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Freud in Cambridge: An Institutional Romance?

Any institution that is going to keep its shape needs to control the memory of its members – Mary Douglas (1986:112)

Freud in Cambridge is an astonishing venture: in the design of its individual and group portraits; in the visions, sympathies, accidents and events that loosely link them; in detailing a lesser-known ‘local’ chapter in the early development of psychoanalysis in England; in scrutinising that twenty-year period (1910-1930) in which Freud crashed the gates of Cambridge and trespassed the grounds of its classical ‘High Science’. But if *Freud in Cambridge* is a monumental intellectual history, it is also a self-conscious ruse. ‘Freud the physical individual never came to Cambridge’ (Forrester and Cameron, 2017: 2). The book, Forrester and Cameron make clear, ‘is the story of his non-arrival’ (2). Or rather, given his often chilly and short-lived reception, this is a study of Freud’s entrance but of his never settling-in or staying-on. Why, the authors ask, did the unmatched enthusiasm for psychoanalytic theory in Cambridge of the 1910s and 20s never attain institutional legitimacy or endow a disciplinary legacy? Why did this episode break off so abruptly – a flurry of impassioned attachments and affiliations that begat little ‘progeny or issue of any kind’, bestowed few pedagogical innovations and left behind ‘not even a consulting room in the town?’ (6)

The question of Freud’s appearance, and the more peculiar query of his disappearance, in Cambridge is what I would like to focus on here. For even if the book turns on a bluff, it also reveals Cambridge at its most Freudian: absencing never invalidates but inheres as the real content of our histories, riders are not mere discretionary additions, and supplements never in excess of any truth but part of its lopsided, immoderate play. That Freud neither went nor properly arrived in Cambridge, then, is not beside the point but a sharpening of the point itself: the essential and the extraneous, ‘fact’ and suppositional counter-fact, crux and caveat are not

opposed; the one simultaneously masks and sponsors the other. If nothing else, the Freudian approach is always most attentive to the work of negation – alive to the deft and dexterous ways with which we craft our histories of non-arrival, of events that didn't happen, efforts that go under, signs that stir but fail to signify.

Together with the mystery of why Freud has never fully figured in established versions of Cambridge's 'High Science' – a redaction that the authors attribute to the self-correcting presentism of most disciplinary descriptions – the book invites another, and perhaps more originary, question. What does a historical narrative really do? What are the reasons for telling and re-telling an event or experience? Specifically, what purpose does biography, as a mode of historiography, fulfil – whether of a life, a methodology, an academic discipline or institutional edifice? Forrester and Cameron do not explicitly pose these questions. However, as a 'study of a group of individuals' (5) and of how their work has come to be known, the ambition of the book presupposes its own impossibility. It is an intellectual history that reinstates the presence of an 'Absent Great Man' (2), on the one hand, and a history which, going by the riddles of that man's own theory, must always absent as much as it presents, on the other. That *Freud in Cambridge* both confirms and resists this implacable knot means that it not only questions the storying of science; it also speaks to the psychoanalytic architecture of storying itself.

While Freud was a prolific biographer – his papers on Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, Shakespeare, Goethe, Dostoevsky count among the key studies on the sources of artistic creativity – and even as he conceived the clinical case-study as a way of refining the writing of human lives, a fundamental scepticism about the 'writable life' (especially his own) lies at the heart of his project. Corresponding with his own prospective biographer, Arnold Zweig, in 1936, Freud makes his suspicions clear:

[To be a biographer] you must tie yourself up in lies, concealments, hypocrisies, false colourings, and even in hiding a lack of understanding, for biographical truth is not to be had, and if it were to be had we could not use it. (Freud, 1961: 127)

In *Becoming Freud*, Adam Phillips brilliantly sets out the ways that biographical truth – even if it were ‘to be had’ – remains unfeasible for Freud: not only theoretically unstable but unusable in any therapeutic endeavour. On this account, biography is not only unhelpful to the proper knowing of other people’s lives. It is one of the endlessly ingenious ways we defend against un-knowing itself, cleaving to (biographical) fantasies of articulation and comprehension, stubbornly holding to evidence and accuracy, captivating a life by means of a story about itself. Biography, in other words, does not simply evade, dupe, or misdirect. It is a genre of fiction which, for Phillips’ Freud, is ‘the worst kind of fiction’: a persuasion that we wish for, need to believe in, are beguiled and trapped by; less a preference we invent than a desire we submit to and ‘suffer from’ (Phillips, 2014: 21). From this perspective, psychoanalysis does not merely attend to all that is concealed in our self-descriptions or in what is culled out, and tendered, as evidence from the lives of others. As a theory and treatment, it approaches something like a release *from* biography; it succeeds only if the temptations of a scripted life are surprised and allowed to founder. ‘When psychoanalysis works’, says Phillips, ‘it cures people of their need to be their own biographers’. (21) What does it mean, then, for a study to employ a style and method so resistant to its object of inquiry? Or rather, how is it possible to construct biographies of individuals, cohorts and collectives who were themselves the advocates of an avowedly ‘un-biographical’ theory? The authors of *Freud in Cambridge* tread a fine-line: working within the cunning constraints of the historical record and, at the same time, using it to deliver the capacities of a psychoanalytic retelling.

