

MEMORY AND PHANTASY*

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There is a presupposition in the term 'false memory syndrome' that there are memories that are true and memories that are false; that a false memory is something fabricated and that it therefore has no bearing on the truth; and what is fabricated is described as 'phantasy'. This approach distinguishes memory and phantasy so that their content is taken to be mutually exclusive.

A consideration of some texts of Freud problematises this set of assumptions and in the end renders them untenable.

The aim of this contribution to today's debate is to present something of what Freud says of the relations between 'memory' and 'phantasy' so that the status we grant to childhood events recollected in analysis may be called into question.

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In 1899 Freud wrote a paper entitled *Screen Memories*. What follows is the example that Freud gives of a seemingly trivial recollection from childhood which popped into a particular man's mind from time to time during his adult years for no identifiable reason:

I see a rectangular, rather steeply sloping piece of meadowland, green and thickly grown: in the green there are a great

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number of yellow flowers - evidently common dandelions. At the top end of the meadow there is a cottage and in front of the cottage door two women are standing chatting busily, a peasant-woman with a handkerchief on her head and a children's nurse. Three children are playing in the grass. One of them is myself (between the age of two and three); the others are my boy cousin, who is a year older than me, and his sister, who is almost exactly the same age as I am. We are picking the yellow flowers and each of us is holding a bunch of flowers we have already picked. The little girl has the best bunch; and, as though by mutual agreement, we - the two boys - fall on her and snatch away her flowers. She runs up the meadow in tears and as a consolation the peasant-woman gives her a big piece of black bread. Hardly have we seen this than we throw the flowers away, hurry to the cottage and ask to be given some bread too. And we are in fact given some; the peasant-woman cuts the bread with a long knife. In my memory the bread tastes quite delicious - and at that point the scene breaks off.²

The reason for the existence of this memory puzzles the man who recounts it. Why should such seemingly trivial events have come to occupy a fixed place in his memory? Why do some of the elements - the yellow of the flowers, the taste of the bread - have an exaggerated, almost hallucinatory quality? And why does a memory set at the age of three only begin to come to mind in his twenties?

Freud argues that it was only in relation to 'events' when the man was in his late teens that this 'memory' was produced. In effect two phantasies of

² S. Freud. *Screen Memories*, S.E., III, p. 311.

a more comfortable life - one in regard to marriage, the other in regard to career - produced the childhood memory. These phantasies constitute the 'events' of the man's teenage years. Freud proposes that the man 'projected the two phantasies onto one another and made a childhood memory of them'.³ So, is the original scene from childhood a complete fabrication? In this case there was a feeling of genuineness about it. The elements of the scene had been registered but it was only put together in the form in which it was recollected at the behest of phantasies from a later period of the man's life. Freud goes on to present an argument for the genuineness of the memory in the face of the conclusion that phantasies fabricated the childhood scene. Basically he is arguing that the memory-trace is found to meet the content of the phantasy. The link in the present instance is made through verbal content - the visual image in the memory of snatching his girl-cousin's bunch of flowers represents a phantasy of deflowering a young girl of his teenage years. In other words the metaphor of the phantasy is substituted by an image of actual but sexually innocent deflowering.

A recollection of this kind, whose value lies in the fact that it represents the memory impressions and thoughts of a later date whose content is connected with its own by symbolic or similar links, may appropriately be called a '*screen memory*'.⁴

As the phantasy 'slips away'⁵ into a childhood memory the scene itself may undergo changes. Falsifications of memory may be brought about in this way too. However, Freud is careful to point out that a complete fabrication of a childhood memory has not occurred on this occasion. The genuine origin of the memory is evidenced in the elements that do not 'fit in with the sense

³ *ibid*, p. 315.

⁴ *ibid*, p. 316.

⁵ *ibid*.

required by the phantasy'.⁶ A screen memory, then, recurs to conscious memory not because of its own content but because of that content's relation to other suppressed content. The screen memory represents that suppressed content in a form that is acceptable. It is characterised by being extremely well remembered and yet containing seemingly insignificant material.

At the end of this paper Freud suggests that the description of the functioning of screen memories may be applicable to the formation of all memories. While such a memory is 'false' if judged by the criterion of an 'objective' recording of events it is true as a representation of phantasies. As evidence of memory not being the result of a simple recording of an event simultaneously with its occurrence, that is, of memory being the result of some subsequent working over, Freud points to the presence of the subject in the memory: '... the subject sees himself in the recollection as a child ...'. Freud goes on to say that 'falsifications of memory are tendentious - that is they serve the purposes of the repression and replacement of objectionable or disagreeable impressions'.

