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Fantasy in “A Child is Being Beaten”¹

Keywords

castration, fantasy, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, sexual difference

Abstract

This article is a translation of Jacques Nassif’s 1967 reading of Sigmund Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten”: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions.” The text appeared in *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, a Paris-based, student-led journal that published articles related to psychoanalysis and epistemology. This article offers a rereading of Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten,” shifting the focus from perversion to the role of fantasy, as if the elaboration of fantasy were Freud’s manifest project. Nassif’s reading yields insight into the centrality of castration and castration fantasies to the overall structure of fantasy and subjectivity. Furthermore, he proposes that his reading offers an “archaeology of the subject” as opposed to a case-historical or model-based theory of the subject. The full elaboration of this methodological approach is left open. This text remains an underexplored resource for researchers in the psychoanalytic field and contributes significantly to ongoing inquiries into the interplay between sexual difference, science, fantasy, and subjectivity.

Fantazma v »Otrok je tepen«

Ključne besede

kastracija, fantazma, Sigmund Freud, psihoanaliza, spolna razlika

¹ J. Nassif’s text is taken from his talk given at the seminar “Compter avec psychanalyse” on 2 March 1966. [This article was originally published in volume 7 of the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse* in 1967. Translations, facsimiles, synopses, and materials related to the journal are hosted on the web archive: <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/>. The web archive was created by researchers at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP). The editors would like to thank the author for granting permission to publish this translation. All bracketed notes are the translator’s.]

Povzetek

Članek je prevod branja Freudovega spisa »‘Otrok je tepen’: prispevek k poznavanju nastanka seksualnih perverzij«, ki ga je leta 1967 za *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, pariško študentsko revijo, ki je objavljala prispevke, povezane s psihoanalizo in epistemologijo, prispeval Jacques Nassif. Prispevek ponuja ponovno branje Freudovega spisa, pri čemer fokus s problema perverzij prestavi na vlogo fantazme, s čimer nakaže, da je bil prav to Freudov osrednji namen. Nassifovo branje razpre uvid v središčno vlogo kastracije in kastracijskih fantazij za strukturo fantazme in subjektivnosti. Poleg tega trdi, da s tem ponudi »arheologijo subjekta«, ki se zoperstavlja teoriji subjekta, osnovani na popisih primerov in modelih. Polna razčlenitev tega metodološkega pristopa ostaja odprta. Besedilo ostaja spregledan vir za raziskovalce v polju psihoanalize in pomembno prispeva k potekajočim raziskavam o prepletu spolne razlike, znanosti, fantazme in subjektivnosti.



As is often the case for Freudian texts, it seems that the technique of interpretation that Freud himself proposes should be applied in order to gather the greatest fruit from them. This is the case with “A Child is Being Beaten,” whose subtitle “A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions,” is surely of greater weight in Freud’s thinking. There is no doubt that in the author’s manifest project the fustigation fantasy is exposed and detailed only to provide an example of perversion, the veritable focus of interest. What we would like to do is properly decenter the subject to shift the spotlight and focus it on a precise sequence of the theoretical field that Freud works on; in short, to act as if the problem of fantasy, at the level of a latent project, were being approached for its own sake through this text.

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But, before moving in this direction, we need to note an ambiguity in the concept of fantasy, which generates misunderstandings that can only impede the reading of this text and provoke all kinds of undue projections in its reprisal. In the most elaborate elaboration that has been given,² fantasy first appears as inscribed in the particular structure of an individual neurosis and thus as linked

² See Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, “Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine du fantasme,” *Temps Modernes* 215 (April 1964): 1833-68 [See also the more available

to the history of a body or to certain significant parts [*parties significatives*] of that body. It seems then that we can infer from the description of many individual fantasies that the verbalization of fantasy takes place according to a binary structure where two terms (subject and complement) are articulated by a scansion. Is this not precisely the point that Freud suggests to us through such an evocative title, which one could easily consider as the template of all fantasies, like a *bona fide* linguistic schema?

That's just it! It's there that the misunderstanding arises. Firstly, because the child's body is not detailed. In this text it is undoubtedly on the bottom that the child is beaten; yet, in the cases of the Rat-Man and the Wolf-Man, it seems that, as this same fantasy becomes more specific, the child is beaten elsewhere, on the penis, for example. So, it does not involve the fantasy of an individual neurosis, but the metaphorical presentation of a fundamental fantasy. In this case, as we shall see later, it is a castration fantasy whose role is to express the origin of the difference of the sexes.

What's more, the title is mistranslated; it should simply read: "A child is being beaten [*Un enfant est battu*]." ³ This impedes, lacking the third term, that freedom in substitution through which we characterize the verbalization of an individual fantasy, in addition to the precise anchoring to the body and to floating signifiers taken up by the registers of "the seen" [*du "vu"*] or of "the heard" [*"l'entendu"*].

Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine du fantasme (Paris: Hachette, 1985)]; Serge Leclaire, "Fantasme et théorie (Compte-rendu)," *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* 1 (February 1966): 79–88.

³ [Nassif is criticizing a French translation that does not retain the passivity of the German phrase that Freud examines: *Ein Kind wird geschlagen*. The mistranslated yet official title in French was *On bat un enfant*, which literally means, in English, "One beats a child" or in a screwy, potentially provocative rendering, "We beat a child." Thus, Nassif does not cite or quote that French translation and instead cites and quotes his own translations of James Strachey's English from the *Standard Edition* cited below. It seems that he also consulted German editions of Freud's texts, but he does not provide citations for these; he leaves only a hint that he did so by specifying that *le tableau* should be read as *Bild* or "picture" rather than as *Tafel* or "table" in a lengthy quotation from "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" included below in note 28.]