Part of this fine-line involves the fact that whereas biography, like history, depends on proxies – on the stand-in of the archive or published paper, on the brokered viewpoints and verdicts of others – the psychoanalytic encounter is a closer, and more closeted, affair. Without witness or evaluation, it is a world whose crucial scenes are played out behind closed doors, where confidences remain ‘off the record’, and in which a patient testifies only on their own behalf, however vague and unverifiable their demonstrations. Indeed, if biography is, by definition, a speaking *for* the subject, the Freudian project not only returns us to those stories that cannot fully be told. It sets out to redress an earlier, immemorial injury: precisely, the injury of having once been ‘composed’ or *spoken for*. Here again, *Freud in Cambridge* opens up to truths vital to psychoanalysis at the same time as offering us a biographic and intellectual history of it. Thus even as the book is guided by the authors’ commitment to contextual specificity, it also muses on how much weight to attach to its facts. Speculative but self-questioning, it leaves open the suspensions in the documentary evidence. Phrases like, ‘of this we know very little’ (47), ‘we have insufficient evidence’, ‘we are left with fragments’ (53) occur frequently. Likewise, the ‘links between multiple lifelines’(5) are gradually revealed to be the mismatched multiplications *within* a singular life, as the authors sketch the outlines of other, often internalised, figures who crowd it. Moreover, when Forrester and Cameron recount the psychic work of their protagonists (the psychiatrist and medical geneticist, Lionel Penrose, dreams of a chess-game – a thinly-disguised dramatization of familial conflict; the botanist and pioneering ecologist, Arthur Tansley, dreams of being attacked by armed savages in an unnamed sub-tropical country; the anthropologist and neurologist, W.H. R. Rivers, dreams of his election to the presidency of the Royal Anthropological Institute) we not only learn how dream-analysis informed the significant self-reflections of a life. Instead, our attention is drawn to the smallest of particulars that all ‘significant’ and confessed things disguise or do duty for. Even at their most artful, the authors do not intrude on their subjects’ psychic states (even if this

were possible). Their point is to reveal the looser – which are also the knottier – scenes behind the more purposive ideals of a science. There are as many interruptions as hooks and inheritances. With each chapter, the authors reflect on unanswerable questions raised in personal letters, public lectures, books and articles in ways that are adventurous but inescapably unresolved. And while plotting the course of individual and collective careers is one of the book's aims, genealogies remain awkward: lines of transmission contract and expand; get tangled in the fortuities of influences, mishaps, reminders, distractions; information is relayed via the links and gaps of postscripts, chatter, contingencies. There are a lot of impromptu lunchings and 'Tea at the Tansleys'. (245) Where to place the emphatic clarification or put the non-sequitur? What to make of marginalia, annotation, or the alignment that seems to go astray – in short, how to construct this history? – is as much the (highly informed) guesswork of the authors as it affirms the Freudian way at its most creative. This is not to say that the book is incoherent; it still largely satisfies the orderings of chronological sequence and narrative development. Nonetheless, *Freud in Cambridge* – that place he never went to, or quite arrived at – presents, as so often in psychoanalysis, an alternate strain of intelligibility, recasting the scatterings concealed in full view of a history.

Overall then, the picture that emerges is of an extraordinary generation – eminent physicists, evolutionary biologists, mathematicians, philosophers, psychologists, ethnographers, and any amount of polymathic mixtures; one discrete yet privileged site; an intensely-charged historical moment; and a phenomenon which is also a kind of phantom. How and why did Freud loom so largely but disappear so suddenly in the glory days of Cambridge science? That so many proponents of his theory travelled to Vienna to embark on their own analysis – in the early months 1922, we are told that Joan Riviere, James Strachey, John Rickman and Arthur Tansley made up 40 per cent of Freud's patient load – only deepens the oddity.

In their exegesis of a vast range of archives and a very specific social and cultural environment, Forrester and Cameron hit on all sorts of answers. But might there be a way to re-site their central question? Can we keep to the stories that the authors tell but see their material as belonging elsewhere – to another plot, inaugurated elsewhere, in another space, and on a different scale? In short, instead of characterising *Freud in Cambridge* as an intellectual history, I'd like to adapt one of Freud's own terms and describe it as an '*institutional romance*'? Put otherwise, might we see it as an expanded version of the familial model that Freud uses to chart the crises of generational relations, of sources and successions, retaliations and their puzzling replacements? If we do this, Forrester and Cameron's central concerns do not change so much as quicken. Thus, Cambridge: not only a place and institutional system but also an internal picture of a (imaginary) set of ideas.