In conclusion Freud says that a memory of an event from childhood gives us little or no indication of the historicity of the event; such memories do not emerge but are produced later in life; motives other than historical accuracy direct the formation of such memories. A childhood memory therefore does not function as a re-presentation of past events; rather it is a representative of a re-presentation of psychological processes and these processes are to be described as phantasy.

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Next let us consider the case history of the Wolfman in order to learn something more of Freud's use of this term phantasy as it appears in relation

⁶ *ibid*, p. 317.

to childhood recollections. The recollection of a significant scene of seduction at the hands of his sister occurred as a result of an intervention by Freud, in the form of a construction, on the basis of two screen memories, 'incomprehensible in themselves'⁷ involving the eccentric English governess. 'On one occasion as she was walking along in front of them,⁸ she said: 'Do look at my little tail!'. Another time, when they were on a trip, her hat flew away, to the two children's great satisfaction'.⁹ Freud thought that they pointed to the castration complex and provided the material for a construction in the analysis: a threat uttered by this governess initiated the Wolfman's change in behaviour at the age of three and a half. Freud says here that the historical veracity of such a construction is not what is important and that, if they are wrong, they do no damage. Such constructions serve the purpose of the work of analysis if 'there is some prospect of reaching a nearer approximation of the truth by means of them'.¹⁰ In his paper *Constructions in Analysis*,¹¹ written in 1937, Freud describes a construction as a 'preliminary labour' for the analyst. He explains that if the construction touches on something of the truth this will be reflected in an indirect way in the material that is spoken subsequently in the analysis. Again we are reminded that the truth being uncovered in analysis is not some supposedly verifiable historical account of events.

What then was the consequence of Freud's intervention? The recollection of a threat issued did not come to light but a series of dreams occurred and these seemed to be the vehicles of phantasies of aggressive sexual actions towards his sister. Freud dates the composition of these phantasies to the age of puberty. Here we see an interesting movement from

⁷ *ibid*, p. 19.

⁸ Serge and his sister.

⁹ *ibid*, p.19.

¹⁰ *ibid*, p.13..

¹¹ S. Freud. *Constructions in Analysis*, S.E., XXIII, pp. 257-269.

screen memories to a construction made on their basis to dreams evoked by the construction to phantasies from puberty. These later-constructed phantasies, therefore, were the determinants of the reminiscences of an earlier time. The source of these phantasies of aggressive sexual behaviour came to light when the Wolfman 'suddenly called to mind' scenes of being seduced 'into sexual practices'¹² by his sister at the age of three and a quarter: 'First came a recollection that in the lavatory, which the children used frequently to visit together, she had made this proposal: 'Let's show our bottoms', and had proceeded from words to deeds. Subsequently the more essential part of the seduction came to light, with full particulars as to time and place. It was in Spring at a time when his father was away; the children were in one room playing on the floor, while their mother was working in the next. His sister had taken hold of his penis and played with it, at the same time telling him incomprehensible stories about his Nanya, as though by way of explanation. His Nanya, she said, used to do the same thing with all kinds of people - for instance with the gardener: she used to stand him on his head and, and then take hold of his genitals'.¹³ The phantasies of aggressive actions towards his sister and the governess were revealed to have had a particular function: 'they were meant to efface the memory of an event which later on seemed offensive to the patient's masculine self-esteem, and they reached this end by putting an imaginary and desirable converse on the historical truth'.¹⁴ These phantasies were 'imaginative compositions' akin to the legends a nation forges 'to conceal the insignificance and failure of its beginnings'.¹⁵

¹² op.cit., Vol XVII, p.20.

¹³ ibid, p.20.

¹⁴ ibid, p.20.

¹⁵ ibid, p.20. Freud was fond of this analogy. Interestingly while here he uses it to describe the way phantasies rewrite the past when he uses it in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and in his essay on Leonardo da Vinci it is to describe the way screen memories and childhood recollections rework the past. The way in which the analogy fits to the operation of the Wolfman's phantasies and recollections and screen memories in itself suggests similarities in

Here phantasy appears as a 'fabrication' whose function it is to efface the recording of an event. It would seem to be the inverse of the phenomenon described in the *Screen Memories* paper where the apparent memory turned out to be a way of screening phantasy. This example from the case of the Wolfman might seem to be presenting phantasy as a falsification of what actually happened. Here phantasy conceals the recollection while in the earlier example the recollection concealed the phantasy.

