

Freud on «Repression» and on «the Unconscious»

ROBERT SILHOL (*)

I do not think I shall surprise anyone, here in any case, if I say that Freud's major concept is the concept of «Unconscious», *das Unbewusste*. The very word, indeed, summarizes what has been called Freud's invention, a discovery which heralded the entry of humanity into a completely new age, something like a scientific revolution in fact. We all know the expression: «an epistemological break.»

The word is to be found in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in the book on *Jokes* and in *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* among others, but it was only in 1915 that Freud devoted a long essay to the concept: fifty pages in all if to it we add the shorter paper on «Repression», which can well be considered as an introduction to the main topic and in fact shortly preceded it in time. «Repression» was completed between the end of March and the beginning of April 1915, and «The Unconscious» was written in April of the same year, «a new definition of the Unconscious» Freud wrote to Lou Andreas-Salomé in his letter of the 1st of April. Both papers were published in 1915.

Today, in 2005, ninety years after that publication, the question for us is to find out whether this text still stands scrutiny and to what an extent it still constitutes a sound basis for our research.

And of course, in forming our appreciation – call it scientific judgment if you like – we shall not be able to set aside what we have learnt from Freud himself. Indeed, my claim is that Freud's work, because it rests on a few entirely new principles and concepts – which represented a decisive departure from what had preceded it –, can itself be read and assessed to the yardstick of these very principles. Such an enterprise is not new and we all know how a «return to Freud» was advocated some fifty years ago; what I simply propose is that we continue in the same line of thought. Any reading – this also is well-known – is an interpretation, but I shall do my best to remain as freudian as can be, while conducting this freudian interpretation of Freud's papers.

For over fifty years, the «inventor» of psychoanalysis, in an attempt to give a sound theoretical explanation of the facts clinical experience was confronting him with, revised his early propositions, leaving us finally a model of the human psyche he had unrelentingly improved.¹ And yet, the original «discovery», the founding principles of psychoanalysis – which, in 1915, became Freud's «Metapsychology» – remained. And we mustn't think this is too paradoxical: the hypothesis that most of our mental life is unconscious, an intuition on which the whole psychoanalytical «building» now rests, is simply the starting point of an inquiry which, precisely because of the fundamental unacceptability of

(*) Centre d'Anthropologie Littéraire, Université de Paris VII, Paris, France.

¹ And of course the enterprise also represented his own analysis.

this assumption, was to be, if not endless, at least extremely long and difficult. Like an analysis, in fact. What the twenty four volumes of *The Standard Edition* clearly show is that all the modifications Freud introduced throughout the years can be considered as logical consequences of his original discovery. One does not always think so and one sometimes uses «one Freud» not to hear what «another Freud» has to say: thus is the radicality of psychoanalysis sometimes overshadowed. For me, there is no discrepancy between the first topology – the most radical one, I think – and the second; simply, it takes some epistemological effort to articulate them. In the same fashion, Freud's other fundamental discovery, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is quite in keeping with the concepts of psychoanalysis which had been established before 1920; in fact, it helps to solve some of the problems which had appeared with these early concepts, repetition and the «death-wish» namely.

I

«The Unconscious», then and, before this, «Repression», for the two topics constitute a single object. See how Freud concluded his article on «repression»:

The short series of comparisons presented here may easily convince us that more comprehensive investigations are necessary before we can hope to understand thoroughly the processes connected with repression and the formation of neurotic symptoms. (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, London: Hogarth Press, vol. XIV, 157)

The long paper «The Unconscious», which directly followed «Repression», constitutes one of these «comprehensive investigations».

At the origin of the reflexion on repression we find a question, a question directly dictated by Freud's clinical observations: «One of the vicissitudes an instinctual impulse [*Triebregung*] may undergo is to meet» with forces² which make it «inoperative,» why is it so? Why does the impulse pass «into a state of repression»? Breaking such new ground as he does, it is only normal that Freud should come across great difficulties. His first move, however, is impeccable:

It seems to us now that in view of the very great extent to which repression and what is unconscious are correlated, we must defer probing more deeply into the nature of repression until we have learnt more about the structure of the succession of psychical agencies and about the differentiation between what is unconscious and conscious. (*S.E.*, XIV, 148)

