CHAPTER 2

# *Freud's Return to Lacan*

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After Lacan, we read Freud. Lacan named his life's work "the return to Freud": a reimmersion in Freud's ideas, Freud's language, and perhaps even Freud's unconscious, in order to counter the post-Freudian tendencies in psychoanalytic and psychological circles. Lacan had been working as a psychoanalyst for almost twenty years and was arriving at the realization that the Freudian discoveries had been abandoned, that "things have come to such a pass that to call for a return to Freud is seen as a reversal."[1] Only, it's a bit misleading to describe the return in this way, since the force of Lacan's corrective to his contemporaries was not "go back, do your homework, get Freud right" – but rather an exhortation to feel out "a return" in language, to become sensitized to language's routes, turns, detours, circuits, and dead-ends. Go back, return, retrace, repeat the movement in language. Marking this arc of repetition, Lacan defined the return circuitously: "The meaning of a return to Freud is a return to Freud's meaning."[2] Vertiginous tautologies, chiasmic reversals, and compulsive repetitions of this sort do not deliver a longed-for meaning, instead casting us on to the *defiles* of the signifier – plunging us into a tail-chasing turning (*un tour*) in which sense eludes us but sensation compels us. "What can Lacan mean by this? What does he want?" we ask ourselves, and this position of questioning the other's desire, this suspension of certainty about experts, this dwelling in language as a medium of opacity in excess of communication – this is some of what he means. After Lacan, we know many new things about Freud, but the ultimate point of returning to Freud is not knowing *more* so much as knowing *differently*, palpating this agency of language to be simultaneously too much and too little. Freud's work is not to be summarized or mastered; it is to be turned around in, reveled in, detoured; "One never goes beyond Freud … One uses him. One moves around within him. One takes one's bearings from the direction he points in."[3]

After Lacan's return, today's readers should keep returning to Freud, rereading the letter of his language, touching what in his texts says too much and what says too little, attending to the ways his own texts bespeak or perform, rather than master, the very phenomena he was trying to discover. This chapter returns to Freud to illustrate some of what can be done with Freud after Lacan. After Lacan, we read Freud's written word not as philosophy or gospel, but much as though Freud himself were speaking two enigmatic discourses at once: that of the analyst, who punctuates what the analysand speaks, *and* that of the analysand, whose desire derails speech. We read Freud's words as though they are addressing us, inviting us into lacunae. We activate reading as a process of attunement to the form, contour, gap, and surface of discourse. What is being spoken? How does the shape and rhythm of what is being said point us to what hasn't found its way to being said? How, at even its most ostensibly summative moments, does Freud's discourse proliferate questions, enigmas, and overdeterminations? After Lacan, Freud is a work to be worked through, a corpus of language to be rethought again and again.

In characterizing our state after Lacan as a position of ongoing return, I intend that we not take Lacan as a master any more than Freud. This is a big temptation. There are dozens of introductions to Lacan aimed at helping readers become experts in his work, explaining his transformations of Freudian psychoanalysis, and many of these are very smart guides. An essay could devote its entirety to summarizing those guides: Lacan makes available Freud as philosopher, Freud as structuralist, Freud as revolutionary; above all, Lacan adds the dimension of language to Freud's discovery of the unconscious. This is the simplest formulation of Freud after Lacan: Freud plus language. Where Freud's medical background and fascination with biological life lead him to speculations about the body and existence which many have read as pronouncements about human nature, Lacan's return to Freud educes the linguistic quality of Freudian phenomena such as the symptom, the dream, desire, fantasy, and emphasizes the linguistic quality of the Freudian revolution: the talking cure. Freud discovered the unconscious and Lacan discovered that the unconscious is structured like a language. As Lacan himself describes this parallel: "Freud's discovery was that of the field of the effects, in man's nature, of his relations to the symbolic order and the fact that their meaning goes all the way back to the most radical instances of symbolization in being. To ignore the symbolic order is to condemn Freud's discovery to forgetting and analytic experience to ruin."[4] Lacan's notion of the symbolic order names language but also the relationships for which

language is at the base: laws, institutions, norms, traditions. In approaching the psyche as crucially activated by the symbolic order, Lacan deromanticizes the dynamics Freud studies; rather than charting individual eruptive, erratic flows of instincts and desires, Lacan charts the syntaxes of social connection in every individual's case. Underscoring language in this way, Lacan provides a framework for receiving Freud as a theorist of social context, including not only how languages are used in particular cultures, but also how societies are themselves constituted by relations to and in language (this is what Lacan calls "the symbolic order"). Where received readings of Freud cast him as a scientist, a universalizer, and a prophet of biology as destiny, the Lacanian reading enables new appreciation of the linguistic, social, and situated tenor of Freud's insights: he produced less an account of a transcendental vital force toward sexual satisfaction, and more a theory of sexuality as dissatisfaction, as a disturbance in the human animal, its inability to be uncomplicated in its necessary social relations.

