

Repetition compulsion and the pleasure principle

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Freud starts his paper on “Remembering, repeating and working through” recalling the changes of psychoanalytic technique since its beginnings. All of the techniques before 1914 relied directly or indirectly on remembering. Freud even speaks of an “impulsion to remember¹”. He opposes this “impulsion to remember” with the “compulsion to repeat”, which is witnessed whenever the former fails.

One of the aspects of this mutant paper is that it forces Freud to give up his excessive confidence in remembering. We understand today that complete remembering is in fact impossible. No patient can truly remember all the incidences and consequences of an event. If one recalls a fact through memory, it is generally dissociated to avoid the repetition of its traumatic nature linked to its other aspects, i.e. the hallucinating quality of remembering, its uncanny quality, its resonance in the body, etc. I shall come back to this point later in the clinical material. As Freud describes in

¹ S. Freud, *S. E.*, XII, p. 151.

the cases of some patients: "...the patient does not *remember* anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but *acts it* out. He reproduces it not as memory but as an action; he *repeats* it without of course, knowing that he is repeating it¹."

It is generally accepted that remembering here takes the form of action. I wish to dissociate the repetition compulsion from its expression through action. In my view the compulsion to repeat can be found in the material outside action. The repetition is not in itself harmful. What is harmful is that the patient seems to totally ignore the relationships between the repeated fragments. They are put together side by side without any connection. In some patients, the compulsion to repeat may be preceded by a paralysis of communication.

The patient, who has been informed about the fundamental rule, in spite of an eventful history and a long story of illness pretends that he has nothing to say: "He is silent and declares that nothing occurs to him²." I do not believe as Freud does that this can be taken as a mere repetition of a homosexual attitude towards the analyst, which is used as a resistance.

I am struck by the fact that what Freud describes here has also been found by the Paris Psychosomatic School with psychosomatic patients who

¹ *Op.cit.*, XII, p. 150.

² *Ibid.*

suffer from limitations in their mental functioning. It seems that we are facing the same situation: a temporary defect of psychic functioning. If nothing occurs to the patient who may present a blank mind, it is obviously to prevent any association and thus to avoid the possibility of giving a meaning to what happens in the session. This is not only a consequence of repression but is also a more radical expression as an effect of negation.

What is important is the unrecognized link between the act and its content which can also be found elsewhere. The specificity of the compulsion to repeat is the fact of repeating in different forms without any awareness that a similar same content is repeated. The different forms of repetition seem alien to one another. Misrecognition of the different forms of the repetition is responsible for the continuing reoccurrence.

In other words, there is no recognition of the different forms of the repetition; the fact that they all deal with the same content is denied. But when Freud returns to this topic a second time in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in 1920 – six years later –, he comes to examine how this compulsion to repeat relates to the pleasure principle: “But how is the compulsion to repeat – the manifestation of the power of the repressed – related to the pleasure principle? It is clear that the greatest part of what is re-experienced under the compulsion to repeat must cause unpleasure to the

ego, since it brings to light activities of the repressed instinctual impulses. This, however, is unpleasure of a kind we have already considered and does not contradict the pleasure principle: unpleasure for one system and simultaneously satisfaction for the other. But we now come to a new and very remarkable fact namely that the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences that include no possibility of pleasure and that can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses that have since been repressed (S.E., XVIII, 20).

So, it seems to be the end of the sovereignty of the pleasure principle; under the pressure of a compulsion the unwanted situations and painful emotions are repeated.

The hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat seems “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides¹.” This is Freud’s most extreme statement on the repetition compulsion.

Are we definitely beyond the pleasure principle? We may think this is Freud’s final opinion stated in 1920 but we would be wrong in saying so. It was in fact a very perilous decision to give up the sovereignty of the pleasure principle, because opening the way to the destructive drives

¹ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

reinforced the repetition compulsion. Freud also adds: "...the compulsion to repeat and instinctual satisfaction which is immediately pleasurable seem to converge here into an intimate relationship¹." We find here more complementarity than antagonism.

Returning to this subject again in the "Economic problem of masochism" in 1924, Freud considers the dangers of masochism. As a result he extends the power of the pleasure principle: "We are tempted to call the pleasure principle the watchman over our life rather than merely over our mental life²." For after the introduction of both the death and the destructive drives, it is not only the mental life which has to be protected but indeed our whole life.