In a brief paper first published in Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1909), Freud sets out a particular type of fantasy that he later coined 'The Family Romance'. The child imagines that it is not born of its real parents but is a foundling, an orphan, or – more neurotically – is the bastard offspring of the mother's illicit love affair. Though its motivating pressures are various, the fantasy is singularly directed, charged with the pressing task of estrangement on which, for Freud, 'normal' development depends:

The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development... If these day-dreams are carefully examined, they are found to serve as the fulfilment of wishes, and as a correction of actual life... The child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing. He will

make use in this connection of any opportune coincidences from his actual experience, such as becoming acquainted with the Lord of the Manor or some landed proprietor if he lives in the country or with some member of the aristocracy if he lives in town... (Freud, 1976: 237-9)

If Freud's exemplars of replaced parentage – manorial lords, landed proprietors, urban aristocrats – are grandiose they also have historical cogency. In 1909, they unmistakably invoke the social fabric of the last generation of the Habsburg Empire. The shattering effects of World War 1, the collapse of Central European political structures and the cycles of revolutionary and counter-revolutionary turmoil that followed are only five years away. Yet, from the flatlands of a small Cambridgeshire town in the inter-war years – 'an economically backward, non-industrial relatively poor part of England' (Forrester and Cameron, 2017:5) – might Freud, that consummate figure of Viennese cosmopolitanism, not stand for a corrective or more desirable intellectual pedigree? Further, might psychoanalysis as that most excitingly fallible of theories – made more hazardous by its actual applications – not be fantasized as an alternative parentage for a generation schooled in the primacy of 'pure science'? On an institutional and disciplinary level, *Freud in Cambridge* captures something of this strange romance: an actual, 'originary', scientific tradition imaginatively deposed in preference for the darker strains of a more radical, but newly ennobled, one.

Importantly, while such a fantasy is premised on loss, it is also geared towards a certain attainment. For the central charge of the 'Family Romance' is, of course, the harsh but valiant struggle of subjectivity, and of thought. Who am I? Where do I stand? How do I lose, oppose, divest, and *still* stand? – questions which involve the effort of regaining a place in the world, of relocating oneself in history or finding alternate ideas about authority and its sourcing. 'Who am I?', in other words, is not just the sign of an insufficiency; it becomes a form of education,

an intellectual achievement. It allows for the ability to doubt, to compare, to relativize or revise a knowledge. Tansley's rejection of classical botany, Rivers' and Edward Douglas Adrian's move away from physiology, Penrose's departure from mathematics, logic and theoretical biology: all tell a story of primary attachments demoted, and successors imaginatively sought, in Freud's remaking of Cambridge science.¹

But if the imaginative romance by which we invest our births elsewhere is a romance of ambition, it also 'undergoes a curious curtailment' (Freud, 1976: 238). After all, the rewards and kickbacks that Freud gives us are also always reductions and cutbacks. So it is that everything the subject tries to displace and replace, it also repeats or lands up re-attaching to. *Freud in Cambridge* details what I am calling an 'institutional romance' in just this sense, too. The book not only gives us stories of disciplinary disinheritance, and talks of the un-seatings and substitutions necessary to intellectual development. It also tells us of the ultimate return to – even the eventual triumph of – real disciplinary paternities. The child's 'faithlessness and ingratitude are only apparent', writes Freud at the end of the 'Family Romance':

If we examine in detail the commonest of the imaginative romances, the replacement of both parents, or of the father alone by grander people, we find that these new and aristocratic parents are equipped with attributes that are derived entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble ones; so that in fact the child is not getting rid of the father but exulting him. (Freud, 1976: 239)

Indeed, by the end of *Freud in Cambridge*, the paternity of 'High Science' has been reasserted. The ancient institution is upheld, its lessons verified, and our principal figures are somehow returned to legitimacy: Tansley decides against becoming an analyst and is appointed as Sherardian Professor of Botany in Oxford in 1927; Frank Ramsey branches out into abstract algebra; Penrose embarks on his career in medical genetics. Only John Rickman and James

Strachey remain Freudians (even though, as we learn, Strachey was later to recommend including geophysics into psychoanalytic training!) If 1922 was the ‘year of Cambridge in Freud’s consulting room’, (2) by the decade’s end the assorted disseminations of psychoanalysis had all but clammed up.

And so, the ‘institutional romance’ ends. Except of course, that it doesn’t. Because the essential vision of *Freud in Cambridge* is about things that even if they ‘fail to arrive’, arrive only incompletely, or emerge as lost, might yet obtain to a history. What begins as an initial liberation from Cambridge – a release from the authority of its scientific strictures as much as from the established (or ‘biographical’) training in them – turns out to be nothing other than the propulsion that leads its subjects back there. Not just a study of a particular set of people, a place, and time, *Freud in Cambridge* invites us into this intrigue: a history of science that splits and multiplies into the science of storying and the curious romance of its development.

ⁱ The later and more familiar ‘familial’ dramas of the Training Committee of the British PsychoAnalytic Society (including James Strachey’s repudiation of Edward Glover’s pedagogical stipulations in November 1943 and Adrian Stephen’s fraternal rivalries with Strachey) are detailed in the chapter on ‘Bloomsbury Analysts’, pp. 574-590.

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