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0521650526 - Freudian Repression: Conversation Creating the Unconscious

Michael Billig

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1 Introduction

‘Freudian repression’ – the very phrase is ambiguous. At first glance, it indicates quite simply Freud’s theory of repression. Freud believed that people repress, or drive from their conscious minds, shameful thoughts that, then, become unconscious. This was his key idea. As he wrote, repression was the ‘centre’ to which all the other elements of psycho-analytic thinking were related.¹ More obliquely, the phrase ‘Freudian repression’ suggests something else: maybe Freud, himself, was engaging in a bit of repression, forgetting things that were inconveniently embarrassing. The ambiguity is deliberate, for both meanings are intended. Freud’s idea of repression remains vital for understanding human behaviour. Yet, right at the centre of Freud’s central idea is a gap: Freud does not say exactly how repression takes place. It is as if Freudian theory, which promises to reveal what has been hidden, itself has hidden secrets. However, if we want to understand repression, we must try to see what Freud was leaving unsaid.

The present book aims to reformulate the idea of repression in order to fill the central gap. Repression is not a mysterious inner process, regulated by an internal structure such as the ‘ego’. It is much more straightforward. Repression depends on the skills of language. To become proficient speakers, we need to repress. The business of everyday conversation provides the skills for repressing, while, at the same time, it demands that we practise those skills. In this respect, language is inherently expressive and repressive.

To sustain the argument, it is necessary to treat repression as a psychological concept. That might seem obvious. After all, Freud was building a psychological theory. In the last few years, there has been an enormous amount written about Freud and his theories. However, practically none of this interest has come from authors with any background in academic psychology. One only has to look at the books published about Freud and note the university departments to which

¹ ‘An autobiographical study’, *PFL* 15, pp. 214–15.

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the authors belong. One will find plenty of scholars from departments of literary studies, history, philosophy and even sociology. Of course, psychoanalysts still write about Freud, but they tend not to belong to university departments. Amongst the Freud-writers, there will be hardly a psychologist.

Today, a student in literary studies will have a better chance of learning about Freud than does a student of psychology. This is unfortunate. Psychology students are being denied the opportunity of learning about the greatest writer of their discipline. They are being encouraged to cram their notebooks with the latest studies that mostly will be forgotten by the time it comes to teach the next generation of students. Freud's enduring works will be ignored. Sometimes, students start their courses, expecting to learn about Freud. They will be rapidly disabused. Freud will be dismissed as an infantile pleasure, like thumb-sucking or cuddling soft toys. The mature, properly educated psychologist should grow out of such childishness.²

On the other side of the campus, students of English are likely to find Freud on their reading lists. But, in the hands of literary experts, Freud has ceased to be a psychologist. One cannot assess the continuing value of Freud's ideas – especially those relating to repression – without some understanding of their psychological basis. Some recent studies, especially those written by specialists in literary studies, give the impression that knowledge of psychological issues is irrelevant. What matters, it appears, is how to 'read' Freud. It is as if Freud has been reduced to being a text. Sometimes, literary theorists will use psychological terminology taken largely from the French psychoanalyst Lacan (of whom more shortly). The rest of psychology is conspicuous only by its absence. This is no way to judge Freudian ideas. Literary scholars would no doubt be up in arms were someone to evaluate a notable poet, having only read one other poet (of dubious literary talent) and possessing absolutely no familiarity with literary criticism.

In consequence, a dual task needs to be performed. The Freudian idea of repression should be reformulated in a way suitable for today's psychologists. On the other hand, this psychology should not be so off-putting that it drives away Freudian specialists from other disciplines. It must be admitted there are many reasons why literary theorists should find much of current psychology methodologically restrictive and intellectually narrow. Here, the new critical psychologies, developed in opposition to mainstream experimentalism, are crucial. They draw attention to the details of language and to the social nature of talk, in

² Parker (1998a and 1998b) has claimed that psychoanalysis is psychology's 'repressed other'.

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ways that should interest those from the humanities and the social sciences. And, it will be argued, these new approaches can breath fresh life into Freud.