We will therefore need, in light of Freud's text, to go against recent elaborations and revisit the problem of the articulation of an individual fantasy, such as it has been described with one of the three original fantasies (of the primal scene, of seduction, of castration), and above all the necessity or not of this articulation. Such is the horizon under which our analysis will unfold.

I

As to whether this may involve a fundamental fantasy, reading the first sentence of the text—if in the domain which we occupy inference is well-founded—suffices to convince us of it:

It is surprising how often people who seek analytic treatment for hysteria or an obsessional neurosis confess to having indulged in the fantasy: "A child is being beaten." Very probably there are still more frequent instances of it among the far greater number of people who have not been obliged to come to analysis by manifest illness.⁴

So, this fantasy, despite Freud's original intention, is not only characteristic of the pervert, but is common to all possible cases of neurosis. Indeed, Freud worked on material composed from six cases: four women and two men (the Wolf-Man, whom Freud was following in the same period, would be a third), and he added that he had others up his sleeve "which have been investigated less thoroughly."⁵

In all of the cases, this fantasy is presented as a "typical occurrence" of a species so common that Freud asks himself all the same whether he is not unduly generalizing (given the paucity of his statistical material) and whether he is not

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⁴ Sigmund Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 17:179. [I mostly quote from Strachey's translation in the *Standard Edition* to the letter, marking where I or Nassif, as the case may be, have amended or abridged Strachey's translation. I have always altered Strachey's "phantasy" to the now more common "fantasy." I have also changed "beating-phantasy" to "fustigation fantasy," since this (a) matches Nassif's *fantasme de fustigation* more closely and (b) is not an invented compound word in English, making use of the versatility of the English lexicon.]

⁵ Freud, 17:191.

himself isolating his object too far from the field where it inscribes itself. This induces him to write—all while making attenuating and skeptical formulae following and preceding it—this sentence: “[The psychoanalyst] is obliged to admit to himself that to a great extent these fantasies subsist apart from the rest of the content of a neurosis, and find no proper place in its structure.”⁶

One can precisely examine this assertion, which is of great import for our own purposes, in the “Wolf-Man,”⁷ where the fustigation fantasy is mentioned several times but comes along with other pathological manifestations more directly linked to the core [*nœud*] of the neurosis.

Nonetheless, in this last text [the Wolf-Man case-history], Freud seems to us much less free in the face of his material, entangled as he is in the problem of the reality or not of the traumatic “scene.”

II

On the contrary, in “A Child is Being Beaten,” it is fantasy which is the sole reality, or rather, it seems that fantasy has its own status as reality, different from both the Real and the Imaginary (despite German having at its disposal only one term to designate the phantasmatic and the imaginary, we shall see that the thesis is based on the description of different mechanisms and not on a description of the purely semantic order).

A—Firstly, regarding the Imaginary, Freud observes that behind the conscious formulation “A child is being beaten” there is the influence of an anterior phase which remains unconscious and which we can go so far as to act on the

⁶ Freud, 17:183. [My insertion.]

⁷ [Sigmund Freud, “À partir de l’histoire d’une névrose infantile,” in *Cinq psychanalyses*, trans. Patrick J. Mahony (Paris: Quadriges, 2008), 553–54; “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 17:62–63. In an in-text, parenthetical note, Nassif writes “Cf. p. 339 of the French translation *et passim*.” I am unable to determine with certainty which edition of which French translation Nassif is referring to, but I believe it to be Marie Bonaparte’s translation included in earlier editions of the famous *Cinq psychanalyses*; this was originally published in 1935 by Denoël and Steele. The citation to *Cinq psychanalyses* that I provide is the translation updated under the scientific direction of Jean Laplanche.]

“character,” being at the basis and in the center of a paranoia, for example. Indeed, he writes,

People who harbor fantasies of this kind develop a special sensitiveness and irritability towards anyone whom they can include in the class of fathers [and their substitutes]. They are easily offended by a person of this kind and in that way (to their sorrow and cost) bring about the realization of the imagined situation of being beaten by their father. I should not be surprised if it were one day possible to prove that the same fantasy is the basis of the delusional litigiousness of paranoia.⁸

The fantasy, in these patients who want to realize “the imagined situation” of being beaten, thus structures the imaginary reality itself, which comes to superimpose itself on the real reality [*la réalité réelle*], providing material for the imaginary interpretation. In this way, the Real furnishes its elements for “the imaginary ingredient,”⁹ which is in its turn recaptured by a “structural binder”¹⁰ that is not of the same order. The hard kernel of the fantasy is thus rebound to a register itself underpinning the imaginary.

B—In order to define this “reality” of fantasy in relation to the Real itself, we must now describe the most original discovery of this text: The fantasy itself has a history that permits explication of certain essential permutations within its structure.¹¹

To speak of reality in Freud’s *œuvre* is to immediately situate it in time, and thus to confront problems of genesis. Fustigation fantasies, as one might have expected, only appear in these cases at the end of the Oedipal period or after it; Freud therefore hypothesizes that they represent “an end-product and not an initial manifestation.”¹² To support this interpretation, Freud begins by composing,

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⁸ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:195. [My insertion, which is based on Nassif’s translation from English into French.]

⁹ Laplanche and Pontalis, *Fantasme originnaire*, 62.

