

NIDA'S MARCH 2019 SEMINAR

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Wolf-Man: A Melodrama in Psychoanalysis

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In February 1910 a wealthy Russian man, Dr Sergei Pankejeff was referred by his physician to Freud for treatment. Wolf Man (his case name) had severe recurring psycho-somatic symptoms: venereal disease, irrational fear of the animals, depression and strong feelings of isolation from the rest of the world. Freud accepted this patient with enthusiasm and began as usual investigating the events of Wolf-Man's childhood and puberty in order to see the relation between his childhood abnormalities and his ongoing symptoms. During the initial stage of treatment, Freud's aim was to bring the patient's repressed unconscious ideas and overcome his resistance. However, in the case history, Freud pronounced at the very outset that he had excluded certain parts of the patient's history of illness, for they were socially impermissible. The German sanatoria where Wolf-Man lived for a while, under the influence of raging instinctual forces that plagued his behaviour and instilled in his mind an impeachable apathy. In a more exhilarating novelistic details, Freud gives full account of Wolf-Man's character and his life history that later in his old age Wolf-Man writes it in his *Memoirs* in which he gives also Freud's theoretical account of his illness.

Like many other patients of Freud, Wolf-Man was born in a dysfunctional family. His father was depressive and showed little care for his children. His sister who had perverse sexual relation with Wolf-Man committed suicide by shooting herself. His wife also took her life when she was still young. He showed various perverse behaviour patterns and obsessions in his personal and social life. When investigating his sexual perversities, Freud declared disagreement with his colleague Alfred Adler's opinion who like Michel Foucault saw the will to power as a driving forces behind compulsive and perverse sexual activities. However, Freud accepts the contributing factor of the will to power and the rationalization behind Adler's conclusion, but he remain stuck firmly to his initial theoretical phraseology in relation to obsessive neurosis in Wolf-Man's cases.

Human sexual conduct, as well as everything else, has been subordinated by Alfred Adler to motive forces of this kind, which spring from the will to power, from the individual's self-assertive instinct. (Freud, 1990, 251)

Freud underlines Wolf-Man's bizarre reaction to the death of his sister and his profound grief on the death of a Russian finest romantic poet, Lermontov known as 'the poet of the Caucasus'. But he had developed phobia about his father. His childhood mischiefs were addressed to his

father in order to be beaten by him. This phobia turned as the cause of Wolf-Man's masochistic impulses. Yet another aspect of Wolf-Man's character was his compulsive unpredictable behaviour, which was usually triggered by sudden and anomalous happenings in his daily life. Wolf-Man's behavioural pattern made him a typical model of Dostoyevsky's characters especially one of the personae of his short fiction. Similarly, his sadistic impulses were directed against his own self and his mind was wavered between excessive religious piety and perverse blasphemy and sacrilege.

Freud in his analysis singled out one of the Wolf-Man's dreams and saw in its tapestry the patient's unconscious fantasy especially the vicissitudes of the structure of 'the primary scene'. In the aftermath of the interpretation of this dream Freud postulated his theories of retroaction, infantile neurosis and obsessive neurosis. Freud summarises Wolf-Man's dream, which originally dreamt when the patient was of four or five year of age:

I dream that it was night and that I was lying in my bed. (My bed stood with its foot towards the window; in front of the window there was a row of old walnut trees. I know it was winter when I had the dream, and night-time.) Suddenly the window opened of its own accord, and I was terrified to see that some white wolves were sitting on the big walnut tree in front of the window. There were six or seven of them. The wolves were quite white, and looked more like foxes or sheep-dog, for they had big tails like foxes and they had their ears pricked like dogs when they pay attention to something. In great terror, evidently of being eaten up by the wolves, I screamed and woke up. My nurse hurried to my bed, to see what had happened to me. It took quite a long while before I was convinced that that it had only been a dream. (Freud, 1990, 259)