And straight away afterwards, he introduces the notion of «primal repression» [*Urverdrängung*]. For us, who have learnt so much from him – who have learnt «everything» in fact –, the case is closed and brilliantly so. Beyond this intuition of the psychoanalytical «bar,» the intuition of what, in a word, founded the revolutionary concept of *Unconscious*, there is nothing more to say. It corresponds to the intuition – comforted everyday by clinical observation – that there exists a «domain» where consciousness is of no avail. But this was 1915, fifteen years only after *The Interpretation of Dreams*, and whatever the confirmations received from clinical practise, psychoanalysis as theory had yet to be securely established. It was indeed the discovery of a completely new dimension in man and woman, but because this dimension was so unacceptable, it took decades to be accepted. What I am saying here, in fact, is simply that the concept of «unconscious,» fundamentally, in its essence, cannot be consciously accepted and is in any case rather difficult to fathom. For Freud also such a research into our mental activity presented a difficulty, and as we read his paper on repression we can observe his own efforts to control, to harness even, what promptings came to him from consciousness.

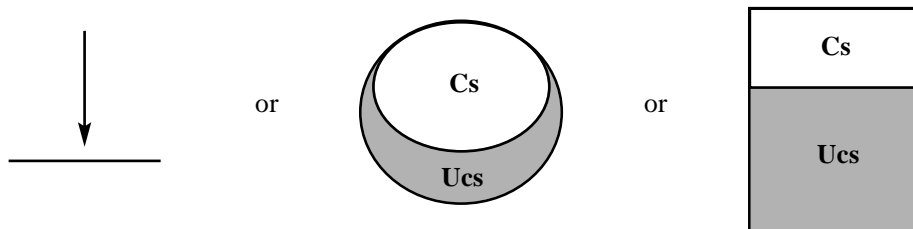
² This is a shortened version of Freud's question; also, I have not translated *Widerstande* (resistances) because it might have led us astray; the general term «forces» seems more adequate for the purpose of my demonstration.

Thus, no sooner has he spoken of «primal repression» – and this is more than an adumbration of the «bar» – than he mentions «repression proper» (calling it however «the second phase of repression») of which, of course, everyday life offers obvious evidence. We see Freud proceeding with the prudence of the scientist, carefully weighing the pros and cons, examining whatever objection he himself can think of, but firm in the end in the defence of the new conceptual system he is constructing. Following his mention of repression proper – which came, in a way, as a semi objection to the more radical concept of primal repression – here is his final argument:

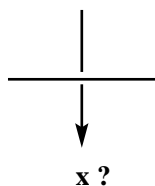
Repression proper, therefore, is actually an after-pressure [*Nachdrängen*]. Moreover, it is a mistake to emphasize only the repulsion which operates from the direction of the conscious upon what is to be repressed; quite as important is the attraction exercised by what was primarily repressed upon everything with which it can establish a connection. Probably the tendency to repression would fail in its purpose if these forces did not co-operate, if there were not something previously repressed ready to assimilate that which is rejected from consciousness. (*S.E.*, XIV, 148)

And indeed, if one does not want to assimilate this «after-expulsion» to a mental movement which would be conscious, one has to resort to the idea of «something previously repressed,» a «force» in fact whose function it is to maintain the repressed repressed. Here is how this can be illustrated:

a) Repression as rejection



b) A withdrawal. Attraction?



Freud's presentation does not proceed without hesitations, there are some twists and turns in his argumentation, but psychoanalytical theory as we know it today is on the making all the same whatever the «temptations» to change course and side with the forces of consciousness. The «struggle,» as Freud himself writes, is «never ending» (*S.E.*, XIV, 158), but the demonstration which will lead us from a *dynamic* conception to a more generally *structural* one is well on the way, as the metaphor of the «undesirable agent» clearly shows:

The general vicissitude which overtakes the *idea* [...] that represents the instinct can hardly be anything else than that it should vanish from the conscious, or that it should be held back from consciousness if it was about to become conscious. The difference is not important; it amounts to much the same thing as the difference between my ordering an undesirable guest

out of my dressing-room (or out of my front hall), and my refusing, after recognizing him, to let him cross my threshold at all. (*S.E.*, XIV, 153)

Interestingly, the passage is followed by a footnote which is even more explicit:

This simile, which is thus applicable to the process of repression, may also be extended to a characteristic of it which has been mentioned earlier: I have merely to add that I must set a permanent guard over the door which I have forbidden this guest to enter, since he would otherwise burst it open.

What better metaphor of the «bar» than this «sentinel» which will have to keep constant guard over the door?

II

The writing of «Repression» was over in the first days of April, and «The Unconscious», written in the same month, followed close.

