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Dreaming of Animals: The Animal in Freud's Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year Boy and History of an Infantile Neurosis

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationship of Freudian Psychoanalytic Theory and animals by examining two of Sigmund Freud's Famous cases studies, *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year Boy* (Little Hans) and *History of an Infantile Neurosis* (Wolfman). Numerous critics have accused Freud of taming the possibly radical figure of the animal in dreams by containing them within the interpretive frame of the Oedipal complex. Conscripting the work of French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, this paper attempts to theorize a more enabling and productive way to think about the relation of Freudian theory with animals.

Keywords: Animals, Freud, Deleuze, Psychoanalysis, Dream-Work

The importance of animals in myth and fairy-tale is due in no small measure to the openness with which they display their genitalia and their sexual functions to the curious young child.

Sigmund Freud, *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year Boy*

[Wolfman] thought that the position assumed by the wolf in the [illustration to *The Tale of the Seven Little Kids*] might have reminded him of the position taken by his father in the primal scene we had reconstructed.

Sigmund Freud, *History of an Infantile Neurosis*

[Oedipal animals] invite us to regress, draw us into a narcissistic contemplation, and they are the only kind of animal psychoanalysis understands, the better to discover a daddy, a mommy, a little brother behind them...

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

The Animal and Mental Life

In *The Postmodern Animal*, Steve Baker (2000) claims that there is “no modernist animal” and that “the animal is the very first thing to be ruled out of modernisms bounds.” Using examples drawn primarily from visual culture, he posits that animals in modernism merely show “the human imagining-itself-other” (p. 20). It could be argued that modernity's emphasis on industrialization and urbanization has weakened the earth's capacity to maintain life, and this has led to environmental destruction and consequently the constant disappearance of animals. Indeed, it is modernity's cliché: human advancement has catastrophic consequences for animals and the environment. As John Berger (2009) succinctly puts it, “Everywhere animals disappear” (26).

If Baker is correct that animals are the first “to be ruled out of modernism's bounds,” then it is through psychoanalysis that they have managed to find a way to creep back in. Sigmund Freud's discovery of (or, depending on how sympathetic one is to Freud, invention of) the unconscious provided new ways for the animal to come into contact with the human. Animals have returned to “stalk our dreams, slither into our fantasies, [and] haunt our mentalities” (Bleakley, 200, p. 11). Indeed, if there is one lesson to be learned from Freud's *Totem and Taboo* it

is that the objects we murder (be it literally or symbolically) return as a stronger phantasmatic presence in our mental lives. Freud (2005) writes, “The dead now became stronger than the living; and we can see all of this in human destinies even today” (p. 142). Freud’s most well-known case studies, *The Ratman: Notes Upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis* and *The Wolfman: From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, demonstrate the central role that the figure of the animal plays in psychic life. Animals are no longer merely (real or symbolic) objects that are independent and distinct from the human subject, for through psychoanalysis they have also become psychical/imaginal material that organize the human subject’s psyche and structure how subjects perceive and consequently respond to their social reality. For example, Ratman’s fear that a certain Oriental torture technique involving rats boring their way into a victim’s anus was at the root of his complex obsessional neurosis. Part of Ratman’s routine involves the highly elaborate way he goes about performing tasks that involve money. Freud points out the unconscious pun on *ratten* (German for rats), which is a word that closely resembles *raten* (German for installments), and then he goes on to show how the word *ratten* is connected to Ratman’s father who had accumulated a large gambling debt and was referred to, in the slang of the time, as a gambling rat. Freud argues that *ratten*, for Ratman, has come to be associated with anything that circulates: money, penises, words and thoughts.

However, despite the important role that animals play in the unconscious, psychoanalysis maintains an incongruous attitude towards them. On the one hand, psychoanalysis provides an exclusive space for the animal within the discourse of modernity; however, on the other hand, it viciously regulates how animal presence in the unconscious is to be decoded. The philosopher Gilles Deleuze and the radical analyst Felix Guattari have criticized Freud for misreading the animal in unconscious mental processes. They challenge Freud’s “oedipalized” unconscious (that is, the way Freudian theory chains psychic matter to representations that are already set by social structures prior the psychic matter’s emergence). In *A Thousand Plateaus* they write,

[Psychoanalysts] see the animal as a representative of drives, or a representation of the parents. They do not see the reality of a becoming-animal, that it is affect in itself, the drive in person, and represents nothing (1987, p. 259).