In drawing out the language aspects of Freud's concerns, Lacan opens Freudian psychoanalysis to broad connections with linguistics, semiotics (the study of signs), aesthetics (especially literary theory), anthropology, philosophy, and social theory. Already, Freud was not necessarily modest in describing his innovations, characterizing psychoanalysis as sister to "the history of civilization, mythology, the psychology of religions, literary history, and literary criticism."[5] Lacan's highlighting of the role of language in Freud's thought expands this scope even more: "I would be inclined to add: rhetoric, dialectic, grammar, and poetics – the supreme pinnacle of the aesthetics of language."[6] After Lacan, Freudian psychoanalysis can be appreciated as this incredibly expansive engagement with human experience, from law and society to literature and language. Scholars such as Adrian Johnston, Julia Kristeva, Lorenzo Chiesa, and Markos Zafiropoulos have traced out these branches with great lucidity and brilliance. The psychoanalyst properly practicing is sometimes a historian, sometimes a mythologist, sometimes a doctor, and always a highly sensitized linguist:

> We must thus take up Freud's work again starting with the Traumdeutung to remind ourselves that a dream has the structure of a sentence, or, rather, to keep to the letter of the work, of a rebus – that is, of a form of writing … which reproduces … the simultaneously phonetic and symbolic use of signifying elements found in the hieroglyphs of ancient Egypt and in the characters still used in China … what is important is the version of the text, and that, Freud tells us, is given in the telling of the dream – that is,

> in its rhetoric. Ellipsis and pleonasm, hyperbaton or syllepsis, regression, repetition, apposition – these are the syntactical displacements; metaphor, catechresis, antonomasia, allegory, metonymy, and synechdoche – these are the semantic condensations; Freud teaches us to read in them the intentions – whether ostentatious or demonstrative, dissimulating or persuasive, retaliatory or seductive – with which the subject modulates his oneiric discourse.[7]

For Lacan, turning around in Freud's discourse necessarily evokes the turning of *tropes* (etymologically, trope derives from the Greek trepein, "to turn"), those figures in language that mobilize words for senses beyond the proper. The subject's ordinary language makes use of rhetorical tropes in abundance, and this very quality of proliferating repetition and metaphor, allegory and ellipsis, reveals that the unconscious is not a place or presence, but rather, as Samuel Weber puts it, "a representation that in turn refers to other representations."[8] This propulsive movement of language's turning, its always offering more words in lieu of meanings, animates Lacan's own notoriously evasive language, and underlies his refusal to define the return to Freud as a quest for accuracy, getting back to the source. Consequently, rather than spending this chapter summarizing the various ways that Lacan's return to Freud was a repetition with a difference, I want to stage something of my own return. I hope that, in enacting a return rather than cataloguing Lacan's return, the argument will achieve greater effect than it might otherwise, since it is this prospect of essays acting out their own ideas, instead of authoritatively delineating them, that Lacan pursues in advocating that Freud's writings had not yet been adequately encountered.

In trying to consider Freud after Lacan in terms of Lacan's return, Lacan's exhortation to repeat, we must return to Freud's language, and we might take as a starting point one of Lacan's rare overarching statements about Freud's oeuvre:

> From the beginning to end, from the discovery of the Oedipus complex to *Moses and Monotheism*, via the extraordinary paradox from the scientific point of view of *Totem and Taboo*, Freud only ever asked himself, personally, one question – how can this system of signifiers without which no incarnation of either truth or justice is possible, how can this literal logos take hold of an animal who doesn't need it and doesn't care about it – since it doesn't at all concern his needs? This is nevertheless the very thing that causes neurotic suffering.[9]

Lacan helps us to see that Freud's entire project, from his first to his last works, is driven by the question of why human beings are bound to

language and broad social frameworks. If the unconscious is structured like a language, Freud seems almost equally interested in the "is structured" part as in the "unconscious" or "like a language" part: he continuously poses the question of structure, of "the system of signifiers," of the mutual constitution of the psyche and the social. Whence this interest? How is it that Freud's discovery of the unconscious somehow also entailed new questions about the essence of sociality?

