture drawn so far is a chimera, and that the period preceding the First World War not for nothing is referred to as “the *Armed Peace*.” Thus, as an example, during the same month that Wilhelm II expresses his wish to be lauded as an “Emperor of Peace,” the German Parliament passes a bill approving the increase of the army by over 100,000 men. And Germany is certainly not alone in its expansive ambitions. The armaments race involves most European countries, and is supported by quasi-Darwinian rhetoric of struggles between peoples or races as necessary to national survival. Moreover, the daily press does its share to whip up chauvinistic sentiments among the newspaper reading middle class in the cities. Yet there are few who truly believe that the war will come, and even fewer who suspect it will be an extended affair in case it nonetheless breaks out. No wonder,

² Quoted after *ibid.*, p. 129.

³ The episode with Pankejeff is recounted by Peter Gay in *Freud: A Life for Our Time*, London and New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006, pp. 342–343.

against this background, that the general sentiment in Europe is dismay, despair and disillusionment as the living hell of the trench warfare soon turns out to be non-ending.

The illusion of humanity's original goodness

Sigmund Freud shares the general sentiment of dismay over the war. His three sons serve in the army, and his colleagues and followers, one after the other, are called up. Yet he cannot join in the widespread, almost paralyzing bewilderment over what civilized people are in the process of staging in Europe. In the early spring of 1915, he writes a short reflection on the war, which is later published as “The Disillusionment of the War.”⁴

“We cannot but feel,” Freud initially states, “that no event has ever destroyed so much that is precious in the common possessions of humanity, confused so many of the clearest intelligences, or so thoroughly debased what is highest” (*DW*, p. 275). Even science, so highly held by Freud, has lost its “passionless impartiality.” Anthropologists declare the enemy inferior, and psychiatrists issue diagnoses of the enemy’s feeble mind. Freud’s examples could be multiplied. Numerous are the distinguished writers, artists and scientists who are attacked by the patriotic war fever, most notoriously, perhaps, Thomas Mann, who eagerly defends the war as a struggle for German *Kultur* over against French and British decadence.

Shouldn’t we have expected a better behavior from educated people, from the civilized cultures of the “great world-dominating nations”? Freud allows the current cultural self-reproaches to expand over the pages. Not that we weren’t prepared to find that war between “the primitive and the civilized peoples” would continue to occupy humanity for some time to come. “But the great nations themselves, it might have been supposed, would have acquired so much comprehension of what they had in common, and so much tolerance for their differences, that ‘foreigner’ and ‘enemy’ could no longer be merged /.../ into one single concept” (*DW*, pp. 276–277). If a war in Europe were nonetheless to happen, it would certainly produce hardship and suffering—but given the “high norms of moral conduct” that the civilized nations have laid down for their citizens, one could still expect that this would not interrupt the development of “ethical relations” between peoples and states.

In light of these expectations, this high self-perception, it is not surprising that the “citizens of the civilized world” are perplexed facing the blind rage of the war. Reading

⁴ Sigmund Freud, “The Disillusionment of the War” (*DW*), trans. E.C. Mayne, in James Strachey (ed.), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychoanalytical Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. XIV, London: The Hogarth Press, 1957, pp. 275–288.

Freud's essay, one initially gets the impression that the senses of outrage and disappointment are his own—which they most likely are. But that does not prevent him from changing his tune halfway into the essay and pronouncing the following somewhat brutal judgment against the widespread cultural disappointment:

Strictly speaking, [the disappointment] is not justified, for it consists in the destruction of an illusion. We welcome illusions because they spare us unpleasurable feelings, and enable us to enjoy satisfactions instead. We must not complain, then, if now and again they come into collision with some portion of reality, and are shattered against it (*DW*, p. 280)

What is the illusion that cannot withstand the test of reality? The illusion of humanity's original goodness; the false belief that humanity by virtue of reason and good education can eradicate evil in the individual life and in society. "In reality, there is no such thing as 'eradicating' evil" (*DW*, p. 281). What psychoanalysis shows is rather that the deepest essence of human nature consists of instinctual impulses, in themselves neither good nor bad, but simply human. For this reason, it is deeply misleading to classify humanity as good or bad. "A human being is seldom altogether good or bad; he is usually 'good' in one relation and 'bad' in another, or 'good' in certain external circumstances and in others decidedly 'bad'" (*DW*, p. 282).

