

Searching for the Lost Cause:

Freud's First Steps: (towards a theory of Anxiety)

Helen Sheehan

This paper follows Freud's first tentative steps towards his understanding of the origins of anxiety. It will deal in particular with his work from 1892 until 1895 and will engage briefly with Lacan's comments on the matter.

Key Words: Anxiety, origin, aetiology, neurasthenia, anxiety neurosis, transformation, jouissance, affect, soma, psyche, Other.

It is important to remember that we cannot separate theory from practice for Freud and to remember that every discovery Freud has made has in one way or another been influenced not only by his theoretical work but by what was happening in his personal life and this is because, it seems to me, for Freud theory is not something you do – you write about. What you write about are the little threads of significance that go to frame a Life and then we call this theory. In other words, as Lacan insists the unconscious is that which does not stop not writing itself.

And, in this context, it is interesting to note that it was at the time of his definitive separation from a valued friendship with Dr Joseph Breuer that Freud began to work on anxiety states.

Freud met Breuer at the Institute of Physiology in Vienna in the late 1870's and sharing the same interests and outlook, they quickly became friends. He became as Freud says , "my friend and helper in my difficult circumstances. We grew accustomed to share all our scientific interests with each other" ⁽¹⁾

**

(1) Jones E. The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud. Basic Books. New York 1953. Vol I. P. 223.

From December 1880 to January 1882 Breuer treated what has become recognised as a classical case of hysteria – that of Fraulein Anna O. This fascinating case history will have to be left for another day but suffice to say that for Breuer the case did not end so well.

While the break with Breuer in 1894 may have been the exciting cause, as it is called, of Freud's first investigations into anxiety, we see that as early as 1892, especially in his letters to Fliess, in Draft A, he first posed the following question "Is the anxiety of anxiety neurosis derived from the inhibition of the sexual function or from the anxiety linked with their aetiology".⁽²⁾

As early as 1892 albeit in an embryonic form we are dealing with Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety. We know that "symptoms constitute the sexual activity of the patient"⁽³⁾ We also know that for Freud when the question of aetiology is raised we are looking for the thread, the cause and indeed could we not say in this case, the lost cause? Freud did not become the founder of psychoanalysis overnight.

Towards the end of this draft A, Freud proposes a tentative answer to his question with the following thesis "Anxiety neurosis is, in part a consequence of inhibition of the sexual function."⁽⁴⁾

(2) Freud S. Pre Psychoanalytic Publications and Unpublished Drafts. S.E. Vol. I. P. 177.

(3) Freud S. A case of hysteria, Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works. S.E. Vol VII. P. 163.

(4) Freud S. op.cit. Vol I P.178.

Draft B, again written to Fliess, the following year 1893, continues with this search for the missing thread. He entitles it *The Aetiology Of The Neuroses*.⁽⁵⁾ The first group of the major neuroses studied by Freud were Hysteria and Obsessional neurosis. The second group was neurasthenia which he divided up into two functional states separated by their aetiology as well as by their symptomatic appearance – neurasthenia proper and the anxiety neurosis”. He wrote with regard to this “anxiety neurosis (Angstneurose) is a name which, I may say in passing, I am not pleased with myself.”⁽⁶⁾ Both these were later known as the Actual Neuroses. Freud was later to say “I was studying the “actual neuroses” at a time when analysis was still a very long way from distinguishing between processes in the ego and processes in the id and the observations which I made at the time still hold good”⁽⁷⁾. He continues elsewhere “the aetiological significance of sexual life is a crude fact, ----- but as a rough guide it retains its value to this day”⁽⁸⁾ In return to Draft B we see that Freud here is beginning to make a distinction between neurasthenia and anxiety neurosis. In the 1880’s U.S. physicians developed a diagnostic profile for a condition afflicting the leading families of the United States. The best educated, most cultured Americans were suffering from a new distinctly American condition that was destroying their health. They had migraines, poor digestion, fatigue, depression and even complete collapse in alarming numbers. They suffered from neurasthenia – nervous exhaustion. Dr. George Beard, an American Neurologist had published “*American Nervousness, its Causes and its Consequences*” in 1881.⁽⁹⁾ Beard saw neurasthenia as created

(5) *ibid.* PP. 179 – 184.

(6) Freud S. *Early Psycho Analytic Publications*. Vol. III. P.146.

(7) Freud S. *An Autobiographical Study, Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety, Lay Analysis and Other Works*. S.E. Vol XX. P.P. 109-110.