¹⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis, 62.

¹¹ We have chosen to reserve the term “permutation” for changes in the structure of the fantasy that can be explained by the history of the subject, as opposed to the term “substitution,” which will be linked to free imaginative activity within this structure.

¹² Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:184.

with care and finesse, an anamnesis in the classical style. I quote cursorily from pages 179 and 180:

Eventually it becomes possible to establish that the first fantasies of the kind were entertained very early in life: certainly before school age, and not later than in the fifth or sixth year. [. . .] In my patients' milieu it was almost always the same books whose contents gave a new stimulus to the fustigation fantasies: those accessible to young people, such as what was known as the "*Bibliothèque rose*," *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, etc. [*Les malheurs de Sophie* and, in general, books by the Comtesse de Ségur are said, in a footnote in the *SE*, to be the most widely read.] The child began to compete with these works of fiction by producing his own fantasies and by constructing a wealth of situations and institutions, in which children were beaten, or were punished and disciplined in some other way, because of their naughtiness and bad behavior. [. . .] The individuals from whom the data for these analyses were derived very seldom [were] beaten in their childhood, or were at all events not brought up by the help of the rod. Naturally, however, each of these children was bound to have become aware at one time or another of the physical strength of its parents or educators[.]¹³

This passage, which establishes the object of the article, shows on the one hand, how little the fantasy in its first formulation is linked to reality and, on the other hand, how much "the imaginary ingredient" appears to be already structured by the underpinning fantasy, since daydreaming is presented as indissociable from unconscious fantasy. So far, nothing new for us.

However, the true history of fantasy begins precisely before this period, which we will henceforth call "phase C," since this last state of fantasy is preceded by two phases brought to light and clearly elucidated in analysis.

It is evidently apropos the earliest phase that the problem of the relations between the fantasy and reality arises since phase B is always reconstructed in analysis and belongs more to the register of truth than to that of reality. As for phase A, it only comes to light in girls who present—we will see why—the classic form of the fantasy. Nonetheless, Freud does not despair of tracking down this

¹³ Freud, 17: 179–80. [Nassif's insertions and abridgements; translation modified.]

preliminary phase (of a sadistic nature) in the boy as well, “for,” he says, “I can readily see the possibility of meeting with more complicated types.”¹⁴

Be that as it may, in phase A, the beaten child is never the author of the fantasy. It is always someone other, more often a brother or a sister. There is thus no constant relation between the sex of the patient and that of the beaten child. Therefore, the fantasy is certainly not masochistic. It might be tempting to present it as sadistic, but, as Freud notes, we cannot neglect the fact that the child producing the fantasy is never the batterer; it is always an indeterminant adult who is later recognized clearly as the little girl’s father.

Freud concludes with an expression of the fantasy in the form, “My father is beating the child *whom I hate*,” but he asks himself right away “whether the characteristics of a ‘fantasy’ can yet be ascribed to this first step towards the later fustigation fantasy. It is perhaps rather a question of recollections of events which have been witnessed, or of desires which have arisen on various occasions.”¹⁵

He may well add that these doubts are of little importance; for us, these scruples clearly outline the necessity, at the very least, of inscribing the fantasy in “the signifying order,” the space in which it is inscribed being supposedly distinct from and primary to those in which memories or desires come to inscribe or express themselves. Moreover, in his interpretation of this first phase, Freud very simply explains the origin of the significant connection [*la connection signifiante*] between hating and beating: “One soon learns that being beaten, even if it does not hurt very much, signifies a deprivation of love and a humiliation. [. . .] [This is why the] idea of the father beating this hateful child is therefore an agreeable one, quite apart from whether he has actually been seen doing so.”¹⁶

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This absence of “the seen” [*du “vu”*] clearly shows that it is the signifying order that Freud assigns as the space for fantasy, despite the apparent naivete of his tone. The decisive argument is the following: the verb (to beat) permits this designation. It is the hardest kernel of fantasy, and it is the verb that supports the entire *mise-en-scène*. Throughout the permutations of the different phases we

¹⁴ Freud, 17:198.

¹⁵ Freud, 17:185. [Freud’s emphasis; translation modified.]

¹⁶ Freud, 17:187. [Nassif’s insertions and abridgement.]

are going to study, the verb "to beat" remains in its place, unchanged. It seems that one might generalize and let it be the case for all fantasy: at its core [*à son noëud*] there will be a verb as signifier of a "movement pleasing or displeasing to the body."¹⁷ Being beaten, needless to say, is an arduous bodily experience for the child, and it could well be, more generally, that "to beat" means "to fuck" [*"baiser"*] for him, since in any case he has no word at his disposal to recount a strictly amorous relation, and that is what it is all about really.

III

The moment has come to ask ourselves what status Freud attributes to the verbalization of fantasy in our text. While, in fact, no mention is made here of "the heard" [*"l'entendu"*], Freud does employ the concept of verbalization on several occasions (which I have found expressed in English by the term "wording").¹⁸ In this context, and in support of our preceding interpretation (beating—fucking), Freud remarks, apropos the mystery that the sexual act represents for the child, that intimacy between parents is thought of in terms of relations of another order, such as sleeping together, undressing oneself in front of the other, etc. He adds that "material of [this] kind can be more easily apprehended in verbal images than the mystery that is connected with the genitals."¹⁹

Verbalization here is thus a simple form of transposition that does not involve any imbrication in a process of ego-defense. It concerns nothing more than the verbal expression of signifiers already known and immediately interpretable where a kind of "secondary elaboration" comes into play at the level of the vocabulary available to or, rather, lacking in the subject. Nonetheless, is there, on the basis of different "verbalizations" of the fustigation fantasy (conforming to its "phases"), a ground on which we could build a general grammar of fantasy?