Lacan's discourse gives us Freud's language in its fuller dimensionality and broader (as it were, interdisciplinary) scope, but Freud's language itself already gives us a perpetual emphasis on this intrinsically social character of psychoanalysis, what might be called the "objective" register that complements its "subjective" focus. For Freud, unlike Lacan, composed numerous works specifically addressed to the psychoanalytic contributions to social theory, specifically addressed to the psychoanalysis of culture, specifically addressed to the uniquely psychoanalytic purview on to human collective history. He acknowledged the special status of these texts in referring to them as his "metapsychology": forays into the meta level of context for the unconscious. The works of political metapsychology include *Totem and Taboo*, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, *Civilization and its Discontents*, and *Moses and Monotheism*, and they span from 1912 to 1939, relatively early in his career to the very end. As a group, these texts are speculative, searching, and even outlandish, going so far as to conjure the myth of the primal horde of brothers who murder their father for sexual access to his women, the omnipresent possibility for humans to fall sway to demagogues, and the existential impossibility of happiness. Inflected by the very real threat of world war, these texts recur again and again to the question of peace – to how it can be possible to formulate societies that acknowledge their own origins (in acts of arbitrary if not violent founding) and their own incompletion (in chronic discontent). Freud's wildly imaginative and repeatedly undertaken political metapsychology strives to represent the social as the proper object of psychoanalysis. This is Freud's return to Lacan.

Freud returns to Lacan the emphatically social quality of the language Lacan returns to Freud. In authoring works of overt political theory of a type from which Lacan himself demurred, but whose centrality to psychoanalysis can never be sidestepped, Freud returns to Lacan the positivized sociopolitical dimension of Lacan's own work. This implicit dimension in Lacan has been skillfully explicated by Slavoj Žižek, Joan Copjec, Todd McGowan, and others. As a mode of inquiry, Freud's

metapsychological works consistently probe the logics and sutures of the collective psyche, turning again and again to the role of constituted frameworks for social life. As readers of Freud after Lacan, we also read Lacan after Freud, read the political insights in Lacan's own discourse that continue to clamor for punctuation. In an effort to illustrate Freud after Lacan, the remainder of this chapter pursues, in a Lacanian fashion, the perennial Freudian question of "how . . . this system of signifiers . . . is possible."

## Origins of Origins

In claiming Lacan's return to Freud as an opportunity to return to Freud's social thought, I take some inspiration from the way that the social concerns of psychoanalysis already prompted Lacan's very first call for the return. He made the call in a 1951 paper on transference, in which he conducted a close-reading of the Dora case study narrative to demonstrate that "by rethinking Freud's work, (it is possible to) find anew the authentic meaning of his initiative and the means by which to maintain its salutary value."[10] Transference, the distribution or displacement of psychic energy toward the analyst, provided the perfect topic for hailing the return, and for substantiating the return as a turn, a twist, a complex trajectory: Lacan traced Dora's positioning of Freud and Freud's positioning of Dora in order to advocate "the return" as an activation of the transference *toward* Freud, a deliberate and ecstatic *positioning* of Freud. Closely following the case history narrative, Lacan's paper underscores the fact of the failure in the case; though Freud acknowledges the failure, Lacan reads in Freud's acknowledgment a different cause than Freud himself does. Where Freud looks to Dora's desires, Lacan looks to Freud's own desires, broaching the question of the countertransference, "the sum total of the analyst's biases, passions, and difficulties, or even of his inadequate information, at any given moment in the dialectical process."[11] For Lacan, Dora, like all the case studies, ultimately relays less the desire of the analysand, and more the desire of the analyst, the desire of and for psychoanalysis.

Lacan is able to read the desire of the analyst in a number of important features of the Dora case study that we might call "formal," pertaining to the way the case study is composed. Specifically, he emphasizes that Freud chose a failed treatment to be elevated as one of his very few case studies; that Freud later amended the text with significant and weighty footnotes; that the text proceeds through a series of repeated "dialectical reversals." To Lacan, these aspects lend an uncertain and unfinished

quality to the Dora study: Freud had not quite said what he meant – he had not been able to identify countertransference, "the sum total of the analyst's biases, passions, and difficulties, or even of his inadequate information, at any given moment in the dialectical process."[12]

The case concerns the issue of Dora's involvement as a subject in the scenarios which she reports herself as an object, but Lacan adds that it concerns as well the issue of Freud's involvement in the scenarios in the clinic, his own investment in the analytic relationship. The work of Freud's case study is to attend to the subject's own part in her narrative of objectification; Dora complains of the plots and triangulations to which she is exposed, but does not avow her own desire within them, hence those desires speak through her hysterical symptoms, and the task of the analyst is to receive this speaking as discourse. Similarly, Freud makes dramatic reversals and amendments to the case narrative, and acknowledges the treatment's failure, but does not avow his own desire within them. The case poses the question of hysteria – "who am I for this other who desires?" – and poses it for both Dora and Freud. A narrative is not without a subject – this is the lesson of Dora for Freud, and the lesson of Freud's *Dora* for Lacan.