The first two paragraphs of this second text constitute a short preamble which sums up what has been presented in «Repression»: what is unconscious has not been abrogated or annihilated but simply *withheld*; it cannot be «apprehended by the common mind,» but it produces «effects,» and a «translation» of these manifestations is possible. Here, in a few sentences, we have a clear presentation of the whole of Freud's theory, «resistances» included. One sentence, however, deserves a commentary:

[...] let us state at the very outset that the repressed does not cover everything that is unconscious. The unconscious has the wider compass: the repressed is a part of the unconscious. (*S.E.*, XIV, 166)

I read this as a first step toward the recognition that the word «unconscious» implies much more than what simple observation has revealed to Freud the clinician. As a concept indeed, the unconscious will gradually come to represent what characterizes men and women in the whole of their symbolical and linguistic dimension.

1. «Justification for the Conception of the Unconscious»

The very title of this first part already describes the problem. How can the hypothesis about the existence of an unconscious activity in humans be at all verified? Freud's preoccupation is properly epistemological and can be given a very plain formulation: «If it is unconscious, how can we ever know about it?»

And yet, «we possess numerous *proofs* of its existence» (*S.E.*, XIV, 166); and also, «we must adopt the position that to require that whatever goes on in the mind must also be known to consciousness is to make an untenable claim.» This insistence on the unpracticability of a «conventional identification of the mental with the conscious» justifies Freud's recourse to the notion of «latency» and to the observation that there are «latent states of mental life.» (*S.E.*, XIV, 168) Some of the passages in these first pages of the paper could even be considered as answers *avant la lettre* to neurobiology.³

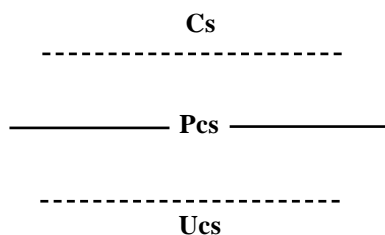
Then, from latency we proceed to the concept of *splitting*: the existence of mental processes whose elaboration remains hidden to us – processes which often strike us, besides, by their incohe-

³ See: «We then encounter the objection that these latent recollections can no longer be described as mental processes, but that they correspond to residues of somatic processes from which something mental can once proceed.» (*S.E.*, XIV, 167)

rence – brings about this concept, and the last paragraph of this first part clearly announces the debate on the relationship between psychoanalysis and phenomenology (Kant is mentioned). In the same way as the individual subject is separated from the world out there, so the conscious subject – and I should write *Ich*, ego – is separated from himself or herself: an unconscious, split, subject. Lacan's real – one of the meanings of the word in any case – is not very far.

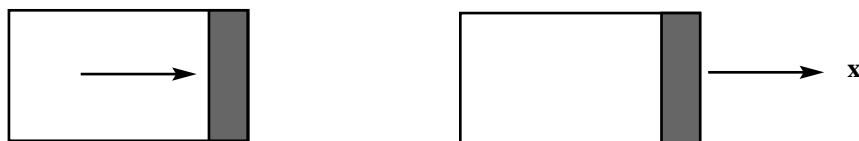
2. «Various Meanings of the Term 'Unconscious'; the Topographical Point of View»

This second section represents an attempt at drawing an abstract⁴ topography of our mental states, and the task is at first so difficult that there will be some hesitation in the presentation of the results of the enquiry. In fact, none of the two questions posed in this chapter – about 2 or 3 systems and about the registration of mental acts – receive a clear answer. As for the 2 (or 3) systems, Freud explains he is «for the moment» «not in a position to decide between the two possibilities» he has been discussing. The mental topography he has conceived distinguishes two distinct systems – or three, he is not sure –: *Cs.*, *Ucs.* (and Preconscious which he does not quite know where to place). And the topography leads to a question about the «registration» in the mind of what was in the system *Ucs.* and has been transposed into the system *Cs.* (or *Pcs.*). The word is «*Fixierung*», fixation, but is followed by «*Niederschrift*,» inscription, and one understands that what is being discussed here is memory and acts of memory.⁵ No definite answer is reached yet, but in the end, though, and in spite of the ambiguity – 2 systems, 3 systems? – the demonstration does go on, for what remains certain, now, is that we can «sharply» «discriminate» (*S.E.*, XIV, 173) between two systems – whatever their labels. True, the *Pcs.* holds an awkward position,



but the idea of a «rigorous censorship» is firmly established: I call it the «bar.» As for the question about the fixation/inscription of mental acts, it will receive a solution in the following section.