The problem arises when humans begin to deny these elementary conditions. Blinded by our civilizational triumphs, we run the risk of overestimating our cultural abilities in relation to our instinctual impulses and regard our nature as better than it actually is. Hence the shock and disappointment over the war—we simply had forgotten our own worse selves. In the war situation, we are stripped of the later accretions of civilization and our slumbering primal impulses are laid bare. In no time, we set aside our civilized judgment, begin to believe our own lies and to exaggerate the enemy's wickedness. Freud accordingly sees a link between the war's collective madness and a civilization that has pushed itself to the limits to tame human instinct: "Anyone thus compelled to act continually in accordance with precepts which are not the expression of his instinctual inclinations, is living, psychologically speaking, beyond his means" (*DW*, p. 284). With the war, the gap between our mental constitution and the civilization we have created are finally catching up on us.

In all this there is still a consolation to be found. Having emphasized the unjustified in the disappointment over "the uncivilized behavior of our fellow-citizens," Freud

clarifies that there is nevertheless a consolation to be derived from the very recognition of the unjustified nature of these sentiments:

They were based on an illusion to which we had given way. In reality our fellow-citizens have not sunk so low as we feared, because they had never risen so high as we believed. The fact that the collective individuals of mankind, the peoples and states, mutually abrogated their moral restraints naturally prompted these individual citizens to withdraw for a while from the constant pressure of civilization and to grant a temporary satisfaction to the instincts which they had been holding in check. This probably involved no breach in their relative morality within their own nations (*DW*, p. 285).

What we encounter here is something more and something other than a cynical observation that humans are driven by blind instinct. Rather, it is a profoundly ethical reflection. Precisely because we are *not* preprogrammed saints, it is so important with critical self-perception, and it is only when we begin to see ourselves in a more realistic light that we can adopt a more conciliatory attitude towards other people: “Having in this way once more come to understand our fellow-citizens who are now alienated from us, we shall much more easily endure the disappointment which the nations /.../ have caused us, for the demands we make upon these should be far more modest” (*DW*, p. 287).

Specters of Freud

Freud is sometimes depicted as a stoic who enjoins us become conscious of our instinctual life, and thus be able to master our desires and instincts.⁵ But is it really a stoic view of the human being that is reflected in Freud’s essay? Let me make a short detour and recount a famous anecdote. It is Freud himself who, in the short text “On Transience” (written in November 1915), recalls a promenade during the last summer before the war. In the company of his friends Lou Andreas-Salomé and Rainer Maria Rilke (who are not mentioned by names in the text), Freud wanders through “a smiling countryside.” Rilke, the taciturn poet, admires the beauty of the scenery, but is not able to feel joy in it, as he is tormented by the thought that all this beauty is fated to extinction. Freud, for his part, cannot at all accept the idea that the transience of what is beautiful involves any loss in its worth: “On the contrary, an

⁵ So, for instance, by Peter Gray in *Freud*, p. 356.

increase! Transience value is scarcity value in time. Limitation in the possibility of an enjoyment raises the value of the enjoyment.”⁶

Is it not Rilke who is the stoic of this anecdote, holding back the enthusiasm over the beauty of nature in order to spare himself the pain of its extinction—whereas Freud, like a true tragedian, exposes himself to nature’s beauty as well as to the pain of its loss, and allows the two aspects to enhance each other? I wish to argue that this is the case, and that the characterization of Freud as a stoic is misleading. What we find in Freud, in his correspondences and in preserved anecdotes, is not the stoic sage who soberly rise above his passions and inner conflicts. Freud’s attitude to life, as well as the philosophy he imparts through psychoanalysis, is first and foremost about learning to live *with* ones passions and conflicts in a wise way.