In analysing that dream, Freud was concerned with finding answers to questions that resulted from looking at the Wolf-Man's dream scene. For example, were wolves sitting always on a tree? Why the number of wolves was changed from five to seven? [in Wolf-Man's drawing the number of the wolves was five]. Why the wolves had foxes' tails? What was behind Wolf-Man's animal phobia? And so on. After examining the manifest and latent contents and meanings of the dream, he associated the tree to the Christmas Tree and the Christmas day, which was Wolf-Man's birthday as well. The number of wolves came to the dream from his childhood when he used to hear the children story 'The Wolf and Seven Goats' from his grandfather. The white colour of the wolves was a metaphor for the white colour of his father's night underwear. And finally, the wolf was representing his father as Freud writes, "the wolf that he was afraid of was undoubtedly his father," (272). Freud concludes that the fear of father in fact, was his passive attitude towards his father and as a consequence of repression, the fear of father morphed into a wolf and an animal (small or big) phobia. Lacan was keen to reread Freud's analysis of this dream and appreciated his choice because according to him the dream offers "because it is the pure fantasy unveiled in its structure. This observation has unexhausted and inexhaustible character because it essentially concerns, from beginning to end, the fantasy's relation to the real." (Lacan, 2014, 73)

Freud continued the treatment of Wolf-Man who provided empirical and experiential evidences for the development of Freud's psychosexual theories for many years. Wolf-Man's dream which contained the genesis of his major symptoms was at the heart of Freud's diagnosis. Let us summarise at this point Freud's diagnostic remarks and his theories about the Wolf-Man's illness.

- As hinted above, Freud was attracted to the sequences of events in Wolf-Man's life during his childhood and their sustained psychological effects on his later life in order to justify and formalise his theory of the trauma and primary traumatic scene in childhood

and their deferred outcomes. Freud postulated that such deferred outcomes are the irreducible parts of a neurotic adult life. Wolf-Man develops an affective state of trauma and phobia in his later life. Freud termed this revision of the past trials in adult life as *Nachträglichkeit*. Freud observed this process and tried to reconstruct and transcribe his patient's past history especially his infantile conflicts and how did they frame the Wolf-Man's symptoms in his later life. As hinted, Wolf-Man's dream was taken as an unconscious fantasy of the primal scene. From this, Freud concluded that the genesis of the later life symptoms should be invariably sought in infantile psychological conflicts. As such, the past memory traces continually mutate themselves so as to fit the fresh life experiences and find new signification and psychological meaning.

In his famous description of mental life, Freud compares the psyche to the city of Rome, in which all the buildings ever built are still standing on the same site, layer upon layer...Deferred action does not rule out psychological causality and development, but rather, posits a reverse dynamic. It assumes an ongoing readjustment of the casual relations among past events and impressions, as if the ancient layers of Rome were periodically reshuffled. (Barzilai, 1999, 50-51)

Freud explores Wolf-Man's visual memory of his parents' copulation as the primal-scene that constructed his childhood neurosis and permanent later symptoms. As the scenario of Wolf-Man's dream shows the main point of Freud's observations was to stress that the primal scene revises itself in fantasy as the act of fear and violence perpetrated by father. This traumatic episode was at the centre stage of Wolf-Man's dream. The whiteness of the wolves was representing Wolf-Man's white night underwear and the horror of the wolves' strained gaze and his phobia of the father. The horror of the wolves on the other hand, was Wolf-Man's defence against being an object for his father.

Freud's complex and detailed analysis of the dream, helped by its many variants which now emerged during the analysis, produced an interpretation: that the dream indexed an early sexual scene, in which the patient's eyes had opened—the window suddenly opening—following by his own strained at something he could see. (Leader, 2001, 252)

- Another cause of Wolf-Man's phobia arises from Wolf-Man's troubled relation with his sister, Anna and her suicide. As Freud narrates, Wolf-Man was seduced by his sister in his childhood which exacted in his psyche a hidden guilt and fear in his later life. This guilt and also his passive attitude towards his father also caused in Wolf-Man's unconscious the emergence of active-sadistic impulses as well. Considering this in his diagnosis, Freud perceived two periods in his patient's childhood, the "first phase of naughtiness and perversity from his seduction at the age of three and a quarter up to his fourth birthday, and a longer subsequent phase in which the signs of neurosis predominated." (Freud, 1990, 258)
- Wolf-Man develops his fantasies about his father in which his grandfather's story of tailless wolf and the seven little goats played a structural role. This fantasy was circled around what Freud called 'primal scene' from where the act of violence on the part of the father begins. In addition to the Wolf-Man's case where the primary scene is based on the actually experienced event, the primary scene could be constructed on the base of a pure fantasy as well. Freud is interested also in interpreting the Wolf-Man's dream in the light of his theory of Castration Anxiety. For this purpose, he examines and attributes certain parts of the dream to the Wolf-Man's mother as well.