Enjoying the little words

In the present intellectual climate someone, with a background in psychology, needs to justify writing a book about Freud. Within psychology, it's not the done thing to take psychoanalysis seriously. As Freud taught, and as his own life illustrated, in psychoanalytic matters the theoretical is bound up with the personal. What in other fields would be dismissed as gossip is, as John Forrester has pointed out, legitimate evidence in the field of psychoanalysis.³ Therefore, the justification can be both personal and intellectual.

I have never been able to grow out of the pleasures of reading Freud. Time and again, especially when I have found myself in-between more 'serious' projects, I regress to those pleasures. I have long drifted away from mainstream experimental psychology. Recently, with colleagues at Loughborough University, I have been concerned to develop a form of 'discursive psychology', which concentrates on the study of language, particularly the analysis of conversation. Discursive psychologists argue that standard psychology looks in the wrong place for an understanding of human conduct. Instead of hypothesizing what goes on in the mind, we should be analysing the details of conversation, paying careful attention to the micro-features of talk. This discursive psychology, like the psychology it has rebelled against, has little place for Freud or notions of the unconscious.

As I finished a book on nationalism, I found myself again with time to turn back to Freud. I took advantage of a remaining privilege of academic life – being paid to read works of outstanding quality. Once again, I found myself entranced by the beauty of Freud's writing and the movement of his intellect. But I am not a 'silent', passive reader: I wanted to argue back.

As I read Freud this time, concentrating on the case studies, with which I was less familiar, I was struck by two things. First, just at the crucial moment, when repression takes place, Freud seems to go silent, or to substitute a bit of jargon for clear description. Second, my background in discursive psychology kept drawing me to seemingly unimportant phrases in Freud's texts. Here was a clue. Discursive psychologists stress that little words are crucial to the smooth running of

³ Forrester (1990).

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dialogue. Freud and his followers typically overlooked the little words in conversation's banal routines. So often, the attention is drawn to the unusual or to the 'big' symbolism. Perhaps, it was these little words that held the key to repression. Through their use, speakers can switch the topics of talk almost imperceptibly. Maybe these same little words allow us to change the topics of our internal thoughts, thereby driving away uncomfortable desires.

And so the present book emerged. There was no conscious decision to move from reader to writer. I was intellectually seduced. But it seemed to me that a wealth of new conversational detail would be revealed, if the insights of discursive psychology could be applied to the cases that Freud reported. In the case of Little Hans, we do not just hear a young boy's growing fascination with sexuality. In addition, we hear parents guiding his attention, teaching him morality and projecting their own insecurities. A much richer, more sociological, picture emerges, with repression occurring in the details of everyday life.

In consequence, the message to Freudian scholars is to take seriously the details of talk. However, the good news cannot be simply brought from discursive psychology to Freudian studies. In the course of the journey, the news is changed. A return journey is required to inform the discursive psychologists how their message was altered in the transmission. By and large, conversation analysts take a strict position, that opposes the depth psychology of Freud. The new psychologists do not want to speculate about the inner processes of the mind, and certainly not about unconsciousness. However, if repression is seen to occur through conversation, then the notion of a 'dialogic unconscious' becomes reasonable. The return message to the new psychologists is that they should lighten up theoretically, by 'darkening' their image of human psychology. They should admit that we repress shameful desires and that not all human life is outwardly expressed in conversation. In short, Freudian scholars are asked to read a bit of psychology – and discursive psychologists to accept a revised Freud.

Concentrating on Freud?

The present book, therefore, homes in on the idea of repression. Inevitably, it differs in style and intent from those few books on Freud that have been written by psychologists and that claim to assess Freudian ideas according to the current state of current psychological knowledge. Such books tend to chop Freud's theories into discrete hypotheses, and then collect the relevant experimental evidence. At first sight, such a strategy might seem eminently sensible as a definitive

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means of sorting the psychologically useful from the disproved. However, the results are inconclusive as the writers disagree among themselves. Some claim that, after the empirical evidence has been gathered, virtually nothing of Freud's theories remains.⁴ Other psychologists, assembling much the same evidence, argue that the main elements of Freudian theory have been confirmed.⁵ The disagreements are not surprising. The authors of such compendia tend to be partisan. Defenders dismiss negative findings, on the grounds that the subtle processes which Freud described cannot be reproduced artificially in the laboratory. Prosecutors take the opposite line, displaying the negative findings as the ultimate trophies of war.