(8) Freud S. *Introductory lectures on Psycho Analysis (Part III)*. S.E. Vol XVI pp. 385 – 386.

(9) Beard G. *American Nervousness, its Causes and its Consequences: A supplement to Nervous Exhaustion (Neurasthenia)* New York. Putnam 1881.

by the hectic fast paced life in American Cities – as we see he even called it “American Nervousness”. The nations leaders in business, government and the arts were made ill by the stresses and strains of modern life. The only cure was withdrawal from the pressure of urban life, rest, and a simpler, healthier lifestyle.

The diagnosis and treatment for neurasthenia were distinctly American but the concept soon became part of standard medicine in England, France, Germany and other parts of Europe and eventually in China and Japan.

As the condition gradually spread to more and more groups of society, not merely the elite, neurasthenia became almost a badge of social status. As well, of course, anxious and depressed patients were reassured that their symptoms were caused by a physical disease (exhausted nerves) and not by any psychological issue.

Freud was very familiar with the concept of neurasthenia as another letter to Fliess bears witness. Referring to the above mentioned Dr. Beard he writes “My lectures are attended by eleven students who sit there with pencil and paper and hear damnably little that is positive. I play the part of a neuropathological yokel in front of them and comment on Beard but my interest is elsewhere”.⁽¹⁰⁾

This “interest” we know was the sphere of psychopathology and with his burgeoning theory of anxiety, Freud begins his first independent entry into this domain. Freud writes in Draft B “Every case of neurasthenia is no doubt marked by a certain lowering of self confidence, by pessimistic expectation and an inclination to distressing antithetic ideas”.⁽¹¹⁾

(10) The complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess. Harvard University Press, 1985 Trans: Masson J. letter of Nov 5th 1897. P. 277.

(11) Freud S. Op. cit. Vol I. P. 182.

He continues this in Draft B. He describes three forms of anxiety neurosis (1) anxiety attacks but this never occurs without chronic symptoms (2) a chronic state of anxiety the symptoms of which one (a) anxiety relating to the body (hypochondria) (b) anxiety relating to the function of the body (agoraphobia, claustrophobia, vertigo) (c) anxiety relating to decisions and memory such as folie de doute, obsessive brooding and so on and the (3) third form of anxiety neurosis Freud lists as periodic depression, an attack of anxiety lasting for weeks or months. These findings lead him to question whether anxiety neurosis should not be detached (abtrennen) from neurasthenia as an independent anxiety neurosis. Beginning with the real of the body and working through the Imaginary functions of the body, he arrives by way of decision making and memory traces, at leaving open, for the moment, the question of the relationship between mind and body and he now begins to detach anxiety neurosis from neurasthenia. In this way he begins to untangle this knot, thereby introducing a break between the real and the symbolic.

Freud is assured about How Anxiety originates, (as he terms it) when we get to Draft E in 1894. “It quickly became clear to me that the anxiety of my neurotic patients had a great deal to do with sexuality”.⁽¹²⁾ He is here beginning to rule out anxiety as an hysterical symptom even though the connections between them are obvious enough. There are at least three reasons, it seems to me why Freud insists that anxiety is not hysteria.

(1) While anxiety neurosis is a neurosis of damming up, like hysteria, what happens in the former is that anxiety arises by transformation out of the accumulated sexual tension, so that we can say with Lacan at this juncture, that we can take anxiety in its minimal definition as a signal. (Draft E).

(2) So that Freud can say in the final section of this 1894 paper (Draft E) – that anxiety neurosis is actually the somatic counterpart to hysteria.

In anxiety, the accumulation of tension has been transformed whereas in hysteria it is worked over and turned into a psychological conflict.

(12) Freud S. *ibid.* pp 189 – 190.