We do not believe so, but we are going to try to see everything that one can draw out in this respect, and at the least determine to what extent one can make Freud say, on the basis of this text, things that he does not actually say, full-stop.

¹⁷ Serge Leclair, "Les éléments en jeu dans une psychanalyse. A propos de l'analyse, par Freud, de l'homme aux loups," *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* 5 (November–December 1966): 7–40.

¹⁸ ["Wording" in English.]

¹⁹ Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten," 17:188.

To begin, in phase C the syntactic form is the passive. It is not an active verb preceded by a neutral (and interchangeable) subject, as has been too quickly translated (or inferred). From the form “a child is being beaten” [“*un enfant est battu*”] we can only deduce one thing: the absence of the subject of the action whereas the object is specified, i.e. the child. One can also suppose that the batterer will be the father by drawing this word [“father”] from the semantic definition of “the child” as a begotten being and by making the words of the fantasy autonomous, as a language [*langage*] without speech, from which everything must be drawn.

This is not what Freud does, who permits himself to forge a linguistic fiction in order to give verbal support to the reality of the procedure of displacement that he has observed in the passage from phase A to phase C. He writes, “It appears as though in the phrase, ‘my father is beating the child, he only loves me,’ the stress has been shifted back on to the first part after the second part has undergone repression.”²⁰

Yet, this skillful presentation aims, if one refers themselves to the context, to demonstrate above all how the fantasy of phase C is sadistic in its form and masochistic in the satisfaction that derives from it, but not to elucidate some sort of verbal sedimentation. In contrast, the passage from phase A to phase B, described in a genetic fashion, offers some basis for linguistic speculations. This phase B, which is essentially masochistic, is moreover reconstructed in the analysis, but Freud underlines its transition from the active to the passive; it is he, in fact, who includes the second sequence of this novel verbalization in parentheses: “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father)”;²¹ and, repression, working more specifically on this latter sequence, gives the monolithic, “A child is being beaten” [“*Un enfant est battu*”].

Now, while this material makes it possible to say interesting things about the function of the passive in language [*langue*], it contributes little to the investigation bearing on the fantasy itself; the latter might be perhaps advanced, if, for example, the masculine or the feminine (of the subject or the complement) were expressed in some manner in the morpheme of the verb “to beat,” but this is not

²⁰ Freud, 17:190.

²¹ Freud, 17:189.

the case, and the most complex permutations—that which in the case of the boy goes from “I am loved by my father” to “I am beaten by my mother”—can in no manner, to our knowledge, be formalized with the aid of a linguistic schema. Above all, nothing permits saying that there is any relation to be established between the subject, or rather the author of the fantasy, and the grammatical subject of its verbalization (always the child as passive subject), (between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement), because in the permutations brought to light it is neither a matter of metonymic transformation through “contiguity” nor a matter of metaphoric transformation through “similarity.” This is precisely why we employ the term “permutation” which is more neutral in terms of linguistic connotations. In order to round off the debate without closing it, why not recall—which would return us to the text—that Freud is not working, here at least, on linguistic “signifiers” but on “representations”?

IV

The three paths followed thus far—the place of “A child is being beaten” [*Un enfant est battu*] in a typology of fantasy [I]; the status of the reality of fantasy [II]; the possibility of constructing a grammar of fantasy [III]—all while showing the originality and the importance of the text in Freud’s *œuvre*, have above all enabled us, in a critical reflection, to pinpoint what one can and cannot make this author say, purely as a matter of good policy, in order to underline the difference that entails each of its reprisals.

We would now like to embark on a more positive path, on which we will perhaps have to follow Freud rather than rework his text according to what has become of the theory after him. In fact, his vision is one of the freshest yet, as he unfolds what is not unreasonable to call an “archaeology of fantasy.” He writes at the beginning of the text:

A systematic application of [psychoanalysis] shows that fustigation fantasies have a historical development which is by no means simple, and in the course of which they are changed in most respects more than once—as regards their relation to the author of the fantasy, and as regards their object, their content and their significance.²²

²² Freud, 17:184. [My insertion; translation modified.]

By “content,” I think that it is necessary to hear in this sentence the clinical manifestation of which the fantasy is only a symptom; by “object,” the person or rather the sex of the beaten subject in the fantasy; by “signification,” the connection between beating and loving or hating established by the subject. At minimum these translations will enable me to organize my reading along different tracks that will eventually plot a network in which the term “archaeology” will find its place and function.

A. The “content” of the fantasy: at the threshold of “archaeology”

The content is what the fustigation fantasy presents most concretely or most apparently. In this passage of no slight theoretical importance, Freud employs the term “scar” to refer to it: “What remains of the [Oedipus] complex in the unconscious represents the disposition to the later development of neuroses in the adult. In this way the fustigation fantasy and other analogous perverse fixations would also only be precipitates of the Oedipus complex, scars, so to say, left behind after the process has ended . . .”²³

Starting thus from this definition of fantasy as the “scar” of Oedipus, while noting that, right away, Freud assimilates it to a perverse fixation, because his explicit aim, let us not forget, is to determine the aetiology of perversions. However, if we shift the focus onto fantasy and leave perversion in the blurred margins, it becomes clear that this term “scar” takes on a less metaphorical meaning: beneath the scars of Oedipus, there will be the scar of castration. We can then reread the text and find that the fustigation fantasy does not originate, as the previous quotation may lead one to expect, in a hatred for the mother or overcompensatory affection for her, but in hatred for those with whom the father’s affection must be shared.