I agree with Deleuze and Guattari to the extent that animals indeed represent a theoretical difficulty for psychoanalysis, and that Freud had to deal with this conceptual impasse by taming the animal through “oedipalization.” However, rather than negating the claims of psychoanalysis, I argue that Deleuze and Guattari’s project only shows how Freud was unable to fully maximize the use of conceptual tools that have already been developed in psychoanalytic theory (particularly, the emphasis on the analysis of form rather than content). As my comments on Freud’s *Little Hans: Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy* and *Wolfman: From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* seek to show, Freud’s theories may be read in such a way that it overlaps quite productively with Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that animals are the embodiment of multiplicity, “fundamentally a band, a pack..[possessing] modes rather than characteristics” (1989, p. 239). In pursuit of my claim that Freudian and Deleuzian theory need not necessarily be opposed on this issue, I turn to Jacques Lacan’s concept of the signifier. I wish to show that Lacan provides the necessary elements to bridge the gap between Freud and Deleuze. Contrary to Alan Bleakley’s use of Lacanian theory to “differentiate between ‘animals’ appearing in the three orders of experience,” which he designates as the biological; the psychological; and the conceptual (2000, p. xii), I posit that the figure of the animal in the psyche is always already symbolic, and therefore is subject to the operations of the signifier. That is, the experience of the animal whether Real or Imaginal will always be mediated by what Lacan designates as the big Other. However, Bleakley

is skeptical of the suggestion that there is a symbolic system that mediates between the animal and the human subject because the "self-presentation of animal life is never known directly" (p. xiii) and such obscures the significance of the animal presence in the psyche. This raises important theoretical issues that I will address later in this essay.

Freud Reads Animals

So what do we make of animals that appear in unconscious activities such as dreams and parapraxes? Freud provides us with an answer that looks impressive in theory; however, in practice, he seems to be unable to deploy his theory in all its complexity. Just when Freud is faced with clinical evidence that should be able to provoke him to be theoretically productive, he insists more strongly on his safe yet reductive oedipal framework. This is clear in two of his famous case histories: *Little Hans: Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy* and *Wolfman: From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*.

Freud's *Little Hans: Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old Boy* is an account of the analysis of the young Herbert Graf (alias Little Hans) who suffered from a phobia: the boy refuses to go outdoors because of the fear that he might be bitten or knocked over by a horse. Little Hans' father, Max Graf, under the supervision of Freud, conducted the analysis, and it lasted from January to May 1908. With Max Graf's permission, Freud published this case history in 1909 (Quinodoz, 2004, p. 78).

Freud performs a predictable and often reductive reading of Little Hans' case history. In the weekly report sent to Freud, Hans' father shares an interesting discussion he had with his son that touches on the latter's fear of animals.

Hans' father: Do you know why you are afraid of big animals? Big animals have big widdlers and it is the big widdlers you are really afraid of... and you were probably frightened once you saw the horse's great big widdler, but there's no need to be frightened. Big animals have big widdlers and little animals have little widdlers.

Hans: And all humans have widdlers and when I get bigger my widdler will grow too; it's taken root, after all (2003, p. 26).

Analyzing the aforementioned material, Freud writes,

From the comforting remark: 'When I get bigger my widdler will grow too', we may conclude that he has constantly made comparisons in the course of his observations and remains deeply dissatisfied with the size of his own widdler (p. 27).

And he concludes, "We are justified, then, in guessing that behind this...lies Hans' fear that Mummy doesn't love him because his widdler will not stand comparison with his father's" (p. 30).

Freud then proceeds to strengthen his claim that the horse in Hans' dreams and phobic phantasies represent Hans' father. Freud claims that according to what he was able to gather from analysis, Hans was not afraid of just any horse but only ones with blinders and leather muzzles. Freud suggests that the blinders stand for Hans' father's spectacles and the black leather muzzle for Hans' father's moustache.

I asked Hans in a joking way whether his horses wore spectacles, to which he replied that they did not, and then whether his father wore spectacles, to which despite the evidence he also replied in the negative; I asked whether by black around the mouth

he might mean a moustache, and then revealed to him that he was afraid of his father because he was fond of his mother (p. 32).

Freud also explains how Hans' fear of a horse falling and potentially knocking him over is in fact related to the boy's inability to resolve his Oedipus complex. Freud claims that Hans' fear of a horse falling to the ground is a product of the guilt that he feels for harboring a death-wish for his father. Hans loves his father very much, but his father is also his rival for his mother's love; thus, his aggressive impulses aimed at his father had to be repressed and the anxiety of being castrated by his father was displaced into the form of the horse. These psychic mechanisms, according to Freud, allow Hans to continue loving his father consciously.

In *Wolfman: From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*, Freud once again appears to contain the figure of the animal in his 'oedipalized' hermeneutic cage. Wolfman, who was a wealthy young Russian named Serguei Pankejeff (sometimes Sergei Pankeiev), came to Freud because throughout his life he suffered from depression, obsessional symptoms and a phobic fear of wolves. Commentators have described Freud's account of Wolfman's case history as a "fascinating" narrative (Thurschwell, 2000, p. 61; Quinodoz, 2004, p.156). What I find to be more fascinating than the narrative, however, is Freud's associative acrobatics. Before I proceed to comment on Freud's interpretation of this case, I would first like to quote in length Wolfman's account of his nightmare.