(3) But – the single most important reason Freud gives for detaching anxiety neuroses from hysteria, is because for him anxiety is not a hysterical symptom. It is an independent entity and has its own structure. In other words, as Lacan says “anxiety is framed”.⁽¹³⁾ Beginning with the proposition that it is a physical factor in sexual life that produces anxiety, he then sets out to find out “what factor”. With this aim in view he brings together the cases in which he finds anxiety arising from a sexual causation. There is quite a long heterogeneous list of examples of people suffering from differing aspects of anxiety and he is therefore led to ask “How are all these separate cases to be brought together?”⁽¹⁴⁾ He concludes that it is a question of accumulation of physical sexual tension. This accumulation is as a result of discharge being prevented but, since there is no anxiety contained in this accumulation Freud states “the position is expressed by saying that *anxiety* has arisen by *transformation* out of the accumulated sexual tension”⁽¹⁵⁾ He explains this transformation: “When there is an abundant development of physical sexual tension but this cannot be turned into affect by psychical working - over - because of insufficient development of psychical sexuality or because of the attempted suppression of the latter, or of its falling into decay, or because of habitual alienation between physical and psychical sexuality – the sexual tension is transformed into *anxiety*”⁽¹⁶⁾ Freud is here making a distinction between physical sexual tension and anxiety – anxiety arises from a certain transformation, so that anxiety is not simply the automatic result of a physical sexual tension that has not been discharged. And, is he not also here making a distinction between somatic sexual excitation and psychical sexuality?

Instead something happens here – there is what Lacan says we can call “an interruption in the support of the libido”.⁽¹⁷⁾ It is in combining the signal of anxiety with this interruption in the support of the libido that Freud indicates the source of

(13) Lacan J. Anxiety (1962 – 1963) Book X. Trans: Gallagher C. Seminar : 19:12:1962.

(14) Freud S. op cit. Vol I. P 191.

(15) Freud S. ibid. P. 191.

(16) Freud S. ibid P. 194.

(17) Lacan J. Op. cit. Anxiety. Seminar: 16.1.63.

the tendency and is it not here that tentatively at least we can place the subject and while we are saying (the personal pronoun) “I” (as Lacan reminds us) at the level of the unconscious there is situated objet a. In other words, I am inscribed as a subject, as a quotient in the Other. I am dependent on the Other but the condition of this dependency means that there is a residue, a remainder, something is left over. Lacan calls this objet a. When this object, which usually remains hidden, suddenly reveals us to ourselves as the strangers that we are, then everything around us becomes strange!

Why does this happen? In other words, why does this transformation take place and how does this intolerable objet arrive at this place? To explain this Freud makes a distinction between what he calls endogenous and exogenous excitation and maintains that things are more difficult with the former. Here, he is intimating that at some point inside becomes outside and vice versa because it is only above a certain threshold that tension is turned to account psychically, that it enters into relation with certain groups of ideas which then set upon producing the specific neurosis. As Lacan reminds us in this seminar on Anxiety and elsewhere, the neurological apparatus has no interior because it has only a single surface (the threshold Freud is speaking about). What Lacan introduces is a topological function that will help solve what he calls “the impasse, the riddle (in the notion of an outside) before a certain interiorisation of (that) outside”⁽¹⁸⁾ Freud understood this because he states here what he was to outline in the Project with this reference to what Lacan calls the Other, that which Freud calls specific reactions – in other words an appeal, a first call to an Other, to help solve this distressing situation. If, initially that call has not been responded to for all the myriad reasons that frame our existence then anxiety may plant its roots there, as (anxiety is always in the frame) and as Freud reminds us towards the end of this Draft E, this specific reaction is akin to and is as necessary as breath itself.

Lacan reminds us that “the subject is constituted at the locus of the Other, -----
---this is just as essential for any advent of human life as everything that we can conceive in the natural Umwelt”⁽¹⁹⁾

(18) Lacan J. *ibid.* Seminar: 16:1:63.

(19) Lacan J. *ibid.* Seminar of 6:3:63.

Freud takes his next step towards understanding anxiety nearing the end of 1894. His cumbersome title “On the Grounds for detaching a particular Syndrome from Neurasthenia under the description Anxiety Neurosis, Strachey regarded as “the first stretch of a trail that lead, with more than one bifurcation and more than one sharp turning, through the whole of Freud’s writing “⁽²⁰⁾ Freud was later to write “In every case of neurosis there is a sexual aetiology but in neurasthenia it is an aetiology of a present day kind”⁽²¹⁾ Indeed, as he comments “It is difficult to make any statement of general validity about neurasthenia, so long as we use that name to cover all the things Beard has included under it”⁽²²⁾

Contrary to what Beard had written Freud is of the opinion that “no one becomes neurotic through work or excitement alone”⁽²³⁾ He was also later, in his Autobiography to remark “I went beyond the domain of hysteria and began to investigate the sexual life of the so called neurasthenics who used to visit me in numbers during my consultation hours. This experiment cost me, it is true, my popularity as a doctor”⁽²⁴⁾

This paper (On the Grounds etc) in 1894 is a condensation of all that is contained in the Drafts already mentioned. However, there are two additional concepts, worthy of note, which Lacan deals with in his Seminar. The first one is that in defining sexual libido as psychical desire, Freud is lead to postulate that “the mechanism of anxiety neurosis is to be looked for in a deflection of somatic sexual excitation from the psychical sphere, and in a consequent abnormal employment of that excitation”⁽²⁵⁾ Is this not a definition par

(20) Freud S. op. cit. Vol III P. 87.