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Let us go further: if we had only perversion and its relationship to the Oedipus complex as a scale of reference, we should logically expect to find the opposite situation in the little boy (hatred for those whom he must share the mother’s affection). Yet, this is not the case, and it is perhaps no coincidence that Freud is unable to find in boys an A-phase equivalent to that in girls. It is only for the sake of clarity, moreover, that he initially speaks only of the feminine fantasy that presents the classic form. After a fairly long development, he is obliged to

²³ Freud, 17:193; translation modified.

note that there is no point of correspondence, and, while pointing to the place that posits fantasy in its unity of "content" ("*In both cases the fustigation fantasy has its origin in an incestuous attachment to the father*")²⁴ he discovers the point at which neurotic fantasy differs from perverse fantasy: "In the case of the girl the unconscious masochistic fantasy starts from the normal Oedipus attitude; in that of the boy it starts from the inverted attitude, in which the father is taken as the object of love."²⁵

The fantasy thus has a different "content" depending on the sex of its author, which is to say, it presupposes a turmoil of a different structure. Yet, at this level, there is only horizontal "modification," and it is still difficult to speak of the "historical development" of fantasy. This initial track allows us only to see that the fustigation fantasy has as its bedrock the "fundamental fantasy" of castration, or that the "scar" of being beaten originates in the structures established by the difference of the sexes.

B. The "object" of the fantasy: from doxology to archaeology

We said that by "object" we would mean the quality of the person beaten in the fantasy. Now, its author has opinions on this that form a field where analysis describes fullness and emptiness, allows for the observation of continuities and breaks [*coupures*]. It is precisely by shaking this doxology of the subject that one accesses the archaeology that allows for thinking about breaks in a succession of phases. This is exactly what Freud does through this text.

He first lets his patient fill the field he has isolated. He listens for what the fantasy he has pointed out consists of, notes that it is confessed with much reluctance, that it initially has a monolithic formulation, and that it is impossible to know who is beaten and especially whether it is the subject or someone else. But this subject confesses that it is he who is responsible for the substitutions in the daydream, as well as the reproduction of this same fantasy from a period to be determined. From then on, this period can be situated as the terminal phase from which the substitutions must be identified and analyzed according to a fixed combination. Indeed, it is always substitutes for the father (or the mother in the case of boys) who are the batterers, and an indefinite number of boys who

²⁴ Freud, 17:198. [Freud's emphasis.]

²⁵ Freud, 17:198–99.

are beaten (in the case of girls). Freud also notes that, in the most refined fantasies, it is only a matter of humiliation or punishment.

All this, which is indispensable, leaves us at the level of doxology. It is then that Freud observes that the “content” differs according to the sex of the author of the fantasy. And we have seen how it can be related to an archaeological foundation: the castration complex. But above all, it turns out that the analysis, pushed as far as possible, exposes breaks: the characters in the drama change sex. Each break allows us to distinguish two phases: we have moved to the level of archaeology.

The foundation was constituted by the structure implied by the difference of sexes. But now, the child, the father, and the mother, the only actors in the scenario, begin to change sex, as if at the level of the fantasy they were not objects separate from the order of the signifier, but primary signifiers not yet cleaved.

Let us take a closer look. Freud notes that the fantasy can, in women, be reconstructed in analysis following a form that shows the girl beaten by her father, whereas in phase C, now considered posterior, it is always boys who are beaten. So, there is not only a substitution of person, but a change of sex: there is a break, and we can posit an earlier phase B.

But now it is necessary to explain the transition from B to C, to find the necessity of this permutation. Freud rejects both the interpretation by way of the rivalry of the sexes and the one relating the break between B and C to that between A and B. One would then have to suppose that the child, envied by his sister and beaten by the father, was male and consider phase C as a return of the repressed from phase A. Freud adheres to the classical explanation of Van Ophuijsen and prefers to rediscover here a typical manifestation of the “virility complex”: “When they turn away from their incestuous love for their father, with its genital significance, they easily abandon their feminine role.”²⁶

The permutation in the case of girls thus results in the batterer and the beaten being of the same sex. However, in the case of boys, we know that what happens in phase B, which is here the initial phase, is obviously to be repressed: In phase

²⁶ Freud, 17:191.

C, the batterer and the beaten will therefore be of different sexes. It is no longer the father, but the mother who beats the child. And it is by staying as close as possible to the described state of affairs that Freud can write: "In the case of the girl what was originally a masochistic (passive) situation is transformed into a sadistic one by means of repression, and its sexual quality is almost effaced. In the case of the boy the situation remains masochistic and shows a greater resemblance to the original fantasy with its genital significance, since there is a difference of sex between the person beating and the person being beaten."²⁷

The fantasy thus well and truly has an *archaeological* destiny—and not only an *historical* one—since we are dealing with a *temporal-intemporal mix where the relationship to the origin is not thought of in terms of cause and effect, but in terms of resemblance and difference*.²⁸

²⁷ Freud, 17:199.