- Wolf-Man's case history also provided great insight for Freud to develop his theory of the anal-sadistic stage in the infantile sexual life. This stage plays a decisive role in the emergence and strengthening of sado-masochistic impulses in the adult life of obsessive neurotics. Freud attribute Wolf-Man's love for money and wealth as part of his anal-eroticism. Freud postulates the origin of obsessional neurosis on the ground of sadistic-anal organisation in the unconscious as well.

II

Lacan attempts to re-read and mended Freud's case history to back up his own theoretical arguments about obsessionals, castration anxiety and fantasy. He agrees with Freud's fundamental theoretical premise in relation to Wolf-Man and his aetiology of the obsessive neurosis in general. But his takes on the case has changed overtime in his seminars, as Leader writes, "Lacan's views on the case seem to have changed over the years, and most unusually, he makes a variety of diagnoses. In his first approach, he interprets the childhood neurosis as an attempt to access the symbolic father. After the traumatic scene with Anna, he behaves badly in order to bring punishment on himself, a way of trying to introduce the symbolic dimension," (Leader, 2001, 259).

Let us now turn to the main points of Lacan's rereading and rewriting of Freud's exploration of the Wolf-Man's case history.

- Freud paraphrases Wolf-Man's story of his hallucination about a finger cut and hanging by its skin and consider this hallucination as the sign of compulsive process of castration-anxiety and the patient's father as the castrator:

When I was five years old, I was playing in the garden near my nurse, and was carving with my pocket-knife in the bark of the walnut-trees that come into my dream as well. Suddenly, to my unspeakable terror, I noticed that I had cut through the little finger of my (right or left?) hand, so that it was only hanging on by its skin. Felt no pain, but great fear...At last I calmed down, took a look at the finger, and saw that it was entirely uninjured. (Freud, 1999, 323-324)

Lacan reinterpret the hallucination of a severed finger as a failure of symbolisation of castration that appears in the real, "the finger episode illustrates how Pankejeff's appeal to the symbolic father failed: unable to metaphorize castration, he was left with the terrifying image of a bodily wound," (Leader, 2001, 259-260). Such events in relation to bodily cuts and wounds frequently appears in Wolf-Man's consciousness, which is in a way the acknowledgement of the repression and at the same time the insistence of the real in the unconscious. Something that cannot be articulated in the symbolic emerges in the real, "like a punctuation without a text," (Lacan, 2006, 324). Lacan returns to the hallucination of finger several times in *Écrits* and speaks about it in detail in order to emphasise on the nature of the real, which cannot be accommodated in speech. The subject thus doesn't have a signifier and, as Lacan reiterates, he has only the incomprehensible signified with which he cannot deal with. So, the real inexorably appear and reappear as hallucination and bodily wounds in the consciousness of Wolf-Man. This real which intermittently pop up in Wolf-Man's head and resists entry into

the imaginary, ex-sists [something that existed once in the past, but remains as an absence in the symbolic], as Lacan emphasises.

Take the example of the Wolf Man. The exceptional importance of this case in Freud's work is to show that it is in relation to the real that the level of phantasy function. The real supports the phantasy, the phantasy protect the real. (Lacan, 1994, 41)

- It is important to return at this stage to the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. Jean Laplanche and Jean Pontalis in *The Language of Psychoanalysis* argue that Freud doesn't offer a theory or even a clear definition of the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*. They give credit for the renewal of attention to this notion—deferred action—to Lacan. Lacan lays emphasis on the primal scene as a product of the patient fantasy while accepting it also as a lived experienced of the patient in his/her infantile life. At stake in each of this deferred action or revision for the patient is the act of abreaction—emotional discharge and liberation of the patient from re-enacting the infantile traumatic event. Lacan realises Freud's disavowal of the significance of the time in a deferred action, as he says, Freud “annuls the *times for understanding* in favour of the *moments of concluding* which precipitate the subject's meditation towards deciding the meaning to be attached to the early event,” (Lacan, 2006, 213). This is what the aging Pankejeff says in 1948, “Freud says that the unconscious knows no time; but as a consequence, the unconscious can know no growing old,” (Pankejeff, 1973, 362). Thus, at the heart of each symptom is the trauma in the archaic phases of the subject's life. Lacan concludes that the primacy is given to the signifier on which the subject is constituted and also depended.