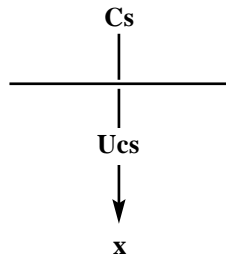
Here is what we have so far, then: the hypothesis of an «attraction,» and a «progression,» on the part of Freud, from rejection to attraction, which can be illustrated thus:



⁴ Abstract because not founded on anatomy: «Our psychical topography has *for the present* nothing to do with anatomy; it has reference not to anatomical localities, but to regions in the mental apparatus, wherever they may be situated in the body.» (*S.E.*, XIV, 175) Lacan and his «*Je pense avec mes pieds*» once again is not very far.

⁵ The first paragraph of this Section distinguishes very clearly processes «which are merely latent, temporarily unconscious, but which differ in no other respect from conscious ones» from the processes which really belong to what we have called unconscious space, «processes such as repressed ones, which if they were to become conscious would be bound to stand in the crudest contrast to the rest of the conscious processes.»

The idea of a «line,» or «border» is reinforced. The concept of primal repression is clearly founded.



3. «Unconscious Emotions»

What opposes *Cs.* and *Ucs.* is also at the heart of the third section, although not always with the clarity one might wish for. One statement, however, toward the end of this section, is explicit:

Even within the limits of normal life we can recognize that a constant struggle for primacy over affectivity goes on between the two systems *Cs.* and *Ucs.*, that certain spheres of influence are marked off from one another [...] (*S.E.*, XIV, 179)

Between the two systems there is indeed a «frontier» (the verb *grenzen* is used) and, again, we have no difficulty in recognizing our «bar». This aspect of the demonstration, however, does not seem to be the central purpose of this section. Here, indeed, Freud rather seems to have been impelled by a wish to present a complete and thorough examination of the problems related to the concept of unconscious, and this would naturally have led him to take «affects» into consideration. Today, however, this may not appear as central to the discussion he has been conducting so far. But because it deals with the nature of affects, the information that can be gained from this section is far from uninteresting and may help us to clarify some of the difficult concepts and notions Freud has been using. Thus, from the start, he distinguishes the *drive* and its *presentation* and I take this to be more important than it seems if we want to understand fully *Vorstellung* or *Repräsentanz*, for instance.

An instinct can never become an object of consciousness – only the idea that represents the instinct can. (*S.E.*, XIV, 177)

In the next line he even insists on this distinction – as he will do throughout this section –:

Even in the unconscious, moreover, an instinct cannot be represented otherwise than by an idea.

I take this to be a clear indication that the «drive» in Freud's mind is a force, a vector, which needs some sort of form, a content, in order to express itself. See how, for a third time, he insists on this:

When we nevertheless speak of an unconscious instinctual impulse or of a repressed instinctual impulse, the looseness of phraseology is a harmless one. We can only mean an instinctual impulse the ideational representative [*Vorstellungrepräsentanz*] of which is unconscious, for nothing else comes into consideration. (id.)

For «it may happen that an affective or an emotional impulse is perceived, but misconstrued.» (*S.E.*, XIV, 178) Indeed, in order to express itself, the drive has to become connected with «another idea» [*mit einer anderen Vorstellung*]. Already, we have here the structure of the metaphor, and this idea of substitution will recur several times in these pages.

The whole section is complex, repetitive and somewhat awkward, but the discussion, as I have tried to point out, does lead to a distinction we should find very helpful: ideas (representations) are

cathexes of memory traces, «whilst affects and emotions correspond to processes of discharge» (*S.E.*, XIV, 178); I read this as an indication that unconscious desire should not be confused with instinct, which perhaps is obvious today. (See Lacan's helpful distinction between *besoin* and *désir*.)

The section ends with a consideration on anxiety here labelled «the substitute for all repressed affects,» and this is obviously a question which would deserve a long essay in itself. What matters to us here, in this discussion of the concept of unconscious, is the conclusion that affects are effects, effects consciously experienced, and that they should be considered as distinct from what is subjected to repression.

4. «Topography and Dynamics of Repression»

This fourth section is really the heart of Freud's paper. After the discussion on affects, the demonstration resumes its original course, the unconscious again occupies the centre of the debate. The first paragraph formulates a question I find essential and that we have already met: the concept of repression has brought about the idea of a border, and Freud is naturally led to ask in which «system» the withdrawal takes place. This is an interrogation we can formulate in plain language, at the cost of oversimplification: where does what is repressed go?