²⁸ In "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," one can clearly read how Freud attempts to understand the possibility of coexistence despite and through the division into phases; and it is interesting, to justify the use of this borrowed model, to note how naturally the image of successive lava eruptions comes from his pen, which is in truth quite different and more dynamic than that of sedimentation layers. We translate as closely as possible and emphasize: "With regard to both the drives which we have just taken as examples, it should be remarked that their transformation by a reversal from activity to passivity and by a turning round upon the subject never in fact involves the whole quota of the instinctual impulse. The earlier active direction of the drive *persists* [*subsiste*] to some degree *side by side* [*à côté*] with its later passive direction, even when the process of its transformation has been very extensive. The only correct statement to make about the scopophilic instinct would be that all the *stages* [*étapes*] of its development, its auto-erotic, preliminary stage as well as its final active or passive *form* [*configuration*], *co-exist alongside one another* [*sus-sistent côte à côte*]; and the truth of this becomes obvious if we base our opinion, not on the *actions* [*actes*] to which the instinct leads, but on *the mechanism of its satisfaction* [*le mécanisme de leur satisfaction*]. Perhaps, however, it is permissible to look at the matter and represent it in yet another way. We can divide the life of each instinct into a series of *separate successive waves, each of which is homogeneous* during whatever period of time it may last, and whose relation to one another is comparable to that of *successive eruptions of lava* [*éruptions successives de lave*]. We can then perhaps picture the first, original eruption of the instinct as *proceeding in an unchanged form* [*se poursuit inchangée*] and undergoing no development at all. The next wave would be modified *from the outset* [*dès le début*]*—being turned, for instance, from active to passive—and would then, with this new characteristic, be added to the earlier wave* [*s'ajouter à la précédente*], and so on. If we were then to take a survey of the instinctual impulse from its beginning up to a given point, the succession of waves which we have described would inevitably present *the picture* [*le tableau*] [*Nassif inserts in parentheses: Bild and not Tafel*] *of a definite development*

Moreover, the recourse to the “object” allows us to better see the distinction to be made between neurotic fantasy and perverse fantasy. It is not useless to note in this regard Freud’s astonishment at the fact that phase B remained conscious in one of his patients. The pervert, in fact, does not repress his fantasy, but sets out to confuse the object with the meaning it has taken, and then to play with this confusion. In the fantasy of being beaten, for example, the boy’s attitude is clearly homosexual and feminine; however, phase C has this strange feature that the boy retains a feminine attitude without making a homosexual object-choice, since the person who beats is the mother or one of her substitutes. In fact, pushing the analysis further, Freud writes: “The boy, who has tried to escape from a homosexual object-choice, and who has not changed his sex, nevertheless feels like a woman in his conscious phantasies, and endows the women who are beating him with masculine attributes and characteristics.”²⁹

The pervert’s fantasy is thus as neatly structured as the neurotic’s fantasy, but it allows for more flexibility in permutations insofar as the object is completely overshadowed by the meaning, becoming, so to speak, a signifier at the subject’s disposal.

C. The “signification” of the fantasy: the subject in archaeology

The time has come to commence on our third track through the text, which this time will have as its reference point the signification, that is, the connection established by the subject between beating and loving or hating.

*of the instinct [d’un développement détermine de la pulsion].” Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” in *Standard Edition*, 14:130–31. [Nassif’s emphasis. I have included Nassif’s French for every emphasized word or phrase, however the one exception to this is due to the fact that his French translation departs quite significantly from Strachey’s English. Nassif renders that sentence beginning with “We can divide . . .” as: On peut se figurer la vie de chaque pulsion comme décomposable en *poussées isolées, temporellement séparées* et, à l’intérieur de l’unité de temps (celle qui vous plaira) semblables, qui entre elles ont à peu près le même rapport que des *éruptions successives de lave*. I have italicized the words and phrases he emphasizes therein. One could, with some trepidation, retranslate Nassif’s rendering into English with the following: “We can imagine the life of every drive as divided into *isolated surges, temporally separated*, and, from the inside of the timeframes (whichever one you prefer), seemingly alike, which between them have more or less the same relationship as *successive eruptions of lava*.” I surmise he departed from Strachey’s translation in consultation with Freud’s German.]*

²⁹ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:200. [I have provided the unabridged quotation from the *Standard Edition* for ease of reading.]

Indeed, a subject is needed in the fantasy, or rather the fantasy allows us to see what function is assigned to the subject that we are now in a position to situate. If we take things at their simplest level, it is important to note that the bearer of the fantasy can never position themselves in relation to it as the subject of perception in relation to the perceived object, insofar as this fantasy is maintained, cherished, and reproduced with pleasure. Moreover, it particularly accompanies autoerotic masturbatory scenes, which at first "takes place voluntarily, but later on it does so in spite of the patient's efforts, and with the characteristics of an obsession."³⁰ Similarly, the sight of real scenes of children being beaten provokes in the subject who witnessed it "a peculiarly excited feeling," Freud emphasizes, "which was probably of a mixed character and in which repugnance had a large share."³¹ More clearly still, this subject, although totally absent from phase C of the girls, is nevertheless obliged to recognize that they are undoubtedly "looking on [at the scene]."³²

All these facts are clues of the unconscious formation [*la facture inconsciente*] of the fantasy, included in the order of the signifier that excludes the subject, provided they are invested by desire. It is therefore not by chance, when we go back to what could have been the first state of the fantasy, if the subject is absent from phase A (as from phase C). Freud indeed notes: "The child being beaten is never the one producing the fantasy," and further: "one cannot neglect the fact that the child producing the fantasy is never doing the beating herself."³³ It is precisely on this double absence (the subject being neither the batterer nor the beaten) that the fantasy and the significant connection [*connection signifiante*] at this level between beating and hating are built. It is the obligatory absence of the subject who cannot substitute themselves for the object of their desire (here the father), which is meaningful, which creates the signification.