Realizing that he had been wrong in understanding the pleasure principle in mere quantitative terms – i.e. reducing tensions – he concluded that it was necessary to take into account "some characteristic of it which we can only describe as a qualitative one³" and he attributed to the life instinct the task to represent the demands of the libido. "The conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that the description of the pleasure principle as the watchman over our life cannot be rejected⁴."

¹ *Ibid.*

² *Op.cit.*, XIX, p. 159.

³ *Op.cit.*, XIX, p. 160.

⁴ *Op.cit.*, XIX, p. 161.

So we can see that after the pervading wave of the death instinct, in a further move, the power of the pleasure-unpleasure principle is restored. Though we are confronted with a fusion of life and death instincts, being alive is a testimony of the preeminence of the combined action of the life drives and the pleasure-unpleasure principle. Ending his work with the *Outline*, he concludes: “The id obeys the inexorable pleasure principle. And not the id alone. It seems that the activity of the other psychological agencies too is able only to modify the pleasure principle but not to nullify it; and it remains a question of the highest theoretical importance, and one that has not yet been answered, when and how it is ever possible for the pleasure principle to be overcome¹.” It seems here that the “inexorable” is a quality which was rather used to qualify the repetition compulsion.

How should we face Freud’s contradictions and changes of opinion? Without giving a definite answer to these questions, it may be that some arguments in the final chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (VII) give some indication. Freud writes: “We have found that one of the earliest and most important functions of the mental apparatus, is to bind the instinctual

¹ *Op.cit.*, XXIII, p. 198.

impulses which impinges on it. [...] The binding is a preparatory act which introduces the dominance of the pleasure principle¹.”

The binding is seen as a preliminary function which serves to show the way to the final elimination in the pleasure of discharge. Such a preliminary seems lacking in the repetition compulsion. Freud gives an enlightening explanation of this. At the dawn of life there are many failures that prevent the pleasure principle from functioning on the primal forms of mental life. “In later times the dominance of the pleasure principle is very much more secure².” At the beginning of mental life the struggle for pleasure is far more intense than later on but more restricted; it has to submit to frequent interruptions. I wish to specify that my way of understanding binding differs from Freud’s. According to him, primary process is an expression of unbinding. Seen in a more modern view where the drives are considered less elementary and the drive organization present from the beginning, the concept of drive binding is also present at this stage. We do not need to consider binding as relating only to the passage from primary to secondary process. Binding is a characteristic of drive organization even before it becomes an expression of primary processes. Therefore binding is a form of primitive activity enhanced by the drive organization, even before

¹ *Op.cit.*, XVIII, p. 62.

² *Op.cit.*, p. 63.

the passage from primary to secondary process. In other words, unbinding relates to very early mechanisms. It is one of the expressions of failure preventing the access to the pleasure-unpleasure principle.

We can identify in these failures one of the reasons why the setting of the repetition compulsion establishes no relationships between the fragments repeated, its tendency for discharge and its expression for unpleasurable as well as pleasurable contents. Discharge does not mean acting out but getting rid of the meaning of the content with or without acting out.

As binding works in conjunction with unbinding, we may attribute the failures of binding to assert the dominance of the pleasure principle to an excessive development of unbinding processes. This happens whenever there is a refusal of the object's responses, as a way to protest against its unsatisfactory nature. No general meaning is ever revealed to form a coherent group of ideas. Unbinding makes any group of ideas uncoordinated and meaningless. And it is when it is at its peak that the patient becomes silent. Nothing occurs to him and even if anything occurs he will not be able to state it.

So, action or acting out is not the only way by which the repetition compulsion expresses itself. The loss of meaning is a consequence of the experiences being unbound.

Clinical example

The patient, a woman around fifty, is a psychiatrist working in an institution for adolescents suffering from character disorders. I have been seeing her for more than 18 years in a face to face relationship, three times a week. She had made many suicidal attempts and presented compulsive behaviour. She starts the session saying a rape has occurred in her institution. She adds that things have changed: in the past the rapist would have been excluded from the institution immediately without the staff wanting to hear anything about the circumstances of the rape. Today, it is different, the situation is investigated. Not only is the rape victim heard but also the rapist with an effort to understand. I made the assumption that maybe she wanted to understand more about some features of her own history.

After listening to her for a while, I decided to intervene and I told her that this story of rape had maybe made her think about the sexual relationships between her parents she had told me about many times in the past. She answered: “You mean sodomy? Oh! I would even say that with

them it was a kind of exhibitionism, shouts, cries, roars, a restless agitation.”

This was her interpretation of all that excitement.