Just as Freud reads for Dora's secrets and investments, Lacan reads for Freud's, prioritizing the analysand–analyst relationship at the heart of the clinic. "What must be understood about psychoanalytic experience is that it proceeds entirely in this subject-to-subject relationship, which means it preserves a dimension that is irreducible to any psychology considered to be the objectification of certain of an individual's properties."[13] Dora's story is not Dora's individual story, but the story of her relating her story to Freud, and Freud relating back to her as well as relating the story to his imagined reader, and of these relationships as themselves the space of sexuality; sexuality is not an individual's idiosyncracy but the opaque energies in a social field. "Transference" serves as a "fundamental concept" of psychoanalysis (it becomes one of the four in Lacan's Seminar XI *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanlaysis*) because it captures the social quality of the analysand's desire becoming available for interpretation in relation to the analyst and to the analyst's own desire – it captures the clinic as a social space, it captures psychoanalysis as a practice of language that builds new social links. These social studies on transference and countertransference are the perfect origin for the desire for a return to Freud, reinvigorating the social, subject-to-subject distinction of psychoanalysis, as against the personal of ego-psychology. Reading for the transference and the countertransference becomes a way of reading

for the intersubjective distortions that we cannot escape, for the ineluctably *mediated* character of all relations. From the beginning, then, we can note that the return to Freud is tacitly a return to the social.

To further punctuate these social commitments of the return, we should also note that Lacan's very same essay first articulating the return to Freud also argues for Freud's proximity to the great social thinker Claude Levi-Strauss. "Isn't it striking that Levi Strauss – in suggesting the involvement in myths of language structures and of those social laws that regulate marriage and kinship – is already conquering the very terrain in which Freud situates the unconscious?"[14] The linguistic revolution, the return to Freud's language and return to the Freud of language, is coextensive with political consciousness, with returning and reawakening to Freud's political vision. Freud studied the hysteric, the neurotic, the psychotic *in culture* ("the uneasiness in culture" is a more literal translation of the German *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, the text the Anglophone world knows as *Civilization and its Discontents*); he probed that which in intersubjectivity causes the subject's enjoyment and the subject's suffering. The "cultural context" that matters to Freud is not local norms and particular customs, but the general realm of regulated subject–other relationships. Slavoj Žižek's return to Lacan crystallizes Freud's foundational political insight:

> One of the big reproaches to psychoanalysis is that it is only a theory of individual pathological disturbances … When Freud says "the uneasiness" in culture, he means not that most of us are normal, we socialize ourselves normally, some idiots didn't make it, they fall out, oh, they have to be normalized. No. Culture as such, in order to establish itself as normal, what appears as normal, involves a whole series of pathological cuts, distortions, and so on and so on. There is, again, a kind of *unbehagen*, uneasiness, we are out of joint, not at home, in culture as such, which means, again, that there is no normal culture. Culture as such has to be interpreted.[15]

What Freud's consistently social interests endeavor to grasp are the violent occlusions and displacements of any given social formation. Psychoanalysis addresses itself to the impossibility of a fit between cultural constellations and the lacking nature that precipitates them, to the reasons why all cultures are uneasy. Freud's repeated and outlandish representations of the origins of culture bespeak the very absence of origins – the constitutive incompletion – of culture as such. Lacan's return encircles this radical kernel of psychoanalysis at its origin, so in returning to Lacan's return, we would do well to recur again and again to the social dimension of Freud's work.