In this regard, Freud’s view of humanity could rather be characterized precisely as *tragic*. At the risk of blasphemy—at least in certain psychoanalytic contexts—I would even suggest a certain affinity with biblical anthropology. Consider, for instance, the pathos-filled figures of the prophetic literature, by Abraham Heschel legendarily portrayed as the antipode to the stoic *homo apathetikos*.⁷ The human being is here depicted as a complex and conflicted being, which later on, in the New Testament, finds its most condensed expression in Paul’s famous wrestling with the inner tensions of his mind: “For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing” (Romans, 7:19).⁸

Is it not precisely this insight, although not applied to himself, that Freud gives expression to when in the 1915 essay he reflects on how even “the best intellectuals” during the war have proved unable to live up to their “ethical heights”? In other words, it is not enough—to allude once more to stoic (but also Socratic) therapy of desire—to know the good in order to do the good. But a great deal is gained by the very realization of our tendency to overestimate our rational self: “Students of human nature and philosophers have long taught us that we are mistaken in regarding our intelligence as an independent force and in overlooking its dependence on emotional life” (*DW*, p. 287).

The question is only how faithful Freud really is to his own insightful analysis of the human mind. Is it not rather the case that Freud, as a kind of hyper-affirmation of his own

⁶ Sigmund Freud, “On Transience,” trans. James Strachey, in *The Standard Edition*, vol. XIV, op. cit., pp. 305–308 (quote on page 305).

⁷ Cf. Abraham J. Heschel, *The Prophets*, vol I–II, New York: Harper Perennial Classics, 2001 (1969/1971), p. 395.

⁸ The wider context for the quotation is Paul’s famous reflection on the Law’s tendency to generate its transgression—a paragraph that not for nothing has fascinated psychoanalytically influenced thinkers from Jacques Lacan to Slavoj Žižek.

theory, at the very moment when he reveals our inability to rise above our passions makes claim to such a position for himself? In “The Disillusionment of the War” Freud urges his fellow-citizens not to deny the irrational impulses that the war has brought to the surface. But isn’t his entire essay precisely an attempt to rise above the widespread emotional outrage over the war and make a distanced rational judgment of how things really are? It appears as if Freud, at a more subtle level, repeats the gesture of repression that he urges his readers and analysts to critically visualize in themselves.

Few among Freud’s own latter-day analysts have captured these tensions more aptly than Jacques Derrida. Symptomatically, Derrida devotes himself to Freud’s work at a time—the first part of the nineties—when he is struggling with the inherent tensions in his own thought; tensions between his loyalty to the Kantian, critical heritage, and a growing fascination for categories such as faith, religion and not least his personal Jewish inheritance; between what he terms “the messianic”—a universal structure of justice—and particular historical messianisms. *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* is no exception in this respect. The greater part of the book consists in a both admiring and critical discussion of Yosef Haymin Yerushalmi’s endeavor to reconnect Freud to the Jewish heritage,⁹ while Derrida, between the lines, simultaneously reflects on his own relationship to both Freud and to his Jewish inheritance.

The part that is of most interest for this essay, however, are the concluding “theses on Freud’s theses,” that Derrida has added almost as an appendix to the rest of the work.¹⁰ After taking Freud in defense against Yerushalmi, Derrida finally turns to the tensions and contradictions that mark Freud’s own works. If Freud is one of the key figures in the intellectual developments that undermine the modern myth of the rational human being, his works are at the same time filled with another voice, a voice that seeks to take command of the irrational forces that could jeopardize his own (rational) theory. In this respect, Derrida sees a parallel to the tension in Karl Marx that he reveals in *Specters of Marx* from 1993: the conflict between the critical philosopher of culture and the positivistic scientist. If the critical philosopher Marx shows with unparalleled perspicacity how modern economy is not rational, but rather imbued with “spectral” forces (commodity fetishism), the historical materialist

⁹ See further Yosef Haymin Yerushalmi, *Freud’s Moses: Judaism Terminable and Interminable*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1991.

¹⁰ Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1995, pp. 83–96.

Marx exerts himself to exorcize similar forces from his own theory: his claim is nothing less than to have captured the real world of pure and uncorrupted matter.¹¹

In a similar way, Freud wrestles with his “specters.” On the one hand, the cultural critic Freud, who takes peoples stories about spirits, ghosts and hauntings seriously, who sees a *truth* in the depths of these experiences, and who thereby helps to shake to modern overconfidence in the rational self. On the other hand, the scientist Freud, who in his conviction of psychoanalysis’ power to decipher the *real* truth of these irrational experiences, in fact reinforces the hubris of modern rationalism:

[A]s classical metaphysician and as positivist *Aufklärer*, as critical scientist of a past epoch, as a “scholar” who does not want to speak with phantoms, Freud claims not to believe in death and above all in the virtual existence of the spectral space which he nonetheless takes into account. He takes it into account so as to account for it, and he intends to account for it or prove it right only while reducing it to something other than himself, that is to say, to something other than the other. He wants to explain and reduce the belief in the phantom.¹²

What Derrida suggests is that there is in Freud a language of power, a tendency to exclude precisely that which threatens to destabilize or undermine his own interpretation of an experience or an event. In such a language, there is no space left for other interpretations, for ambiguity, or for that which escapes interpretation. The analyst’s voice is made immune to criticism, a remark which already Karl Popper made apropos psychoanalysis.¹³ Derrida, for his part, would not let the discussion end here. For there is always that other voice in Freud, the self-examining voice which inquires into what the rational, monologic self is about to repress. If we chose to listen to this voice, with Freud and yet against Freud, psychoanalysis amounts to something other than the self-sufficient power discourse which Popper saw (and which, undeniably, has been one aspect of psychoanalysis’ multifaceted history). Psychoanalysis, at its best, encourages a critical philosophy of culture, not without a certain relationship, as Derrida points out, to deconstruction.

¹¹ Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf, New York and London: Routledge, 1994 (French original in 1993), pp. 45–47; 159–164.

¹² Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, p. 94.

¹³ Cf. Karl Popper, *Conjectures and Refutations: The Growth of Scientific Knowledge*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, pp. 33–37.

Epilogue: 2014

This year Europe celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of the fall of the Berlin Wall, the symbol of the postwar division of the world into two competing power blocs. Although not an anniversary to celebrate, it is also seventy-five years since Germany invaded Poland and started the Second World War. Last but not least, 2014 marks the centenary of the First World War. You don't have to be interested in numerology to start reflecting over patterns and connections between the three episodes. The connections between the First and the Second World War are many and well known. The connection between the Second World War and the fall of the Berlin Wall also seems fairly evident: the fall of the Wall simply marks the end of the Cold War that resulted from the Second World War. But what about the connection between the fall of the Wall and the First World War? One way to capture this relationship is to point to the fall of the Wall not only as the end of the Cold War, but also as the symbolic end of the violent era that stretches from 1914 to 1989.

This way of looking at the events that took place around 1989 has in many ways marked the generation that grew up in the eighties and went to university in the early nineties—that is, the generation to which I belong myself. Moreover, it is also this view, this specific narrative, which to a large extent has continued to shape the European self-image in the early 21st century—a narrative of Europe as reconciliation project, where armed conflicts have been replaced by peaceful negotiations, where closed borders have been exchanged for freedom of movement, and where patriotism has been succeeded by cosmopolitanism. It would, of course, be cynical to claim that this narrative is taken completely out of the air—Europe is in many respects a successful peace project. Yet we know that this is not the whole picture. Europe in the 21st century is also a narrative about steadily increasing social and economic inequality, about growing anti-immigrant parties in an increasing number of parliaments, and about an indefinite but large number of people living in Europe without enjoying civil rights and obligations. A telling note in this context is also that large parts of the media coverage of the commemoration of the Great War so far has focused on the dissension that the very staging of the commemoration has caused.

So, finally, what is worth pondering a year like this? Perhaps the most important aspect lies in the picture I draw at the outset of this essay: the contrast between the confidence and contentment that permeate the European self-image in 1913, and the inferno that makes up the European reality a year later. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the comparison between Europe today and Europe a hundred years ago, it is not to commit the mistake to let

ourselves be blinded by our high self-esteem to the point that we begin to take the civilization we have created for granted.

This is where Freud is so valuable. When Freud writes *The Disillusionment of the War* in 1915, he is not venting cynicism. What he expresses is the harsh but realistic insight that humanity, the more it tells itself it has eliminated evil, the more evil has an unpleasant tendency to catch up on it. Not even psychoanalysis can swear itself free from this risk; on the contrary, it runs a constant risk to degenerate into an excluding power discourse. But psychoanalysis also holds the deconstructive potential that Derrida captures in his reading of Freud—a potential that at any moment can be turned against psychoanalysis itself. It is also in this deconstructive potential that the philosophical value of psychoanalysis lies. As a critical philosophy of culture, psychoanalysis urges us—both on individual and collective level—to constantly ask ourselves what we are about to repress. This is a question that Europe has good reasons to ask itself 2014.