

## REVIS(IT)ING REPETITION\*

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In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* Lacan makes the following statement about repetition; ‘What is repeated is always something that occurs... as if by chance’.<sup>1</sup> He then goes on to define chance as, ‘the real as encounter - the encounter in so far as it may be missed, in so far as it is essentially the missed encounter’.<sup>2</sup> Taken in isolation these words appear enigmatic and bewildering leaving us wondering how they are to be understood. Fortunately, Lacan doesn’t leave us completely in the dark. His frequent references to Freud suggest that before we can begin to understand what he, Lacan, is saying about repetition, we need to revisit Freud and revise, go over again (*wiederholen*) what he has said on the subject.

The issue of repetition had been on Freud’s mind from the very start. While brief references to it can be found in *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), *The Uncanny* (1919), it is pivotal to his paper *Remembering, Repeating and Working Through* (1914). But it is not until his 1920 paper *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that he gives the issue a comprehensive treatment.<sup>3</sup> His central question here comes from the apparent anomaly presented by people’s tendency to continually repeat unpleasurable experiences, a phenomenon which seems to contradict the long established psychoanalytic premise that the overruling principle of mental functioning is the attainment of pleasure and the avoidance of unpleasure; the pleasure principle.

Freud acknowledges that everyday experience clearly teaches us that the pleasure principle does not reign supreme in the psyche, otherwise we would never feel unpleasure. However, he argues that most feelings of unpleasure can be related in some way to the pleasure principle, explaining them as either being due to the effects of the reality principle when it requires a postponement of satisfaction, or as disguised pleasure as in the case of a neurotic symptom. But, as yet psychoanalysis has offered no satisfactory explanation for the repetition of unpleasurable experiences. He characterises the phenomenon as ‘*daemonic*’, a reference to the Greek notion of the *daemon*, a spirit guide assigned to each individual at birth which can influence people’s actions for good or bad. This emphasises the apparent ‘beyondness’ of their origins carrying the suggestion that something else is at work in the psyche, something powerful enough to override the pleasure principle.

Freud’s questions in this paper are: Can we really speak of a compulsion to repeat? And if so how can it be reconciled with the pleasure principle?

To interrogate these questions Freud takes as his test cases three phenomena which seem to stand in opposition to the pleasure principle. Firstly, the traumatic dreams experienced by sufferers of traumatic accidents i.e. experiences involving risk to life, dreams which repeatedly

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<sup>1</sup>This paper comes of the author’s participation in a cartel of *The Irish School for Lacanian Psychoanalysis* whose members consisted of Eilish Griffin, Monika Kobylarska, Stephanie Metcalfe, Mary O Connor and plus-one Helen Sheehan. It was presented at the Intercartel Study Day in Dublin on [June 13th 2015](#). It has also been accepted for publication in late 2015 in *The Letter Irish Journal for Lacanian Psychoanalysis*.

J. Lacan. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis* Ed. J. A. Miller. London. Karnac. 2010 p.54

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p.55

<sup>3</sup> S. Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* SE XVIII (1920), pp. 3-64

bring people back to the traumatic situation. Secondly, the tendency of children to repeat distressing experiences in their play, witnessed in his own grandson's playing of the fort-da game, repeatedly throwing away and retrieving a cotton reel, and thirdly, the tendency of patients to repeat unpleasurable experiences in the transference in analysis.

Freud succeeds in reconciling the phenomenon of repetition in children's play with the aims of the pleasure principle. He explains it as an attempt at mastery of an unpleasurable experience i.e. his mother leaving him, changing it from a passive experience to an active one. However, it is the phenomena of repetition in the transference and traumatic dreams which lend support to his hypothesis that something more fundamental than the pleasure principle is at work in the psyche, something whose compulsive character suggests a link with the drives. He draws on his clinical experience to argue that the repetition of unpleasant past experiences in the transference stems from the frustration of drives and therefore can be seen as 'activities of instincts intended to lead to satisfaction.'<sup>4</sup> This link with the drives helps make sense of the compulsive character of the phenomenon. With regard to traumatic dreams he argues that as these cannot be explained as fulfilments of wishes in accordance with the pleasure principle, they *must* be performing another more fundamental function, but what is it?

To explore this question, Freud draws on his theory of mental functioning which he first put forward in his *Project for a Scientific Psychology* in 1895. Here he theorised a nervous system with the primary function of discharging excess excitations or energy coming from internal or external stimuli and noted that a difference in intensity of these stimuli can be deduced from the difference in structure between internal and peripheral systems. The presence in the peripheral system of a protective shield of nerve receptors and sense organs, acting as filters and sieves to incoming stimuli, suggests that external stimuli must be very strong. On the other hand, internal stimuli must be of less intensity as they have no such protective shield and lead directly into the mental apparatus. However, regardless of the source of the stimuli, they cannot be discharged directly. They have to be modified in some way in order to come under the influence of the pleasure principle.

Moving his argument along Freud turns to an earlier hypothesis of Breuer which posits that the energy within the nervous system can exist in two forms, a freely flowing mobile energy passing from cell to cell, unbound, which Freud links to primary processes, and a quiescent form, bound, where energy is stored within individual cells to be used on another occasion for the purposes of regulation which Freud links with secondary processes. Based on this theory Freud concludes that before excitations can be discharged in accordance with the pleasure principle the free flowing energy must somehow be bound, transformed into a quiescent state. Furthermore, according to Freud, it is this ability to bind or not which is key to the traumatic neuroses.

Freud describes as traumatic, 'any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield,'<sup>5</sup> and suggests that the key to how a trauma is managed depends on the preparedness of the system to meet the incoming excitations.