## Totem in Extremis

Freud first turned to the political as an overt topic when he was already in the middle of the concerted reflections on psychoanalysis that he called "metapsychology." Right before *Totem*, he wrote *Five Lectures on Psychoanalysis* and numerous "Papers on Technique"; right after it he wrote "On the History of the Psychoanalytic Movement," "Papers on Metapsychology," and *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*. This timing seems important: he made his "first" explicit political reflections in the midst of grappling with what could be generalized about psychoanalysis; one could say that the question of the general and of the level at which psychoanalysis intervenes in the whole field of human relations is at stake for him in this period, as it would be at stake at the outbreak of World War I mere months after *Totem*. He marks his turn to the topic as a turn: in *Totem*'s very first paragraph, he confesses to making a "first attempt" to "bridge the gap" between psychoanalysis and social studies (xxviii),[16] and he marks as well the speculative and outlandish character of this first attempt, disclaiming "if in the end [my] hypothesis bears a highly improbable appearance, that need be no argument against the possibility of its approximating more or less closely the reality which it is so hard to reconstruct." As if he did not have big enough fish to fry in discovering the unconscious and experimentally developing the metapsychological constructs that could possibly inscribe the enormity of that discovery, Freud is compelled to take on the arguably bigger task of developing political origin stories, and original theories of political dynamics. It is this compulsion itself – repeated in his multiple works of political metapsychology, each of which returns to *Totem* – which shows the breadth of Freud's commitment to the intricacy of the subjective and objective, the psychic and the political.

After Lacan, we read *Totem and Taboo*, Freud's first political theory, as the place of his unworked, what has not yet been "worked-through." As Lacan read the form of the Dora case study for indications of Freud's desire to discern countertransference, we might read the form of the repetition of political theories for indications of Freud's desire to reckon with the unaccountable factors in political relations. Noting that Freud deemed *Totem* "his favorite … his greatest triumph," Lacan highlights this triumph as both "a neurotic product" and "nothing other than a modern myth, a myth constructed to explain what remained gaping in his doctrine, namely 'Where is the father?'"[17] The myth provides an answer to the question of place and origin of the law (and the signifier as its avatar),

an unanswerable question, pertaining to the order of the real. "Not the slightest trace has ever been seen of the father of the human horde. Freud holds that it was real. He clings to it. He wrote the entire *Totem and Taboo* in order to say it."[18] Lacan minces no words in his appraisal of the text: "to study how it is composed, it is one of the most twisted things I can imagine … one has to return to Freud – it's in order to perceive that if it's twisted in this way, given that he was a chap who knew how to write and think, there must be a good reason for it."[19] These twists are the essential formal matter that must be read, for a myth is "manifest content … not latent" and *Totem*, as neurotic product, is owing to what is "impossible to formulate in discourse."[20] The myth suffers symptoms, it speaks the unspeakable: the position of discursive installation, the origination of the social relation. It is "impossible" to say from within a given social order where that order originates, because this requires reference to some element outside the order; as a consequence, attempts to tell origin stories twist discourse. It might be appealing to dismiss *Totem* as extreme and irrelevant, to set it aside in favor of the less twisted, more straight psychological works like *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but Lacan helps us see that this extremity is organic to the very question of where social relations start. *Totem* must be read for, not despite, its extremity.

Indeed, the extremity offers itself for the kind of interpretation modeled by Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, the kind of formal rearrangement modeled by Levi Strauss in "The Structural Study of Myth": "it is possible to put a myth on index cards that one then stacks up to see what combinations unfold."[21] That is, Lacan repeats Levi-Strauss's method for myth analysis in his own analysis of Freud's myth, a method of formal analysis that identifies central units of meaning across levels of a text (or even versions of a text) and then clusters them together to make new meanings. Just as Levi-Strauss clusters the multiple stories of Oedipus (Rex and Colonnus and Antigone), Lacan aligns *Totem* with Freud's other mythmaking project, his identification of "the Oedipus complex." Stacking up the index cards, Lacan fixates on the gap between the two myths: whereas in Oedipus the law precedes enjoyment, in *Totem* enjoyment precedes the law.[22] Reading the myths together allows this gap to speak: there is a chicken–egg problem, an undecidability in the connection between law and enjoyment, the objective and the subjective. Lacan's formal reading of the redoubled reliance upon myth, and the reversed causality across *Totem* and Oedipus, leads him to the insight that for Freud the discovery of the unconscious is paralleled by the quest for the origin of the socio-symbolic order.