[...] repression is essentially a process affecting ideas on the border between the systems *Ucs.* and *Pcs.* (*Cs.*) [*die Verdrängung im wesentlichen ein Vorgang ist, der sich an Vorstellungen an der Grenze der Systeme Ubw und Vbw (Bw) vollzieht*] [...] It must be a matter of *withdrawal*; but the question is, in which system does the withdrawal take place and to which system does the cathexis that is withdrawn belong? (*S.E.*, XI, 180)

On which side indeed? Before we can try to formulate an answer, however, we must question the way the problem, at the time, was presented. For the formulation proceeds from a conception we can no longer accept, precisely because of what we have learnt from Freud himself. I have already alluded to this when I opposed «attraction» to «rejection.» To speak of a «withdrawal» [*Entziehung*] implies that there was, at first, «something» there which is no longer perceptible, something in a word which has been withdrawn, rejected, pushed beyond the line, beyond the «border,» and if this does not quite contradict the idea of a primal repression, it is certainly not easy to explain how both mechanisms can exist side by side. Freud is not without sensing that there might be a problem at this point and his next paragraph resorts to the notion of preconscious (this «area» between *Cs.* and *Pcs.* I find ambiguous and ill-defined as will be shown):

Here repression can only consist in the withdrawing from the idea the (pre)conscious cathexis which belongs to the system *Pcs.* (*S.E.*, XIV, 180)

Does this amend the early version? We see the «repressed idea» gradually losing its «place» in the system conscious and getting nearer and nearer what we can call an unconscious «space.» In this paragraph, as in the following ones, every word counts. What is now described by Freud as active clearly belongs to the domain of the unconscious: «The repressed idea remains capable of action in the *Ucs.*, and must therefore have retained its cathexis.» This conception of a presentation (idea, *Vorstellung*) receiving cathexis from the *Ucs.* or retaining its «unconscious cathexis» (180) is central to the discussion here.

We still have the hypothesis of a withdrawal, but it all takes place in an «area» removed, somewhat removed I take it, from what is conscious. At this stage of the demonstration, the preconscious more and more appears as an antechamber to the unconscious rather than as an independent space.

In the whole discussion, in fact, the idea of a withdrawal does seem to stand in the way of Freud's reasoning. He retains the idea, but not without trying to render it more acceptable. What he is finding, or is about to find, is that cathexis, *Besetzung* (the fact of occupying or of being occupied, as in the case of a city or a place or a space), cannot be thought without the help of (and perhaps only comes

from) an active unconscious area. We can really speak at this point of a workingthrough on the part of the author of the concept of unconscious desire.

Thus there is a withdrawal of the preconscious, retention of the unconscious cathexis, or replacement of a preconscious cathexis by an unconscious one. (*S.E.*, XIV, 181)

Obviously, we are approaching a point where it will be very difficult not to grant the unconscious the major role in the whole process. More and more, now, cathexis, *Besetzung*, is seen as taking place in unconscious «space» and it logically follows that the notion of withdrawal comes, at first sight, if not to be criticized or abandoned, at least to be seriously questioned. And yet, on second thoughts, I must correct my previous statement which considered the idea of a «withdrawal» as a notion we could no longer accept. For the formulation, in fact, *Entziehung*, appears as a very appropriate representation of what happens when the subject – the unconscious subject, the infant, say –, forgets, «withdraws» from consciousness, the very inscriptions he is the result of. For the time being, Freud only speaks of cathected and repressed «ideas» [*Vorstellungen*], ideas which try «to penetrate into the system *Pcs.*» (*S.E.*, XIV, 180), *presentations*, in other words, which try to cross the «border» between what is unconscious and what is conscious, but the seat, the place where what is unconscious lies or is produced is clearly the Unconscious; more important, perhaps, we do seem to have here an intuition worth developing. A reversal of the first diagram has occurred and it is now obvious that the term «withdrawal» must be given another interpretation if we want it to be an adequate description of what is occurring in the «making» of a subject. This is probably why Freud, as we saw, resorted to «primal repression» at the end of what I take to be an important paragraph. Gradually and not without pain, the idea of a «split» in us, the notion of an impassable «bar» between *Cs.* and *Ucs.*, is being constructed: what was never conscious and already in a state of withdrawal cannot be withdrawn; today, however, we must add that if it was never conscious this was because very early in life it had been «forgotten,» in other words «withdrawn.» But of course «it» does manifest itself, and this is why the idea of renewed attempts, of repetition, is then to be found in the said paragraph.