This patient was convinced that her father was violent towards her mother at night. Every evening she would unload the gun he had to defend himself from potential aggressors and that he kept in his bedside locker. The session ends with me keeping the association to myself.

The next session she does not turn up. At the following session she shows up excessively surprised: “Doctor Green, I do not know what happened after the last session. I had given up drinking two months ago but after the session I drank a bottle and a half of champagne. It’s hallucinating!” and she repeats “It’s hallucinating!” I say to her: “Yes, this evocation of the sexual relationships of your parents was for you like a hallucination which inclined you to drink.” I am convinced that aside from the verbal evocation of the scene, a hallucinatory functioning was at work in which she found herself caught up. Her compulsion to drink again was meant to relive in her body an excitement, supposed to be associated with the scene. The drunkenness was meant to complete the verbal expression used in the recalling of the past.

Some time later the patient told me that she had given up drinking. But two years later, during a phase of conflict with her mother, she had an

incomprehensible nightmare that troubled her a lot. The nightmare was very difficult to describe, representing people with strange faces. She even said that the people had very unusual faces and could not recognize them. They were moving together performing actions that she could not describe. This time the uncanny was overwhelming. She could not understand what was behind the scenes she dreamt of and could not make any suggestion about their meaning. Like Freud's patients, when asked, she kept silent, saying that nothing occurred to her and that she could not find any meaning to it. For me it was obvious that the nightmare was about the same content as previously, another version of a primal scene fantasy that she could not admit to be still present in her and still active. She was rather depressed and presented a blank mind. She stayed nearly two months in this state of suspension of any mental activity. All my encouragements to associate remained ineffective, until she suddenly reenacted with me the same behaviour she had had earlier with her former analyst, a very skilled colleague. She absconded, not attending our later sessions, making herself unreachable without giving any explanation to her interruption, in spite of many invitations to see me. I must confess that I had considered this possibility in the past but I felt falsely protected from this eventuality, the transference being well-grounded and having resisted such threats in the past.

What I want to emphasize is that besides the verbal expression of the trauma in the past, an excitement concomitant with this forced her to complete the action of the words by the need to repeat the excitement in the body. When she says “it’s hallucinating”, this is not only a figure of speech, it also reveals a potential hallucinatory process which overwhelms the memory coming to play. Hallucination on the one hand and drinking on the other are saturating the experience. But in the nightmare the content was too close to her understanding. It had to be denied.

When the compulsion to repeat produces the nightmare, nothing of the earlier reminiscence is recognized. On the contrary, feelings of strangeness belonging to the uncanny do not allow any recognition. But the anxiety is here, more important than ever and the only solution is to flee, which is also itself a repetition. Therefore *durcharbeiten* (working through) needs from the patient the courage to stand it. Her flight could also be understood as a manifestation of the pleasure principle against the awareness of repetition compulsion, at the expense of losing the possibility of finding a meaning to it.

Conclusion

How are we to understand the relationships between repetition compulsion and the pleasure principle?

One point which is central to Freud's theory is the relationship of the drives to the body. The drives are not direct expressions of the body. For instance, in the *Outline*, Freud writes: "There can be no question but that the libido has somatic sources, that it streams to the ego from various organs and parts of the body¹." In the same work he had also written about the id: "...it contains the instincts which originate from the somatic organization and which find a first psychical expression here [in the id] in forms unknown to us²." It follows from this last remark that even when closely linked to the somatic organization there is a transformation into the first psychical expression in a form that is unknown to us.

What is this transition? How can we figure it? When Freud is criticized for his so-called biological inspiration, one forgets that he does not mix up the somatic organization with the first psychical expression. In our understanding this is primarily the work leading to the drives, mysterious as it is.

¹ *Op. cit.*, XXIII, p. 151.

² *Op. cit.*, XXIII, p. 145.

We propose to understand the passage from the somatic organization to the first psychological expression as the result of the interaction between two beings. In other words, it is the contact with the mother which creates the first psychological expression.

So the reference to the drives does not at all imply a reference to an elementary psychic organization. In recent times, when considering some mental organizations whether psychosomatic or psychopathic ones, different authors have come to the conclusion that something was lacking in the patients' supposed drive organization, as if we were gone beyond drive organization. We came to the conclusion that the drive organization, contrary to what is usually understood, is already a complex organization, a point that Freud could not discover because of his lack of experience with regressed mental structures.