Lacan's interlocution with Levi-Strauss proved so pivotal to his return to Freud precisely because Lacan perceived the Freudian origins of Levi-Strauss's concept of culture. As Lacan saw it, Freud's frequent quest for the origins of the social anticipates Levi-Strauss's own centralization of sexuality in social life:[23]

> Freud's discovery went right to the heart of this determination by the symbolic law, for in the unconscious – which, he insisted, was quite different from everything that had previously been designated by that name – he recognized the instance of the laws on which marriage and kinship are based, establishing the Oedipus complex as its central motivation already in the Traumdeutung … Indeed, it is essentially on sexual relations – by regulating them according to the law of preferential marriage alliances and forbidden relations – that the first combinatory for exchanges of women between family lines relies, developing the fundamental commerce and concrete discourses on which human societies are based in an exchange of gratuitous goods and magic words.[24]

Freud's centralization of the Oedipus complex demonstrates that the unconscious is galvanized by the social rules that govern kinship, the traffic in women, sexual freedom, and sexual constraint. The revolutionary quality of Freudian psychoanalysis stems from its intrinsic regard for the social relations that determine the unconscious. What might appear as the personal core of Freudian psychoanalysis is actually at the same time a social core, since the subject of the unconscious is situated at the unpronounceable intersection of the body and language, structurally comparable to the undefinable emergence of culture from nature. The mysterious, inexplicable origin of the social cannot be narrated into sense or mythologized away; the individual subject's enjoyment is not only structurally comparable to this mystery, but also linked to it, insofar as it is the encounter between the body of the subject and the field of the other which engenders enjoyment.

## Mind the Gap

Lacan provides excellent resources for more thoroughly appreciating the social and political consequences of Freudian psychoanalysis, and he does so at a time when ego-psychology was the most intent on domesticating Freud. Yet, as I have suggested, Lacan's own work seems to take up these aspects less explicitly than Freud did. This political explicitness, which I will substantiate more below, is what I am arguing that we receive, after Lacan, as Freud's return to Lacan.

Freud wrote several works of political metapsychology, and the sheer fact of this repetition warrants interpretation. In conducting such an interpretation, we might take some inspiration from both the conclusions derived, and the method employed, by Joan Copjec, in her analysis of repetitions between *Totem* and another metapsychological text (though not in the political grouping), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Just as Lacan arrives at structuralist insights by emphasizing the repetition of the role of myth across Freud's two primal texts, Copjec intensifies Lacan's political insights by emphasizing the repetition of what she identifies as a wild factor across Freud's two most important metapsychological texts. In her reading, the two texts' shared repetition of a "preposterous" element, one which is "objectively so" (the primal father in *Totem and Taboo*, the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*), points to the working through of the problem of "the necessity of accounting aetiologically for an empirical field, where the pleasure principle reigns in one case, and where a fraternal order obtains, in the other."[25] The key dynamic is that Freud's "preposterous" element is performing the force of a factor that cannot be located in the field of reality: a real, a "surplus existence that cannot be caught up in the positivity of the social."[26] Whereas other political ontologies, namely Foucauldian historicism, apprehend the political as an immanent field, psychoanalysis uniquely refuses "the reduction of society to its indwelling network of relations of power and knowledge."[27] Instead, psychoanalysis insists on a transcendent element, an irreducibility of the social, which is nothing other than the gap in the social itself, the failure of social relations to emanate smoothly from nature. Freud's preposterous extremities are the rhetorical form of appearance of this incompletion of the social, the irreducible surplus of the real.

Copjec's illumination of the importance of this social insight in Freud's work can frame a reconsideration of the political metapsychology. What can emerge if we return to the last work of it, *Civilization and its Discontents*? In *Civilization and its Discontents*, Freud devotes his argument to the ways in which culture is "largely responsible for our misery" even as culture remedies what Freud presents as the inevitability of "aggressiveness."[28] Returning to the questions that motivated *Totem and Taboo*, after intervening years in which World War I obviously heightened impressions of social strife and human aggression, Freud is compelled to grapple yet again with the question of the origin of the social order. This time, it is the antisocial instincts that motivate a repressive or sublimating social formation ("civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set limits to man's aggressiveness"[29]), pressures

need counterpressures in accordance with his dynamic hypothesis. He articulates profoundly that it is the nature of culture to be unnatural, disturbing, uneasy, yet he also makes claims about nature that read as psychologizing and universalizing: claims that human beings are inherently uneasy *because* inherently aggressive.

These psychologizing foundations should be seen as a compromise formation, not a true metapsychological insight. They name the idea of something insurmountable, but they blatantly contradict the "natural foundations" on which Freud has generally, since the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, based his theories: the foundations of human cooperation and interdependence. Infantile helplessness is a material fact of the human animal, as elemental to its animal particularity as is sexuality. In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud ultimately credits this feeling as the cause of religion; we can recognize in his according it such causal force the parallel prospect that it is the cause of sociality. Such causality is material; the human animal is materially characterized by prolonged dependency (unlike birds or cows, etc.), but this dependency brings with it no correlative infrastructure (family or collective formation). It is this asymmetrical relation between the fact of dependence and the artifice of interdependence – the unordained quality of any framework for that relatedness – which instigates political antagonism, the contest over arbitrary origins of the socius.