Step by step, it seems, the nature of what the sign «Unconscious» expresses (the signified of the signifier /unkon'shus /) acquires more specific characteristics. No wonder, then, that the next paragraph suggests that we look for «another process which maintains the repression,» another process which «we can only find in the assumption of an anti-cathexis [*Gegenbesetzung*]» (*S.E.*, XIV, 181). And this time, it is not a question of «rejecting» what is not desirable for – or in – the system *Cs.*, but of the system *Pcs.* «protecting itself from the pressure upon it of the unconscious idea» (*S.E.*, XIV, 181) or, in the words of the 1925 translation, of guarding the system *Pcs.* «against the intrusion of the unconscious idea.» Whether the notion of a preconscious is needed or even useful is a point which shall be discussed later, but what is certain, let me insist on this, is that the image of something that should be expelled has been replaced by the image of something that should be prevented from coming in; the words used by Freud are explicit and leave little doubt: *schützen* (to protect) and *Andrang* (affluence, press). No wonder, then, that anticathexis should be followed – and in a way explained – by the notion of primal repression which we have already met.

The anticathexis is the sole mechanism of primal repression. (*S.E.*, XIV, 181)

Thus is the concept of *Ucs.* gradually constructed with more radicality; and the insistence with which I use the adverb «gradually» is simply a way of pointing out that time was an essential factor in the process, a truly psychoanalytical process indeed.⁶

⁶ See how Freud modifies his previous positions one by one, as for instance in: «... in the case of repression proper ('after-pressure') there is in addition withdrawal of the *Pcs.* cathexis. It is very possible that it is precisely the cathexis which is withdrawn from the idea that is used for anticathexis.» (*S.E.*, XIV, 181)

All things which incite us now to consider this new idea of «anticathexis» with more attention. For at this point an analysis of Freud's discourse in the two papers we are examining seems possible; it will show us what the progression of his reasoning must have been.

Starting from clinical observation and from his study of the dreaming process Freud became convinced that humans demonstrate a propensity to forget. This led him to the conception of *repression*. The discovery of this particular mental act, however, was only Freud's first step, a preliminary stage in fact. For, as we have seen, he did not stop at this observation and went on to explain how he thought the mental «machinery» of repression worked, reaching the conclusion that there were 2 (or 3!) very distinct systems, and thus constructing his well-known model. In the event, however, going, as it were, deeper and deeper into the mysteries of our mental life, he devised – had to devise? – the new concept of «primal repression». Already, this was a good image of our «bar,» for indeed we do not simply reject what is unpleasant and unacceptable but also «protect» ourselves from what we think is an undesirable intrusion. That it does not quite work this way, today we know, and «protect,» of course, is not the word we need, quite on the contrary in fact, as I have just tried to point out. Indeed, why on earth would I have to protect myself against what I (unconsciously) desire? Part of the answer to this difficult and paradoxical question is to be found in Freud's next paragraph, and it is particularly explicit: wishing to amend the idea of a «withdrawal,» he proceeds to clarify the notion of «primal repression.» In fact, as he says himself, he is looking for «another process which *maintains* the repression [...] and [...] ensures its being *established as well as continued.*» (S.E., XIV, 181) (my emphasis). What is here suggested is the idea of a force permanently at work, again very germane to what I call the bar. This other process, Freud called «anti-cathexis.» The idea of rejection is still useful to describe what happens to what we (desire to) forget, but the dynamics at work take on another aspect: what is *rejected* also appears as strongly *attracted* out of consciousness (I represented this mental movement as «x» in one of the diagrams above). What we have now is not simply a force which repels or rejects, but also another force which *maintains*. We have now two forces instead of one and we are approaching the conclusion that the force which attracts or maintains the repressed is the stronger one. Also, the idea of «something» against which we should guard ourselves now imposes itself. (I know that Freud wrote that it is «the system *Pcs.* [which] protects itself from the pressure upon it of the unconscious idea» (S.E., XIV, 181), but we shall see further down that there was no need for such a notion.) The final model is now simple and clear (?): it is definitely made of 2 systems (or 3!).

Perhaps it is not surprising that Freud should, at this precise point, feel the need to introduce his newly coined term of *metapsychology*. I read this as the sign that he was looking at mental phenomena from another viewpoint than the one he had had before, a new direction where what was unconscious in us appeared prevalent.

For the problem, from then on, is going to be to find out where to place the subject and his/her unconscious desire in the model now solidly constructed.