Maybe Freud considered drive activity as elementary because he only had in mind neurotics and psychotics who are in fact strongly organized mental structures. Today we are more frequently in contact with less organized structures (borderline personality disorders, psychosomatic constellations). Compared to them, neurotics and sometimes psychotics seem, even when difficult to treat and to modify, at least clearer to decipher.

This is why we consider drive activity as more organized than we thought in the past. We must also ask ourselves questions about the pleasure principle.

Maybe we should go back to Freud's earliest intuitions. In the beginning, approximately up until 1915, Freud uses indistinctly "unconscious representations" and "instinctual impulses" without making any sharp differences between the two. After the paper on "Remembering, repeating, working through" he will exclusively adopt the expression "instinctual impulses". In "The Uncanny" (1919) we read: "For it is possible to recognize the dominance in the unconscious mind of a "compulsion to repeat" proceeding from the instinctual impulses and probably inherent to the very nature of the instincts – a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle –, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character, and still very clearly expressed in the impulses of small children¹." He adds that whatever reminds us of this compulsion to repeat is perceived as uncanny and also observes that this compulsion to repeat is strong enough to place itself above and beyond the pleasure principle.

Therefore the "daemonic character", probably closely related to the repetitive power of the instinctual impulses, overrules a more delicate and fragile organization, the pleasure principle, which has been constructed on a

¹ *Op. cit.*, XVII, p. 238.

less raw basis of mental functioning. Could it be that the pleasure principle was built less on impulses than on unconscious representations born from experience? Freud will later abandon his reference to unconscious representations, leaving unanswered the origins of the pleasure principle.

The real mutation will be accomplished in 1923 in *The Ego and the Id*. At the end of chapter I, Freud discards the concept of the unconscious. Having to admit several forms of being unconscious Freud distances himself from the concept: "...we must admit that the characteristic of being unconscious begins to lose significance for us. It becomes a quality which can have many meanings, a quality which we are unable to make, as we should have hoped to do the basis of far reaching and inevitable conclusions¹." In introducing the id, any allusion to unconscious representation disappears and is indeed replaced by the instinctual impulse, which now becomes the way to qualify the elementary mental life.

In deciding to give preference to the "instinctual impulse" and giving up the unconscious representation, the difference between action and impulse becomes very slim. This may be why in the compulsion to repeat, the patient sometimes acts instead of remembering, as if he took the shortest way from impulse to acting. No mediation, no representation, no postponing.

¹ *Op. cit.*, XIX, p. 18.

In the repetition compulsion the discharge is not in the manifestation of acting but in that of the repetition itself, which is the contrary of working through since, in this case, the same contents are endlessly renewed to help the appearance of a new meaning or of a hidden one.

A fundamental choice was here put forward: discharge in eliminating the tension or working through leading to object representation.

To avoid the issue of the repetition the subject has to include the relationship to the object. My patient always thought that her mother knew everything about her. She used to say that her mother knew her thoughts better than herself... She had no thought of her at all and moreover said she did not know how to think and even what thinking was. Her life was very restricted. Repetition compulsion was a substitute for thinking. But when the repetition compulsion involved her main trauma the situation became unbearable.

When Freud writes that the hypothesis of a compulsion to repeat seems “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle it overrides¹” he is maybe suggesting that the pleasure principle relies on complex phenomena: unconscious representations, some form of

¹ *Op. cit.*, XVIII, 22.

elaboration of the drives, some capacity of choice between pleasure and unpleasure, the avoidance of unpleasure, etc.

So we understand that the pleasure principle is by no means a basic mechanism. The pleasure principle is fragile, delicate, as we are reminded in Freud's remarks in the final chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. It seems that shifting to the second topographical model, Freud was not only concerned with the description of an activity more primitive than the unconscious but also of a kind of untamed form of functioning. And if the pleasure principle is inexorable, the destructive drives seem to be even more when they are not fused with the life drive. It is as if the oldest psychic organization, the one that can never be tamed, is that of the destructive drives. Therefore, even if we choose to remain with the idea that this pleasure principle is the watchman over our life, such a question is less based on raw material but implies some kind of transformation of the drives.

Finally we may summarize our position as follows: if the repetition compulsion is daemonic, it appears to be due to its narcissistic nature which is bound endlessly to repeat itself. The pleasure principle stems from an evolution in the object's response and it may ultimately become inexorable, losing its quality to safeguard us, to act as guardian of our survival and end up being an ally of the repetition compulsion. But, by and large, it acts on

the side of Eros to preserve our life and to fight against the destructive drives occurring, for the most part, on the side of repetition.