Some in the 'Recovered Memory Therapy' camp might be tempted to privilege the example from the case of the Wolfman and to argue that with the bringing to light of the seduction scene the analysis had reached its goal: it had uncovered the instance of sexual abuse. To take this position would require ignoring the problematic nature of the relation between memory and phantasy that our first example bears witness to. It would also have to ignore the fact that this seduction scene was not, in Freud's view, the instance of trauma in the life of the Wolfman. The trauma took place some months after this scene and was presented through a dream. The effect of the experience of seduction - a passive sexual aim - only impacted at the time of the dream. A more fundamental level of phantasy is at work in this dream and it is its functioning that constitutes the trauma. Before considering that level of phantasy let us look at the sense of the term 'phantasy' as it emerges in the account of another example of a screen memory that turns up in this case history.

The Wolfman had a memory which illustrated the period when his naughtiness would suddenly switch to anxiety:

the functioning of these psychical productions. See *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, S.E., VI; *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood*, S.E., XI. This analogy is also used in *Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis*, S.E., X.

He was chasing a beautiful big butterfly with yellow stripes and large wings which ended in pointed projections - a swallowtail, in fact. Suddenly, when the butterfly had settled on a flower, he was seized with a dreadful fear of the creature, and ran away screaming.¹⁶

The significance of this screen memory emerged piecemeal until the Wolfman recollected a nurse-maid he had 'had' before his Nanya but whose existence had been 'forgotten' until this point in the analysis. Subsequently he recollected a scene in which the nursemaid, Grusha, 'was kneeling on the floor, and beside her a pail and a short broom made of a bundle of twigs; he was also there and she was teasing him or scolding him'.¹⁷ Analysis led to the construction that ...

... when he saw the girl scrubbing the floor he had micturated in the room and she had rejoined, no doubt jokingly, with a threat of castration.¹⁸

The micturation had been a way of obtaining masturbatory satisfaction. This scene became the template for the Wolfman's heterosexual love life, that is, the template which set the conditions for his falling in love - *die Liebesbedingung*.

A footnote to the case history of the Ratman provides an account of this function of phantasy. Freud is speaking about accounts of early manifestations of sexual activity that turn up in analysis. He says that certain facts have to be kept in mind in any attempt at determining the 'historical reality' of such a scene:

¹⁶ *ibid*, p.89.

¹⁷ S. Freud, *op. cit*, Vol XVII, p.91.

¹⁸ *ibid*, p.92.

... 'childhood memories' are only consolidated at a later period, usually at the age of puberty; and that this involves a complicated process of remodelling, analogous in every way to the process by which a nation constructs legends about its early history.¹⁹

Freud is describing work carried out retrospectively on early auto-erotic activities which casts them in the form of the 'seductions and assaults' of object-love relations.²⁰ The individual will attempt '*to efface the recollection of his auto-erotic activities*'²¹ through a rewriting of events in the light of later experience at the level of object-love. That is, the translation is motivated and influenced by changes in libidinal investments. Freud tells us that 'in constructing phantasies about his childhood the individual *sexualizes his memories*; that is, he brings commonplace experiences into relation with his sexual activity, and extends his sexual interest to them - though in doing this he is probably following upon traces of a really existing connection.'²²

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Let us now consider a third sense of the term 'phantasy', a fundamental sense. The dream which the Wolfman had just before his fourth birthday re-presented the collection of the elements of his erotic life and their arrangement in a form which was intolerable for the dreamer. Later Freud will prefer the term 'activation' as a more accurate description for what is, in

¹⁹ op.cit., Vol X.

²⁰ Very briefly, the term object-love refers to a relation with a real other; it contrasts with the forms of activity termed auto-erotic.

²¹ *ibid.* Freud's italics.

²² *ibid.* Freud's italics.

fact, the coming-into-being of a phantasy that is not of the same order as those that emerged in the interpretation of the screen memories above. If we can use the term re-collection it indicates a sense of being a collection of things from the past drawn together. Freud uses the word *Nachtraglichkeit* which has the sense of 'dragging the burden back'.²³ What burden was dragged back? It comprised the elements of the boy's erotic life and the trauma was due to the signification that then fell from their arrangement. One element of his erotic life was that which was inscribed through his being seduced by his sister - his passive sexual aim. A more fundamental element is the collection of effects that resulted from the impressions of what is called the primal scene.