And this naturally invites us to look into the concept of anticathexis [*Gegenbesetzung*] more thoroughly. The first idea that comes to mind, I have already pointed this out, is that the term simply represents our «bar,» an image which illustrates or expresses what we think separates Freud's two systems Cs/Ucs. Cathexis, then, may not appear as such a good translation of *Besetzung* which, as we know, is the word for military occupation (although there are other signifieds of the sign). It seems the act of occupying, of taking possession of, a town or a country, is not represented strongly enough by «cathexis»; the french *investissement* may seem a slightly better choice at first, since *to besiege* is one of its signifieds, and since the verb *investir* has retained, among others, the sense of vesting someone with power. But in the end it is the economic dimension of the term which prevails today and the idea of a change of hands in the conduct of affairs is lost.⁷ (Bruno Bettelheim, in his *Freud and man's soul*,

⁷ *Besetzung*, with an *a*: garrison, occupying troops.

N.Y.: Knopf, 1983, discussed the English translation of Freud's works at length). Fortunately, the modification introduced by Freud, his addition of *gegen* to *Besetzung*, provides us with a clue. Whatever the precise psychoanalytical meaning of *Besetzung*, the act of occupying, securing, conquering an object, or the fact that the subject's libido is overpowered by a drive or, still, the act of discharging libido in a given direction, it is the *gegen* that matters, almost as an answer to the interrogation which accompanies the discovery that there exists a movement of our psyche such as repression. It is quite simple really, simple, but impossible to accept, because what I am discovering is that I do not cathect (!), act, love, hate, and we can say symbolize, as I thought I did. *Gegen*, anti-, counter-, perfectly expresses what happens in the case of repression: the difficulty, or impossibility, to «know,» the difference, in short, between knowledge and truth. The question was: why did «the preconscious cathexis» (but we won't pay too much attention to «preconscious» here) recoil from... accepting or taking charge of an «unconscious love-impulse which demanded to be translated into the system Pcs.?»⁸ But to this we do not get an answer, and, to our surprise, Freud suddenly seems to lose interest in his own interrogation and prefers at this point to concentrate on anxiety. (And of course there is no denying that anxiety does appear in the scene and is in some sort of relationship with repression; for Freud, though, it is a consequence of the rejection of the libidinal cathexis he has just observed, while it seems, today, that another hypothesis is possible.)

Left with our question, however, we are not altogether helpless and the terms of Freud's investigation are going to enable us to formulate an answer. Why the «withdrawal,» the recoil? *Gegen*, as we have seen, illustrates all this: not only what I wish is not what I think I wish – and I find «desire» now is a better word –, but the ultimate aim of unconscious desire is unattainable. There is no need to resort to the image of withdrawal or of a rejected idea, for the very simple reason that what I desire is already withdrawn, unreachable (and here I can also mention what «inscriptions» accompanied my birth and early childhood, inscriptions now forgotten). Interpreted thus, Freud's idea of a withdrawal perfectly translates our splitting and gives its full strong sense to the concept of Unconscious. *Gegen* is the bar. By looking more carefully at *Vorstellung* and at *Besetzung* we may perhaps understand this more clearly (and no doubt a discussion of *Repräsentanz* could also be helpful here). We must remember it all started with Freud's theory about the production of our dreams (and of our slips of the tongue and in the end of all that is symbolical in our behavior). Psychoanalysis is also a theory of representation: in short, we represent what we *unconsciously* desire. And here, as we saw, we come across the problem, or the paradox, which is at the heart of the psychoanalytical «discovery»: if it is true that we are inhabited by «desire,» how can it be that such desire is «repressed,» rejected, in a word, unconscious? The answer, quite simply – beyond the fact that what was «imprinted» in us as infants has been mostly forgotten –, is that desire is not what we think it is. This is where the concept of «bar» is most helpful, I think.

From the point of view of ontology, the bar represents the distance which separates the subject from the world-out-there. (The relationship with phenomenology is obvious.) A subject can never be an object. To put it another way, the perfect, ideal object we crave for cannot be reached: *the only thing we have at our disposal is a representation* of this «perfect» object, that is all, call it Truth, Unity or the One, Fusion, or even Communication. From this first, general, acceptance of our division

⁸ These words are taken from the 1925 translation. *The Standard Edition* (1957) has: «We must suppose that there was present in the *Ucs.* some love-impulse demanding to be transposed into the system *Pcs.*, but the cathexis directed from it from the latter system has drawn back from the impulse (as though in an attempt to flight) and the unconscious libidinal cathexis of the rejected idea has been discharged in the form of anxiety.»