There is another difficulty with this strategy: it tacitly accepts the conventional experimental ways of doing psychology. Freud's ideas are evaluated in terms of psychological approaches that have historically dismissed his work. At best, several Freudian hypotheses might pass the stringent tests of experimentation. Even if they do, the end results will be disappointing. The 'Freudian findings' are absorbed into a much larger framework, where they will be tolerated because they are vastly outnumbered by other methods and findings. By being isolated and then assimilated into alien territory, the hypotheses lose their indigenous character, which, in Freud's hands, constitutes a wide-ranging view of the human condition.

Still another question remains: why Freud? Surely there have been psychoanalytic developments since Freud – why not discuss Klein or Jung or Lacan or Winnicott or a dozen other well-known psychoanalytic names? A respectable outward justification could be given for concentrating on Freud, but it would be a pretext for, or development of, personal inclinations.

The outward justification is simple. Freud is the dominating presence in the history of psychoanalysis. Subsequent writings are either an argument with him or a self-conscious tidying up of loose ends. To understand neo- or post-Freudians, one must always go back to Freud; he is the background against which the later figures appear either 'neo' or 'post'. Psychoanalytic thought would not stand as a distinct interpretation of the world without Freud, any more than Marxism could exist without Marx or Islam without Mohammed. If the aim is to analyse the

⁴ See, for instance, Erwin (1996), Eysenck (1986), Grünbaum (1989 and 1993) and Macmillan (1997). Both Erwin and Grünbaum, who count among Freud's most tenacious critics today, are themselves philosophers, although they criticize Freud also in terms of the empirical evidence.

⁵ For example, Fisher and Greenberg (1976 and 1996); Kline (1972 and 1981).

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'primal' concept of psychoanalysis, then one must search out the primal figure.

Personal reasons must also be admitted. I have gained more intellectual pleasure from reading Freud than from reading any other psychologist. Only William James comes near to matching Freud's style, but, compared with the founder of psychoanalysis, James is theoretically a plodder, not a dasher. Literary theorists should take note of Freud's deceptively simple prose, his eye for the telling metaphor and his choice of quotation. He is a writer who demonstrates how learning can be combined with the pleasure principle. Personally, I have not engaged with later psychoanalytic writers in the same way. For political reasons I cannot allow myself to read Jung with pleasure. Melanie Klein's style of writing affords few joys. And as for Lacan . . .

Literary style is more than mere adornment. It is a way of relating to the reader and, thus, it is a moral, as well as aesthetic, matter. Freud speaks directly to the reader. He clarifies, he teaches, he shares his own excitement. Of course, he uses rhetorical tricks, primarily to prevent the reader from closing the page. The reader invariably controls the situation: how easy it is to put the book down, remove the reading-glasses, doze off, and so on. In one thing, above all, Freud sets an example. He demonstrates that profundity of thought does not require a tangle of jargon. As Peter Gay has pointed out, Freud valued precision in writers, seeing clear writing as a sign that authors were at one with themselves.⁶

This raises the issue of Lacan. It has been said of Lacan that his efforts made 'psychoanalysis the dominant theory in France'.⁷ A theory dominant in France soon becomes, or so it seems, dominant in Anglophone social theory. Anyone coming from a background in cultural studies is likely to assume that a book, which self-consciously attempts to link the unconscious with language, would be (or should be) sprinkled with quotes from Lacan and would follow that thinker's peculiar style of writing. This book does neither. It is non-Lacanian – perhaps even anti-Lacanian in its intention. However, I did not want the book to develop into a running battle with Lacan. Only occasionally do I point the finger to say 'this is all very different from what a Lacanian would do'.

This is not the place to detail how the present approach differs from Lacan's.⁸ But a few quick words can be offered. In the first place, Lacan's treatment of language is very different. Chapter 4 discusses the importance of examining the details of spoken utterances (and, by implication, written texts). Language is treated as a form of social

⁶ Gay (1978), pp. 53–4.

⁷ Borch-Jacobsen (1997).

⁸ See Billig (1997c) for details.

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action: it is not considered as a complete entity with its own internal structure. In this respect, the present position follows the traditions of Bakhtin and Wittgenstein, who unlike Lacan, recommend that we pay close attention to what people actually say.