The primal scene is what is 'activated', howsoever deferred, in the dream:

What sprang into activity that night out of the chaos of the dreamer's unconscious memory-traces was the picture of copulation between his parents, copulation in circumstances which were not entirely usual and were especially favourable for observation... He had been sleeping in his cot, then, in his parents' bedroom, and woke up, perhaps because of his rising fever, in the afternoon, possibly at five o'clock, the hour which was later marked out by depression. It harmonises with our assumption that it was a hot summer's day, if we suppose that his parents had retired, half undressed, for an afternoon *siesta*. When he woke up, he witnessed a *coitus a tergo* [from behind], three times repeated; he was able to see his mother's genitals as well as

²³ I am indebted to Tom McGrath for this translation.

his father's organ; and he understood the process as well as its significance.²⁴

Whatever about the form of his understanding at the age of one and a half it was the way in which the registration of these events was made sense of in the phantasy which came into being when he was four years old that was to have the effect of trauma in the Wolfman's life. The phantasy, which has to do with taking up a position *viz-a-viz* the phallus, uses the mnemonic-traces from the impressions of the primal scene for its content. It is not 'caused' by the primal scene in any simplistic way. The signification of the phantasy at the age of four is also informed by the boy's response to other events - most noticeably the seduction at the age of three and a quarter, which gave him a passive sexual aim. This deferred activation of the observation of coitus 'operated like a second seduction'.²⁵ What was this second seduction? It was a wish to be seduced. It was a wish for sexual satisfaction from his father. Anxiety intervened in order to repudiate this wish since it brought with it the condition of castration. What becomes evident is that the relation to the reality of castration is intimately connected to the institution of the phantasy.

How does this understanding of phantasy as that which fundamentally supports the subject relate to our everyday notions of events and their recollection? The 'events' which contributed to the constituting of the phantasy were not readily available to conscious waking recollection. The seduction scenes only came to light through the mediation of screen memories and dreams and the analysis of these formations. The primal scene is a construction based on the analysis of the dream at the age of four. The provenance of these 'scenes' does not exclude them from having contributed to the truth of the subject. In fact, if we pay any attention to Freud's discovery, the truth of the subject can only be heard from within such

²⁴ S. Freud, *op.cit.*, Vol XVII, p.36-37.

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 47.

formations. As Freud reminds us in the case history of the Wolfman, 'dreaming is another kind of remembering.'²⁶

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A lot more could be said about the implications of Freud's account of the case of the Wolfman and of the relations between phantasy and memory that appear there. I hope in what I have said here today that I have been able at least to indicate a very problematic set of relations which cannot be avoided by an appeal to the supposed 'objective facts' of the case. Before concluding I will recapitulate the senses of phantasy that have emerged in this short account of Freud's contribution.

Analysis of two screen memories led to the uncovering of a recollection of being seduced by his sister. This seduction which is taken to have actually happened is considered to have given the Wolfman a passive sexual aim. The phantasies that entered the analysis here were attempts to rewrite the past. These productions are imaginary and reactionary; they manifest themselves as phantasies of assault.

Analysis of another screen memory led to the uncovering of another seduction but this time the seducer was the Wolfman himself and the object of his attention the nursemaid, Grusha. Again this event is taken as actually having happened. The primarily autoerotic act was subsequently worked into a scene of seduction which casts the Wolfman in the masculine role. This is an example of memory being sexualised, a case of 'retrospective phantasying' and we may consider it a second use of the term phantasy. This use is not very different from the first use in that both rearrange mnemonic material. However, they are worth distinguishing because this second sense

²⁶ *ibid*, p.51.

is more like a translation of material from one stage of libidinal development to another.

The third use of the term phantasy describes something fundamental in the coming-into-being of the subject. It is the instituting of the sense of erotic life of the child and this instituting is informed by earlier erotic events.

In the light of these senses of the term 'phantasy' and their relations to the recollection of events and to the truth of the subject we should be challenged to question any prioritising of the historicity of events, to interrogate what we understand as the history of the subject and to bear in mind what Freud tells us of the ways and means by which the truth speaks.

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