Nachträglichkeit (remember that I was he first to extract it from Freud' texts) or deferred action [*après-coup*], by which trauma becomes involved in symptoms, reveals a temporal structure of a higher order. (711)

- Lacan is cautious about the central question that arises from the notion of *Nachträglichkeit*, and this is Freud's emphasis on the preference of retroaction and “the history of a mutant structure to the history of an event-filled private life,” (Bowie, 1991, 181). This means that the psychological event or to be more precise a symptom is a formation which is bound together with the primal-scene in the unconscious. This very essence of the symptom always remains in obscurity and surfaces in a variety of shapes in the history of the subject. Lacan draws attention to a method by which we can penetrate into the hidden truth to the source of the problem.
- The notion of *Nachträglichkeit* provide a great lesson for literary studies too. According to Lacan, the exactitude of every objective textual reality masks the generative source of the truth. But the notion provides an effective tool to use for the deconstruction of textual paradoxes and aporias in literature and art. This notion also gives us a key to enter and search the unconscious elements and dynamics of a literary creation. This is in line with Plato's method of inquiry who prescribed that if you want to reach to the essence of truth go for the origin of things.

The unconscious reveals itself in the life of Wolf-Man not in his day-to-day activities but in the unexpected and detached moments when he is acting out the unresolved residues of the unconscious. Each of these moments finds their signification in their inherited source retroactively. As such, the source of true psychoanalytical probe into literature and art lies in the clinical discoveries of psychoanalysis. “To gain a belated or ‘deferred’

understanding of an event, this is in fact the precise wager that psychoanalysis makes,” (Sigi, 2013, 7). This is the way that a critical reader makes his journey into the places where textual manifestation of the unconscious occurs, as Proust wrote, “In reality every reader is, while he is reading, the reader of his own self. The writer’s work is merely a kind of optical instrument which he offers to the reader to enable him to discern what, without his book, he would perhaps never have perceived in himself.” (Proust cited in Jordan, 2001, 115)

- In Lacan observation of Wolf-Man and Freud’s analysis, the idea of non-symbolisation of the real is exhaustively repeated. This strategy revolves around the importance of the real in each fantasy that remained masked in a variety of scenarios. The appearance of this kernel of the real in Wolf-Man’s discourse always emerges as emptiness, which for Lacan is equally signifying as a full space. The same is happening in schizophrenic structure where the whole symbolic and language become real. In paranoia, however, the whole symbolic and language turns into an imaginary construction. Another mode in which this inarticulate structure in which the symbolic and the real comes into play is the things that the subject acts out. Wolf-Man’s acting out is behind all his hallucinations, dreams, and symptomatic behaviours. The psychoanalytic notion of the *acting out* refers to those patterns of compulsive action in one’s usual and overall activities. When the subject fails to recall the past, he must repeat it by acting it out. Lacan brings the Other also to the sphere of this acting out, for every attempt to acting out on the part of the subject is a ciphered message to the Other. This Other in the case of Wolf-Man is his father, God, and also Freud.
- As Lacan observed, the underlying picture in every fantasy is the real. This unfolds the very function of a fantasy. The real that brings the subject face to face with his symptom even by force as Lacan says in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. In the Wolf-Man’s case, fantasy meets reality in the signifier that is repressed.

In The Wolf Man, I would say, to give you the thread that will guide you through your reading, that the sudden appearance of the wolves in the window in the dream plays the function of the *s* [the signified], as representative of the loss of the subject. (Lacan, 1994, 251)

In conclusion, Wolf-Man was the most successful “the greatest of all, the most sensational” (Lacan 1994, 251) case history in Freud’s career. The success was being felt on both sides of the spectrum, by the psychoanalyst and the psychoanalysand. The intelligent psychoanalysand, Pankejeff, ‘a piece of psychoanalysis’ as Freud called him learnt the truth of his symptom and consequently felt genuine relief from his lifelong existential pain (despite relapses along and after the therapy); and the psychoanalyst obtained objectified evidences for his fundamental theoretical concepts discussed in this essay, especially, the ‘primal scene’, symptom, *Nachträglichkeit*, infantile sexuality, and the obsessive neurosis. Following Freud, Lacan concludes that every moment at present is “a past futurity and a future pastness caught up together in an unstoppable signifying process,” (Bowie, 1991, 185). The Wolf-Man was the living model of this who in his audacious and bold *Memoirs* describes his predicament in his youth while he was a student, in the chapter, “Unconscious mourning”:

In a big city (St Petersburg) such as this I become even more painfully aware of my lack of participation in all events and experiences, and of my inability to communicate with other people. There was too crass a contrast between the pulsating life around me and the bottomless, unbridgeable gulf of emptiness within myself. (Pankejeff, 1973, 59)

This predicament and human suffering after the successful treatment by Freud ended up in lasting discoveries in psychoanalysis.

Notes:

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