I dreamed that it is night and I am lying in my bed (the foot of my bed was under the window, and outside the window there was a row of old walnut trees. I know that it was winter in my dream, and night-time). Suddenly the window opens of its own accord and terrified, I see that there are a number of white wolves sitting in the big walnut tree outside the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were white all over and looked more like foxes or sheepdogs because they had big tails like foxes and their ears were pricked up like dogs watching something. Obviously fearful that the wolves were going to gobble me up I screamed and woke up (2003, p. 227).

Through a convoluted and counter-intuitive reading, Freud claims that Wolfman's dream is a distortion of a scene that Wolfman witnessed as a child: the scene of his parents having sexual relations *coitus a tergo* [from behind]. Freud designates that moment as the "primal scene," which he defines as "the position [Wolfman] saw his parents assume: the man upright and the woman bent over, rather like an animal" (p. 236).

How did Freud arrive at the aforementioned construction?¹ Freud begins by focusing on what Wolfman claims to be the two moments in the dream that had the strongest impression on him: "first, the utter calm of the wolves...and, second, the tense attentiveness with which they all stared at him" (p. 231). Since the dream-work distorts dream-material, Freud argues that in this case the dream is distorted by "reversal of inversion [*Umkehrung*]." That is, instead of the "absence of motion (the wolves sit there motionless, gazing at him but not moving)" there was "violent movement" (p. 233). According to Freud, when Wolfman suddenly woke up (which Freud links to the opening window) he must have witnessed his parents locked in sexual embrace. And this, Freud claims, is another reversal: "The attentive gaze, which in the dream was attributed to the wolves, is actually to be ascribed to [Wolfman]" (p. 232). Also, for Freud, the big tails of the

¹ A construction is "an interpretation by the analyst which may seem farfetched and removed from the immediate analytic material. The goal of the construction is to bring up repressed childhood material which may have been a real experience of the patient or may have been fantasized by the patient, but which contains something important to the patient's later development" (Thurschwell 69).

wolves are of course phallic representations and the wolves are white because that is probably the color of the undergarments of Wolfman's parents.

Reading Freud (Reading Animals)

If taken at face value, Freud's reading of his patient's case histories appears to use the imaginal animal as a sort of prop to stand in for desire (oedipal desire in particular) in unconscious processes. Freud's reading has been the object of attack by several critics. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) as well as Alan Bleakley (2000) have presented sustained and compelling criticism on Freud's reading of the animal in the psyche.

Deleuze and Guattari's project aims to liberate subjects from oppressive social structures through what they refer to as deterritorialization. They pay special critical attention to Freudian psychoanalysis because it privileges the Oedipal structure and places lack at the core of subjectivity. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) see the Oedipal triangle as controlling and regulating the flow of desire, "territorializing" it even before it has had a chance to flow. As an alternative model for *being*², they propose the machine, which has no center and is defined by its connections and productions, what it *does* rather than what it *is*. Of conceptual importance to their project is the figure of the animal because it is the perfect embodiment of multiplicity and cannot be reduced to individual beings. They write, "Every animal is fundamentally a band, a pack...it has modes rather than characteristics" (p. 239). Thus, they see the process of "becoming-animal" as a step towards "liberation", for it forces subjects to participate in *becoming* and transformations rather than being "territorialized" in their socially constituted *selves*. Criticizing Freud's reading of the horse in *Little Hans: Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-year-old*, they write,

Little Hans' horse is not representative but affective...The horse's blinders are the father's eyeglasses, the black around its mouth is his moustache, its kicks are the parents' lovemaking." Not one word about Hans' relation to the street, on how the street was forbidden to him, on what is for a child to see the spectacle 'a horse is proud, a blinded horse pulls, a horse falls, a horse is whipped...' Psychoanalysis has no feelings for unnatural participations, nor for the assemblages a child can mount in order to solve a problem from which all exits are barred him: a plan(e), not a phantasy (1987, p. 259).