But this position of absence eventually generates a feeling of guilt that includes the subject in the process, placing them in a necessary position within the signifying chain they have formed and which they support. However, this does not

³⁰ Freud, 17:179.

³¹ Freud, 17:180.

³² Freud, 17:186. [The English actually has it "probably looking on" rather than "undoubtedly" as Nassif's phrase *sans doute* suggests. My insertion is based on Nassif's translation of the English into French.]

³³ Freud, 17:184, 185.

reach the level of signification without a notable modification. If the subject is present in phase B, it is as a beaten child. There is thus a passage from activity to passivity, but overall the subject has regressed in the unconscious from a genital position to a sadistic-anal position.

This is what Freud expresses in the language [*langage*] of overdetermination, which is actually the language [*langage*] of co-presence in the same archaeological disposition where being beaten itself continues to signify being loved; but let's return to the text: "My father loves me" was understood in the genital sense; the regression, in fact:

"My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father)." This being beaten is now a convergence of the sense of guilt and sexual love. It is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation, but also the regressive substitute for that relation, and from this latter source it derives the libidinal excitation which is from this time forward attached to it, and which finds its outlet in masturbatory acts.³⁴

If we stay close to the text, we also see that the diachronic phenomenon of regression is related to the synchrony of the signifier where the relationship remains the same between the father and the child despite the permutation of terms, [or, what is the same,] despite the absence and then the presence of the subject in the sequence of the fantasy.

But in any case, the break between A and B, which is the work of Regression [*sic*], brings notable changes at the level of signification, since we clearly move from the genital register to the anal register, which here specifies itself through masochism, while the break between B and C, which is the work of Repression [*sic*], brings the changes we have seen at the level of the object, but rejoins, in terms of signification, with phase A.

Indeed, we have seen how Freud forged what we then called a "linguistic fiction"³⁵ expressing phase A ("My father beats the child, he loves only me"), regarding which he assigned repression that, through a mechanism of displacement,

³⁴ Freud, 17:189. [Nassif's removal of Freud's emphasis.]

³⁵ See above, 18.

preserved only the first part of the sequence ("My father beats the child"). However, the archaeological *tableau* now has two entry-points, and to rejoin with A, the fantasy must combine with B. "My father beats the child" thus becomes: "A child is beaten," the passive form expressing this passage through B, as well as the return to A. Freud, here, describes this process in energetic terms: "[The fantasy's importance] lies in the fact that it has taken over the libidinal cathexis of the repressed portion [phase B] and at the same time the sense of guilt which is attached to the content of that portion [phase A]."³⁶

For us, it would be the same to say that it suggests an archaeological schema where diachronic processes (Regression) and synchronic (Repression) amalgamate in a single, uniform arrangement [*une même disposition d'ensemble*] whose phases follow and interlock without replacing or obscuring each other. The force engendering the breaks is indeed desire, but these breaks occur along the dotted lines drawn by the base structure and the combination of its terms.

The fantasy is therefore no longer only mixed in its composition ("imaginary ingredient" and "structural binder"), but already, at the structural level, in the content of its phases whose significations are opposed. Freud clearly points this out when he notes that "the second phase [. . .] continues to operate through the agency of the phase that takes its place," which "arouses activities of the imagination which on the one hand continue the fantasy along the same line, and on the other hand neutralize it through compensation."³⁷

We must insist, as Freud does, on the importance of phase B, which brings about a transformation in the unconscious itself, and interpret this based on the fact that the subject, absent from phase A as from phase C, introduces themselves into the signifying chain through the sequence of the fantasy where they are a beaten child. And it is this presence of the subject in B that gives the fantasy its inverse signification.

If we were to now chart this history of the subject in the fantasy into some sort of evolutionary diagram, we would have to note the binary periodicity of its rhythm of appearance, so much so that we could suppose a phase D where the subject

³⁶ Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten," 17:191. [Nassif's insertions and amendments.]

³⁷ Freud, 17:195.

would necessarily be present and which would take, at the level of signification, the counter-point of phase C, all while rejoining [*en renouant*] with phase B. Without venturing too far, we could, for example, rediscover the subject in the fantasy, this time, as the batterer, and it would have to be assumed that beating one's child would unconsciously rekindle a feeling of pain, and this could be explained by the fact that—the child, being considered as a living work and, to put it bluntly, as a substitute for the phallus—to beat him would be to hate him.

And it is Freud himself who, in a return to the phase A of girls, which had remained mysterious until then, suggests to us six years later in “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” the interpretation we have deduced here. He has just considered that jealousy “plays a far larger part in the mental life of women,” as it represents a substitute by displacement of penis envy; and he writes:

While I was still unaware of this source of jealousy and was considering the fantasy “a child is being beaten,” which occurs so commonly in girls, I constructed a first phase for it in which its meaning was that another child, a rival of whom the subject was jealous, was to be beaten. This fantasy seems to be a relic of the phallic period in girls. The peculiar rigidity which struck me so much in the monotonous formula “a child is being beaten” can probably be interpreted in a special way. The child which is being beaten (or caressed) may ultimately be nothing more nor less than the clitoris itself, so that at its very lowest level the statement will contain a confession of masturbation, which has remained attached to the content of the formula from its beginning in the phallic phase till later life.³⁸

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On the basis of this interpretation, phase D would therefore only be a repetition of phase A *après coup*, by which the circle of the fantasy closes around this knot of castration which is in its center.