*A system which is itself highly cathected is capable of taking up an additional stream of fresh inflowing energy and of converting it into quiescent cathexis, that is of binding it psychically. The higher the system's own quiescent cathexis, the greater seems to be its binding force; conversely, therefore, the lower its cathexis, the less capacity will it*

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid p21

<sup>5</sup> ibid p.29

*have for taking up inflowing energy and the more violent must be the consequences of such a breach in the protective shield against stimuli.*<sup>6</sup>

The upsurge in cases of traumatic neuroses resulting from the war gave Freud the evidence to support this theory. In treating soldiers suffering from war neuroses he noted that fright, the absence of fear and anxiety, was an important factor in the development of a neurosis. He makes a clear distinction between fright, anxiety and fear stating that while fear has a definite object, anxiety has none but can be described as an expectation of danger. Fright, on the other hand, he considers to be due to the absence of fear and occurs when there is no expectation of danger, when the system is taken unawares. Freud explains that while anxiety and fear keep the system hyper-catheted with energy in expectation of danger, the absence of these means there is not enough catheted energy to meet any sudden influxes of stimuli. So if an unprepared system is taken by surprise it will be unable to bind the extra stimuli and therefore the individual becomes susceptible to developing a neurosis.

This view opens up a new possibility for explaining why traumatic dreams constantly bring people back to the situation in which the trauma occurred. Freud suggests that traumatic dreams are an attempt to bind the excess excitations of the traumatic event as they endeavour 'to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis'.<sup>7</sup> Their function is the psychical binding of traumatic impressions, a process intended to facilitate the operation of the pleasure principle. Therefore, as long as there is a failure to bind there will be repetition. Freud is now in a position to draw some distinctions between repetition and the pleasure principle:

*(T)hough it does not contradict the pleasure principle, (it) is nevertheless independent of it and seems to be more primitive than the purpose of gaining pleasure and avoiding unpleasure.*<sup>8</sup>

He then applies the same principle to the internal sources of excitation, the drives, which he describes here as 'the representative of all the forces originating in the interior of the body and transmitted to the mental apparatus'.<sup>9</sup> These stimuli have no protective shield to overcome and reach the unconscious system of the mental apparatus as freely mobile excitations, as yet unbound. Freud makes the logical deduction that just as the failure to bind excess external stimuli causes traumatic neuroses, the failure to bind internal stimuli can also 'provoke a disturbance analogous to a traumatic neurosis'.<sup>10</sup> He then suggests that a patient's repetition of early childhood frustrations in analysis indicate that, 'the repressed memory traces of his primaeval experiences are not present in him in a bound state and are indeed incapable of obeying the secondary process'.<sup>11</sup> He also adds that it is their unbound status which facilitates the formation, in conjunction with the residue of the day, a wishful phantasy which emerges in the dream. Freud emphasises at this stage how the act of binding must take precedence over the pleasure principle as the pleasure principle cannot come into operation until excitations are bound. Therefore, the act of binding cannot be seen as acting in opposition to the pleasure principle but 'independently of it and to some extent in disregard of it'.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid p.30

<sup>7</sup> Ibid p.32

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid p.34

<sup>10</sup> Ibid p.35

<sup>11</sup> Ibid p.36

<sup>12</sup> Ibid p.35

At this point it seems that Freud has achieved his goal of uncovering what lies behind the pleasure principle. His proposal of a mental apparatus continually attempting and sometimes failing to bind the constant flow of internal excitations of the drives prior to the advent of the pleasure principle serves very well to explain the daemonic character of repetition in people's lives. But this isn't enough for Freud. He begins to speculate about the nature of the drives themselves and what it is they are repeating, arriving at some far reaching conclusions which he admits he's not sure he believes himself.

Briefly stated, he argues that the drives appear to be conservative in nature, not just keeping things the same but aiming to restore the organism to an earlier state of being, a tendency which if followed to its logical conclusion can only mean that the ultimate goal of the drives must be death. Paradoxically this implies that the self-preservative drives, despite their appearance of activity and development, can no longer be categorised as life drives but are merely in the service of the death drive keeping the organism alive so that it may die in its own fashion. Still not satisfied with this conclusion Freud questions the assumption of the naturalness of death itself and gives a fascinating account of research into the subject which reveals a significant debate among biologists on the matter and surprisingly little agreement. Freud feels however that biological evidence supports his theory of a tendency towards death.

However there is one stumbling block in Freud's theory of repetition; the sexual drives. Scientific research offers him very little on their origins and he is unable to uncover what it is they might be repeating or trying to return to. It seems that in their aim to prolong life they stand out as the exception and Freud calls them the true life-drives. Unable to reconcile the function of death-drive with sexual drives he proposes a new dualistic model of mental functioning. Instead of ego-drives working in opposition to sexual drives he now recasts it as life-drive opposing death-drive.

Finally Freud returns to the matter of reconciling the pleasure principle with the compulsion to repeat, or death-drive, as he has recast it, and explains the difference between them in terms of tendency and function. He describes the pleasure principle as a tendency to keep excitations as low as possible, it is in the service of the death drive whose function it is to return the organism to the quiescence of the inorganic world.

Speaking of returning to starting points, we are now in a position to return to our starting point, Lacan's 'missed encounter with the real'. It doesn't seem so enigmatic anymore...the failure to bind the excitations of the drives. What seem like chance repetitions are the result of the psyche going over again the unresolved or unsatisfied demands of the drive in an attempt at mastery. Lacan has caught the essence of Freud's paper in five words, something which is difficult to appreciate let alone understand without a thorough knowledge of Freud's efforts. Above all, it is something which highlights the necessity of continually revisiting and revising Freud's work if we wish to come to terms with Lacan's work.