In my view, Lacan shows a wanton disregard for other psychologies. This has become disastrous when Lacanian ideas have been taken up by cultural or literary theorists who themselves know no other psychology. Just because Lacan refers to a 'mirror-stage', it does not mean that children actually go through such a developmental stage. In fact, the evidence from child psychology suggests that the learning of language occurs in a very different way than Lacan imagined. Lacan ignores such research and his followers make little effort to make good the deficiency. As will be seen, research, which studies the details of children's talk, helps to understand what was going on in the Little Hans case and, more generally, how children learn to repress.

One of Lacan's former pupils has described the Lacanian school as 'one of the last bastions of arrogance'.⁹ Lacan's prose style does nothing to dispel the impression of intellectual arrogance. His writings, to put it mildly, are convoluted. If his project was a 'return to Freud', it certainly was not to be achieved by his means of expression. Whereas Freud set himself the moral duty of persuading the reader through clear argument and telling example, Lacan is too haughty to explain what he means. His patients are insufficiently important to be introduced as characters in his books. So page after page, the lowly reader is tacitly bullied. Occasionally, Lacan openly announced that his thoughts were above the understanding of his readers.¹⁰ But difficulty is not to be confused with depth.

So, to return to the personal justification, I have never enjoyed reading Lacan. As a reader, I do not appreciate the ritual humiliation that he inflicts. I do not want my students to believe that it is clever to write in obscure ways – nor to be impressed by incomprehensibility. I do not want them to show contempt for such mundane matters as evidence. They should be reassured that Lévi-Strauss and Merleau-Ponty also found Lacan incomprehensible.¹¹ By contrast, I want students to read Freud, so that they can enjoy intellectual writing at its finest. Also, I would like them to pick up the habits of clarity – to appreciate its difficulty and its morality.

Beware tales of self-justification, for they are also tales of self-presentation, concealing more than they reveal. In today's academic climate,

⁹ Bognoux (1997), p. 93.

¹⁰ Todd Dufresne (1997) had said, Lacan did his best to say very difficult things, p. 3.

¹¹ Roudinesco (1997), p. 211.

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the pleasure principle is not a sufficient motive for action. We have been taught that there has to be a pay-off. Reading must be justified by 'output' – by writing, by publication. So the current book is also a 'pay-off' – the written product that I, like other academics today, habitually accept as the outcome of reading. Pleasure is co-opted in the name of duty, as the pay-off repays debts. But some intellectual debts, and this includes the debt to Freud, are way beyond the reach of the conventional pay-off.

Structure of the argument

The dual nature of the present book is reflected in its attitude towards Freud. To claim that Freud left a gap right at the centre of his theory is to take a critical stance. Orthodox psychoanalysts, who come only to praise the legacy of their founder, might not take kindly to the suggestion that his original theory of repression is insufficient. Even if they concede that the theory must be recast, they may not want to take the further step of acknowledging that Freud was doing a bit of repressing. Hero-worshippers do not always like to see the object of their devotions as possessing all too human qualities. However, if Freud had been a faultless super-hero, it is hard to see how he could have managed such profound insights into human frailty. He would have been unable to draw upon the benefits of self-insight.

The specific criticisms, however, are contained within a much wider appreciation. The idea of repression is so important that it cannot be left to decay, for want of an inner core. Here, the Freud-bashers will not be best pleased. Those scholars, who come to Freud only in the hope of a burial, will not want to stay to praise the central idea of psychoanalysis's great founding figure. Certainly, they will not want to see Freudian repression being reformulated so that it might offer new theoretical possibilities and, thereby, keep alive the intellectual legacy of its originator.

This duality – critically analysing Freud and his case studies, as his key concept is reformulated – is developed in the subsequent chapters. Chapter 2 sets up the basic problem: namely that repression is the central concept of psychoanalysis and that Freud failed to say how we go about the business of repressing. The remedy is not to develop Freud's metapsychological theory of the mind, with its descriptions of 'id', 'ego' and 'superego'. It is to return to a plainer language, which concentrates on the actions of people. Chapter 3 suggests how language might be used to repress thoughts. Language is not an abstract system of grammar or a dictionary of defined words. Language is something that is

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used in the practice of dialogue. In conversation speakers regularly push aside, or repress, topics from their talk. These skills can be applied to our own internal dialogues. They can be heard in the thoughts of Freud's patient, the so-called 'Rat Man'.