(21) Freud S. ibid P. 268.

(22) Freud S. ibid. P. 90.

(23) Freud S. ibid. P. 272.

(24) Freud S. op. cit Vol XX P.24.

(25) Freud S. op cit. Vol III P. 108.

excellence of jouissance? An abnormal employment of excitation towards ends which may not be in our best interests as subjects? How do we account for the fact that the subjects impulses may draw him elsewhere – especially back towards that unforgettable prehistoric place(Freud’s words) - towards the place of the (Thing) Das Ding? One thing is obvious from these early texts of Freud – this putative subject here is a subject of jouissance, and are we not already in a beyond the Pleasure Principle?

The second concept which Freud introduces in this paper is affect. Here, he suggest that the psyche finds itself in an affect of anxiety if it feels unable to deal with a danger approaching from outside, it finds itself in the neurosis_of anxiety if it notices that it is unable to even out the (sexia;) excitation originating from within – that is to say, it behaves as though it were projecting that excitation outwards”.²⁶ Apart from the problematic notion of outside and inside which I’ve already referenced, what is of importance here is that Freud emphasises the fact of affect passing quickly, while the neurosis itself is a chronic one.

What is interesting here in this early paper is that even though he has not theorised as yet on repression, Freud is able to say that the affect passes quickly – “The affect is a state which passes rapidly the neurosis is a chronic one”²⁷ He was later to add “In the first place, it may happen that an affective or emotional impulse is perceived but misconstrued. Owing to the repression of its proper representative, it has been forced to become connected with another idea, and is now regarded by consciousness as the manifestation of that idea. If we restore the true connection, we call the original affective impulse an “unconscious” one. Yet its affect was never unconscious: all that had happened was that its *idea* had undergone repression”.⁽²⁸⁾

(26) Freud S. *ibid.* P. 112.

(27) Freud S. *ibid.* P. 112.

(28) Freud S. *On the History of the Psycho Analytic Movement, papers on Metapsychology and other works*, S.E. Vol XIV pp. 177 – 178.

So, for Freud, the affect is not repressed. As Lacan reminds us in his seminar “It is unmoored, it goes with the drift. One finds it displaced, mad, inverted, metabolised but it is not repressed. What are repressed are the signifiers which moor it” ⁽²⁹⁾

And, lastly, as part of Freud’s first steps towards understanding anxiety I will briefly mention Draft G written in 1895. This (Draft) shows in pictorial form how the physical sexual tension enters into relation with the group of ideas having reached a certain threshold, which then work over that tension and deal with it psychically. Freud here says “At the boundary between the somatic and the psychical – this however, is the determinant of anxiety” ⁽³⁰⁾

Charles Melman in his *New Studies on Hysteria* (published in 2010) writes that this “Manuscript G, has a wonderful foundational schema because it situates Freudian topology, simply, which is happy to divide space into four” ⁽³¹⁾.

This is worthy of our attention because as Melman writes “with this diagram we can see that for Freud there is a barrier, a frontier, there is a difference between the psyche and the soma” ⁽³²⁾

A problem arises for Freudian topology as to how the subject in question can deal with this division and this will lead us on to the pleasure and reality principles and a more thorough investigation into anxiety and the compromises that are thereby initiated.

(29) Lacan J. op cit. Anxiety Seminar: 14:1:62

(30) Freud S. op. cit. Vol I. P. 203.

(31) Melman C. *Nouvelles Etudies Sur L’Hystérie*. Érès. Trans: My Own. P.79.

(32) *ibid* P. 80.

But Lacanian topology is able, with this Schema to elucidate this impossibility - this real – which Freud came up against in these early years. As he advances his “theory” he finds that each time he says “yes – I’ve found it”, he finds that it’s not that. Perhaps he didn’t realise that with these final irreducible reserves of libido for which he so eagerly reaches out, this object which he punctuates so vividly is in fact, lost - behind him.