Across his body of political metapsychology, this question of the ground of the social order repeats. Freud cannot arrive at a fully satisfactory answer, and the unanswerability itself effectuates a great insight of the political metapsychology: that there is no explicable groundedness of the social order in the psyche, there is no cause of sociality in drives, because the psyche is constituted in and through the social order that precedes it of necessity. Alenka Zupančič has succinctly observed that "the gap of the unconscious is the other name for the reality of the inconsistent Other,"[30] and we can add that this inconsistency is a direct object of Freud's inquiry in and as the discovery of the unconscious. Freud's discovery of the unconscious, I would argue, is a discovery of the inconsistency of the social, the enormity of which task compels his frequent returns to the reckoning with the origins of the social, to narrating, mythologizing, domesticating the uneasiness in all culture. This repetition in Freud's thought is not an ephiphenomenon; his speculative political theories were not ancillary to his project, but rather central, demanding close readings of their own, demanding workings-through and distinct new constructions of their own. Moreover, the emphatic social aspect of psychoanalysis

entails that any movement toward a psychoanalytic cure must also be a movement for social change. Again, Zupančič is so succinct: "If something is to be changed in our unconscious, it has to be changed in the structure that supports it."[31] After Lacan, through the linguistic prism, psychoanalysis appears profoundly socialized; yet before Lacan, Freud himself had already, and more systematically, more compulsively, articulated this properly social purview of psychoanalysis.

If we return to Lacan in the manner of the return to Freud, we can notice something conspicuous about his own reading of *Civilization and its Discontents*, something which might provide an explanation for why Lacan did not fully return to the political aspect of Freud's oeuvre. Lacan's main reading of *Civilization and its Discontents* takes place in *Seminar VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, the most influential and widely cited of all his seminars in English (perhaps of the published seminars in French), and the "reading" there curiously departs from the reading method Lacan exemplifies for the return in his earlier seminars. Instead of the close reading of Freud's texts in pursuit of the unworked in them, Lacan reads *Civilization* much more distantly and narrowly. As result, it is not read as an account of the enigmatic confrontation between the enjoying subject and the objective social field. Rather, Lacan focuses on the internal ecology of the subject-in-the-social: the ethical dimension of superegoic functioning and of fidelity to the subject's desire.

> If we are following so closely the development of Freud's metapsychology this year, it is in order to uncover the traces of the theory that reflects an ethical thought. The latter is in fact at the center of our work as analysts, however difficult it may be to realize it fully … a fundamental intuition that is taken up by each one of us. If we always return to Freud, it is because he started out with an initial, central intuition, which is ethical in kind.[32]

Later in the seminar Lacan ultimately defines this intuition as pertaining to the "paradox of the moral conscience":

> the moral conscience, as he (Freud) says, shows itself to be more demanding the more refined it becomes, crueler and crueler even as we offend it less and less, more and more fastidious as we force it, by abstaining from acts, to go and seek us out at the most intimate levels of our impulses or desires. In short, the insatiable character of this moral conscience, its paradoxical cruelty, transforms it within the individual into a parasite that is fed by the satisfaction accorded it.[33]

Arguably, this seminar is distinguished by Lacan's departure from his formal and structural readings of Freud's discourse, and thematically, of course, ethics are a different domain of relationality than politics. The

most important seminar is also the least careful about its return to Freud, with the consequence that the unquiet antagonism of social life is overly psychologized and attributed heavy-handedly to the voraciousness of the superego. We might even say that, just as Freud violated his own theories of human cooperation in conspicuously turning to the motif of human aggressiveness, Lacan ignores his own insights into Freud's social theories by conspicuously narrowing his interests to the superego's aggression.

Freud's political metapsychology more directly, and more correctly, apprehends the social antagonism as a structural feature of social relations. What Freud offers after Lacan is less this psychological will toward morality and more the unbearable formalism of the law, the emptiness of sociality that provokes the plenitude of the superego. His myths inscribe this function. It is this formalism of sociality, this necessarily formed but unmotivated collectivity, which his political metapsychology radically chronicles.