In chapter 4 the point is widened to suggest that, in order to become mature conversationalists, we must repress disturbing desires. In particular, conversation depends on the smooth, routine practice of politeness. The desire to be rude must be habitually repressed. Thus, the very practice of talk provides the model for repression. Freud's own routines of life, both at home and in the consulting-room, represent vivid examples of this.

All the while, the theoretical issues are illustrated by examples from Freud's case histories and also from incidents in Freud's own life. Regarding the case histories, often the aspects, to which Freud seemed to have attached little importance, are highlighted. Chapter 5 considers the case of Little Hans. If repression is contained in the practice of talk, then children will learn to repress as they learn to talk. They will learn their lessons from older speakers, most notably parents. The conversations reported by Little Hans's father illustrate this dramatically. The analysis turns the psychological tables. Instead of the child being the source of primal Oedipal desires, we find Oedipal parents, through their talk, projecting their own desires onto the child.

Chapter 6 develops these points, by exploring the relations between repressing, remembering and forgetting. Some ideas about memory and forgetfulness need to be reversed. It is argued that children cannot remember explicitly until they have language. Moreover, forgetting is part of remembering, so that the child cannot properly forget, nor repress, until it has acquired the linguistic skills to remember. Inevitably, this discussion of repression in childhood involves considering the current debates about child sexual abuse. Freud himself switched from believing that neuroses were caused by the 'seduction' (or abuse) of infants to formulating his Oedipal theory, which claimed that infants desired to have sexual relations with their parents. Here, Freud will be found wanting: he looked too early in the life of the child for signs of repression.

Chapter 7 discusses the seemingly difficult issue of repressing an emotion. How was it possible for some of Freud's patients, such as Elisabeth von R., to be unaware of shameful feelings of love? The answer, it will be suggested, lies in recognizing that ordinary conscious emotions, such as those of love, are not pure inner states. If we understand the discursive aspects of conscious emotions, then unconscious ones cease to look so strange. There are interesting parallels between

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Freud's patients and his own private life. All, including Freud himself, were responding to the demands of the times. As such emotions are not so much internal, individual states of feelings, but they are bound up in social, cultural and ideological relations.

Chapter 8 develops this theme, by looking in detail at the case of Dora. Here the psychoanalytic account, as well as the conversation between Freud and Dora, are seen to be hiding something. The Jewish dimension, so central to Freud's own conditions of life, is pushed aside. Freud and Dora found it easier to talk of the supposedly taboo topics of sex, than they did of their own precarious circumstances as Jews in anti-semitic Vienna. Surprisingly, the discursive repressions of Freud and Dora are being repeated to this day, even by ostensibly radical writers. Again, this goes to show the repressive aspects of language. Even analyses, which claim to reveal, may themselves be repressing.

In general, the present approach can be said to look at repression as something that is socially, rather than biologically, constituted. One might say it is ideologically constituted, for ideologies concern what people in a particular historical epoch do not talk of. The notion of repression points out that there are topics, of which we could speak, but which, nevertheless, we tend to avoid collectively. The final chapter will discuss some of the ideological implications of seeing language as inherently repressive.

Freud's texts

Lastly, I should comment on the edition of Freud, from which most of the references are taken. It is the convention for Freud scholars, when writing in English, to quote from the Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud – conventionally known by the abbreviation 'SE'. But I have used, for the most part, the Penguin Freud Library (PFL), although, because of its incompleteness, I have also had to refer to the SE. The days are well gone when an academic, with a family to support, could afford to buy a complete set of the Standard Edition. Even university libraries cannot guarantee to have all twenty-four volumes, let alone reserve a complete set for the benefit of an individual academic.

Penguin, nevertheless, has put most of Freud's major writings within the range of academic pockets. I am grateful to be able to possess my paperback copies, and to be able to consult them at will. I cannot be bothered with the charade of re-checking all quotations to find the page references in the Standard Edition, so that I can present myself as the sort of serious academic who uses nothing but the SE. Why should I pretend?