From the fustigation fantasy, we have thus recognized the place assigned to the subject in the order of the signifier. However, our initial concern was to situate the subject in archaeology; and this, as a totalizing system of interpretation, is

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” in *Standard Edition*, 19:254.

not purely and simply assimilable to the signifying chain, of which all that can be said is that it is intrinsically linked to the subject.

However, the subject also has the function of being the bearer of the bar of repression, and in its evanescence, it is almost clinging to the irreducible permanence of this bar. Moreover, we know that it is in the bar of the subject that the fantasy takes place, this bar being like the sensitive plate where the unconscious, structured *like* a language, communicates with the order of the signifier, which is, properly speaking, language. We can therefore assume that the various phases, wherein the subject is either absent or present, relate to the same archaeology where, although excluding each other in the conscious, they continue to act through one another in the manner we have described.

V

Yet, it must be avowed, this text by Freud concerns repression as much as fantasy, for reasons that remain to be elucidated.

Freud, in his descriptions of fantasy, remarks, or implicitly admits, that repression engenders regression, or at least that these two processes are linked. This fact appears to me as the postulate allowing the fantasy to organize and structure itself according to an archaeology, such as we have arrived, after Freud, to reconstruct the breaks, then the phases.

However, it must be said that this postulate is hidden and that this last passage, which we will quote at length, places more emphasis on the difference between the two processes rather than their connection. But many other clues suggest that there is an originary repression of the fantasy which generates phase A and which, being prior to regression, ultimately constitutes its main principal motor. I therefore cite this particularly remarkable quote:

We are justified in assuming that no great change is effected by the repression of the original unconscious fantasy. Whatever is repressed from consciousness or replaced in it by something else remains intact and potentially operative in the unconscious. The effect of regression to an earlier stage of the sexual organization is quite another matter. As regards this we are led to believe that the state of things changes in the unconscious as well. Thus in both sexes the masochistic

fantasy of being beaten by the father, though not the passive fantasy of being loved by him, lives on in the unconscious after repression has taken place.³⁹

But the originary repression, as the bar of the subject constitutive of all archaeology, is the condition of this second difference between a diachronic process—that manages to change things in the timeless unconscious itself—and the synchronic process—guarantor of difference and repetition—[a condition] which is repression proper.

In any case, if the fantasy is rendered possible through its archaeological foundation, as a “scar of Oedipus,” it is indeed because of repression. And it is not by chance that Freud, several times in this text and explicitly in the end, enquires about its origins.

He discusses in this regard the theories of Fliess (whom he leaves anonymous) and Adler on this point; they have in common, he says, “a sexualization of the repression process.”⁴⁰ However, Fliess’s theory, which posits that the repressed unconscious in every man is what is contrary to his sex, does not hold up solely due to the existence of the fustigation fantasy in the girl, as phase A is entirely feminine (being loved by the father).

When it comes to Adler’s theory—which makes masculine protest, that is, the need to deviate from the feminine line, the reason in every case of repression—it more aptly renders the facts, since the fustigation fantasy, both in girls and boys, corresponds to a feminine attitude. But then, Freud points out: “If the masculine protest is to be taken as having satisfactorily explained the repression of passive fantasies (which later become masochistic), then it becomes for that very reason totally inapplicable to the opposite case of active fantasies.”⁴¹

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These two theories are presented as counterexamples of the theory that Freud proposes, which will allow us to resume with the problematic from which we started, handling the fantasy as linked to the history of a body and therefore attached to the structure of an individual neurosis.

³⁹ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:199–200.

⁴⁰ Freud, 17:200.

⁴¹ Freud, 17:203. [Nassif renders Strachey’s “masculine protest” to *protestation virile* which can be directly retranslated into English as “virile protest.”]

Indeed, the body, although it can only be apprehended in its significant parts [*ses parties signifiantes*], is this entity that, as it develops, supports the temporalization of the subject, as is implied by repression. And one could therefore assume that the body constitutes in some way a repressive instance that bars the evanescent subject. In any case, one can interpret this meaning in the passage that we quote to conclude:

The theory of psycho-analysis (a theory based on observation) holds firmly to the view that the motive forces of repression must not be sexualized. Man's archaic heritage forms the nucleus of the unconscious mind; and whatever part of that heritage has to be left behind in the advance to later phases of development, because it is unserviceable or incompatible with what is new and harmful to it, falls a victim to the process of repression.⁴²

Would it be too much to assert that the body, which brings man into the world prematurely, constitutes this "archaic heritage" and engenders, provokes, and undergoes repression, becoming, properly speaking, the fantasy of all fantasies, forming this closed field where the "*mise-en-scène* of desire" is staged?⁴³

Hence, the problem is to know whether this archaeology that we have uncovered *interprets a domain or furnishes a model*; for, if it is on the structure exposed by castration that the fantasy of being beaten is grafted, it is obviously not the difference of the sexes that by itself makes the fantasy. Or one could ask oneself, could another fantasy not form, with a different verbalization, on the ground of this same structure, based on this same archaeological foundation, but according to the individual history of a particular body? It does not seem that the decentering of perspectives in the reading leaves any room for speculation that would permit responding to this specific question.

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Translated by Holden M. Rasmussen

⁴² Freud, 17:203–4.

⁴³ Laplanche and Pontalis, *Fantasme originaire*, 75.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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