Here is the original: «*Es ist anzunehmen, dass im Ubw eine Liebesregung vorhanden war, die nach der Umsetzung ins System Vbw verlangte; aber die von diesem System her ihr zugewendete Besetzung zog sich nach Art eines Fluchtversuches von ihr zurück und die unbewusste Libidosetzung der zurückgewiesenen Vorstellung wurde als Angst abgeführt.*»

between conscious and unconscious it follows that what we can call the ordinary objects we desire as particular subjects are also out of reach, the oedipal law being the best representation of this.

But because, as humans, we represent, because we produce representations of what we desire (and cannot reach), we have now at our disposal a theory which can help us to tell which subjects we are and how we can sort out what is destructive in our behavior. For it is not, of course, forbidden to ream!

In a way, Freud left the question about the «why» aside and preferred to deal with the «how.» But even though – in this paper at least – he somewhat eluded the question (a question he had so successfully formulated), his observations on the «how» are fully coherent with the fundamental structure he is establishing. For his observations helpfully describe the workings of our mental system. Depicting repression as an attempt at flight, he writes:

The [*Pcs.*] cathexis that has taken flight attaches itself to a substitutive idea which, on the one hand, is connected by association with the rejected idea, and on the other hand, has escaped repression by reason of its remoteness from that idea. This substitutive idea – a «substitute by displacement» – permits the still uninhabitable development of anxiety to be rationalized. It now plays the part of an anticathexis for the system *Cs.* (*Pcs.*), by securing it against an emergence in the *Cs.* of the repressed idea. (*S.E.*, XIV, 182)

«Flight,» fugitive cathexis, «substitutive idea,» connection «with a rejected idea,» «remoteness,» all these terms vividly describe how our mental system functions. And although we can no longer admit that unconscious desire can remain repressed *because* it manifests itself, it is not too difficult to right the formula and say that it is because unconscious desire *is* «repressed» (in fact is given an impossible object) that it manifests itself. If it did not, we could not speak of it! In the meantime, Freud leads the way and helps us to understand how we signify, *substitution* being the key word here.

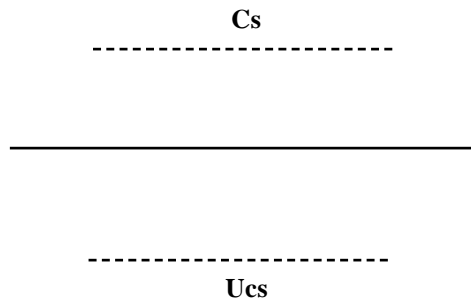
The substitutive idea acts in the one instance as a point at which there is a passage across from the system *Ucs.* (*S.E.*, XIV, 182)

5,6,7. «*Special Characteristics of the System Ucs.,*» «*Communication Between the Two Systems,*» «*Assessment of the Unconscious*»

No wonder then that the three remaining sections of Freud's paper deal with «substitution» and with representation. For between the two systems communication is possible, though it is always veiled. At this point, Freud's hesitations about the nature of what he has called the Preconscious can be analysed and understood. He himself acknowledges the lack of precision of the notion (in an attempt, admittedly, to clarify the notion, but this does not suffice to alter our first impression):

In this connection, also, we shall find means for putting an end to our oscillations [*Schwanken*] in regard to the naming of the higher system which we have hitherto spoken of indifferently, sometimes as the *Pcs.* and sometimes as the *Cs.* (*S.E.*, XIV, 189)

Placed between the system *Cs.* and the system *Ucs.*, the Preconscious – even more than simply the antechamber of the *Cs.* (or of the *Ucs.* for that matter) – is in fact nothing more than the abstract space where «communication» takes place; between the two systems there exists a circulation [*Verkehr*] and the structure of such a circulation, or communication, is the structure of the metaphor, that is to say of language. (In passing this is quite in keeping with D. Winnicott's theory of a transitional space and with W. Bion's hypothesis or image of a «porous membrane».) Since Freud has shown dreams had a meaning which could be analysed, conscious and unconscious are no longer irremediably separated, our «bar» has holes, imperceptible though they may be, holes through which, after a metaphorical transformation, unconscious desire can manifest itself. It is the «area» of these symbolical transformations that Freud was representing, was symbolising, when between *Cs.* and *Ucs.* he left a space which he called Preconscious.



this is no longer the area of a nondescript mental operation, neither conscious nor unconscious, but the space where transformation and therefore communication between *Cs.* and *Ucs.* takes place

It now seems quite possible to do away with what I called this awkward notion of «preconscious»; in fact, what Freud was describing was the abstract space of the metaphor, the area where symbolisation takes place.