After Lacan, we read Freud's political metapsychology for the essentiality of the signifier and its awesome power in installing social relations that exceed justification. In the very project for a political metapsychology in Freudian theory, in the repeated returns to origin myths, and repeated extremes of political suture, we can read behind the contingency of social installation the abyssal void in which the signifier emerges, the very "unground," if you will, of the social. It is the legacy of Freud, after Lacan, for psychoanalysis to advance its unique inscription of the formalism of the symbolic, of the formative power of the symbolic for sociality as such – a legacy quite at odds with contemporary theory's prevailing rejection of the symbolic, an ecstatic desire for formlessness uniting left anti-statism and right fascism. While current prominent theories in work by Gilles Deleuze, Bruno Latour, Michael Hardt, and Jane Bennett[34] prioritize flows of affects and anarchic assemblages, psychoanalysis continues, to its distinction, to highlight the social structures without which desiring bodies could not exist.

In a recent book, Tracy McNulty has brilliantly distilled this legacy, marking the political facets of the Freudian–Lacanian commitment to the symbolic that we have been tracing:

> the symbolic is an absolutely crucial dimension of social coexistence, but one that is neither reducible to social norms and ideals (specific contents or values) nor something that can be assumed to be functioning in a necessary and inexorable way. As a dimension of human existence that is introduced by language – and thus inescapably "other" with respect to the laws of nature – the symbolic is an undeniable fact of human existence.

> The same cannot be said of the forms and practices that represent and sustain it, however. In designating these laws, structures, and practices as "fictions," Lacan makes clear that the symbolic is a dimension of social life that must be created and maintained, and that may also be displaced, eradicated, or rendered dysfunctional. The symbolic fictions that structure and support the social tie are therefore historicizable, emerging at specific times and in particular contexts and losing their efficacy when circumstances change.[35]

Those who wish to stage Freud's return to Lacan, to practice a relation to language that grips the horizon of politics, might lend their energies to the historicizing of specific symbolic fictions or the unsettling of particular norms and ideals. This has certainly been the predominant way in which humanists in the Anglo-American academic context in the past thirty years have understood the ultimate consequences of their work with language: to expose social constructedness, to puncture the pretenses of the universal, to trouble normativity. Yet, as McNulty makes clear, beyond such relativizing, there remains "an undeniable fact" of the symbolic that must be embraced as its own enabling universal. After Lacan, Freud returns, calling us to think this universal sociality, in all its obscene formalism.

**Notes**

1 Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: The First Complete Edition in English* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 335.
2 Ibid., 337.
3 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 206.
4 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 227.
5 Sigmund Freud, "The Question of Lay Analysis," in *The Standard Edition. Volume XX* (London: Hogarth Press, 1926), 246.
6 Lacan, Ecrits, 238.
7 Ibid., 221–222.
8 Samuel Weber, *Return to Freud* (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 3.
9 Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 242.
10 Lacan, *Ecrits*, 178.
11 Ibid., 225.
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid., 215.
14 Ibid., 236.
15 Slavoj Žižek, Žižek! Astra Taylor documentary. *Minute* 38, 41 (2005), 38.
16 Sigmund Freud, "Totem and Taboo" (1913), in *The Standard Edition, volume XIII* (London: Hogarth Press, 1950), xxviii.

17 Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre XVIII: D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant* (Paris: Seuil, 2007), 161; Lacan, *Le Séminaire livre IV: La relation d'objet* (Paris: Seuil, 1994), 210.
18 Jacques Lacan, *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan: The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*. Volume XVII (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 113.
19 Ibid., 111.
20 Lacan, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 161.
21 Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, 113.
22 Lacan, *D'un discours qui ne serait pas du semblant*, 160.
23 Claude Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore* 68, 270 (1955), 435.
24 Lacan, Ecrits, 359.
25 Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan against the Historicists* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), 13.
26 Ibid., 4.
27 Ibid., 6.
28 Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents" (1930), *The Standard Edition. volume XXI* (London: Hogarth Press, 1968), 38, 71.
29 Ibid., 69–70.
30 Alenka Zupančič, *Why Psychoanalysis?* (Natchitoches, LA: NSU Press, 2008), 16.
31 Ibid., 29.
32 Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, 38.
33 Ibid., 89.
34 Gilles Deleuze, *Pure Immanence* (New York: Zone Books, 2005); Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social* (Oxford University Press, 2007); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. *Multitude* (New York: Penguin Books, 2005); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).
35 Tracy McNulty, *Wrestling with the Angel* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 12–13.