If Deleuze and Guattari criticize Freud for pinning the animal to Oedipal representations, Alan Bleakley criticizes him for being unable to provide the animal with an authentic agency. Bleakley (2000), focusing on Freud's reading of the wolves in *Wolfman: From the History of an Infantile Neurosis* asks,

What do the imaginary wolves want? Do they really want to be humanized, reduced to personality dynamics: psychologized, oedipalized? Are they...forced to present their presences through the symptom, only to meet a machinery of psychological interpretation that refuses their autonomy and phenomenality? (p. 89)

In an interesting move, Bleakley shifts the perspective and provides the imaginal animal with agency. For him, the question is "[not] what does the horse symbolize, but what does the fantasy stallion and the imaginary biting dray horse want of Little Hans, as it presents itself phenomenologically to the frightened psyche of the boy?" (p. 91) Bleakley challenges Freud's supposed psychological determinism by suggesting that the animal possesses a consciousness and

² *Being*, for Deleuze and Guattari, is really *becoming*, defined by connections and transformations rather than essence.

subjectivity. For him, the animal cannot be reduced to a symbol or a signifier, for the animal is a Real entity that “speaks” in the imaginal realm of dreams and phantasies.

The aforementioned criticisms are valid and theoretically productive because they are able to highlight the disjunction between Freudian psychoanalytic theory and practice; however, I argue that these criticisms are unable to fully engage the potential of Freudian theory and the possibilities it offers for the animal in psychic life. I posit that it is possible to recuperate Freudian theory and align it, if only partially, with the project of Deleuze and Guattari. It is precisely by according the imaginal animal the function of signifier in the psyche that this could be done. In response to Bleakley’s claim that animals can be experienced directly through the Imaginary without Symbolic mediation, I question how this may be achieved short of psychosis, in the Lacanian sense of the term³. I think the appropriate question is not ‘What does the animal in the dream really want to say?’ but rather “How does the animal in the dream disturb the very sense of order and meaning of the human subject (which casts doubt on the subject’s supposed central and privileged position in his/her social reality)?”

It is commonplace to criticize Freud for his “pansexualist” interpretations of phantasmatic material; however, what is important to keep in mind is—and we have Deleuze and Guattari to thank for reminding us—that the gap between Freudian theory and Freud’s practice is a theoretically productive space. In his case studies Freud seems to insist that the task of analysis is to examine the manifest content (the image of the animal) in dreams to be able to arrive at the latent content (usually repressed sexual desire for the mother and death-wish for the father). In his theoretical writings, however, Freud insists that what we should examine what he calls the “dream-work” (that is, the process by which unconscious matter takes the form of manifest dream-material) rather than the supposed meaning of the dream contained in the latent dream-thoughts. In a footnote to the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud (1977) writes,

I used at one time to find it extraordinarily difficult to accustom readers to the distinction between the manifest content of dreams and the latent dream-thoughts...They seek to find the essence of dreams in their latent content and in doing so they overlook the distinction between the latent dream-thoughts and the dream-work (p. 650).

By emphasizing the importance of the dream-work over the supposed search for the hidden kernel of truth in the dream, Freud prioritizes the analysis of the dream’s *form* rather than its content. Thus, the question is not “What is the meaning of the animal in the neurotic’s dream?” but “Why did the neurotic’s anxiety and phobic fears take the shape of the animal?” I claim that it is precisely because the animal, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is the embodiment of multiplicity, “fundamentally a band, a pack...[possessing] modes rather than characteristics” (1987, p. 239) that phobic symptoms, which are overdetermined, take the shape the animal. As far as I know, Human subjects cannot stand for a phobic object: One cannot say, “I have a phobic fear of this particular person whose name is so and so and who lives in so and so.” However, one can say, “I have a phobic fear of spiders or lizards, and so on.”

Deleuze and Guattari’s take on the animal fits nicely into Lacan’s concept of the signifier since for Lacan, a signifier is never reducible to a sole signified. Thus, the phobic object (the animal) in dreams and phantasies functions as a signifier, in the Lacanian sense of the term, because of its indeterminate nature. Freud ignores the indeterminacy of the phobic signifier in

³ Psychosis for Lacan is defined by the operation of “foreclosure”, that is, “the “Name of the Father” is not integrated in the symbolic universe of the psychotic” resulting in a hole in its Symbolic order (Evans 155).

his case histories. In Hans' case, Freud takes note of his patient's fear *of* horses; however, he ignores the fact that Hans' also fears *for* the horse.

Hans' father: But the silly nonsense was that you thought the horse was going to bite you and now you are saying that you were afraid the horse would collapse.

Hans: Collapse and bite (2003, p. 39).

In Wolfman's case, Freud also focuses on his patient's fear of wolves but not in his desire to "become-wolf."

From puberty onwards [Wolfman] felt a woman's greatest charm to be the possession of large, conspicuous buttocks; coitus in any other position other than from behind gave him scarcely any pleasure at all (2003, p. 238).

What we see in these instances is that the principal characteristic of the phobic object is that it represents more than one signified.

The animal in unconscious mental processes is thus not a mere stand in for a parental figure. They are not phobic objects because they represent a repressed desire for the mother or a repressed death-wish for the father, but rather because their multiplicity forces the subject to come to terms with the radical alterity that the subject had to deny to sustain its fantasy of illusory wholeness.

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