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Rome, Jerusalem, the Subject of the Diaspora

Rome, on Psychic Temporality

Freud established a homology between the functioning of the psychic apparatus and the structure of the city. By observing in Rome the mixture of past ruins and modern architecture, he drew a comparison between its landscape, which captivated him, and the way traces preserve themselves in the psychic apparatus. An analogy by which he highlighted the timeless dimension of the unconscious.

Of Rome, he writes: “Allow us now, in a flight of imagination, to assume that Rome is not a human habitation, but rather a psychical entity.” An assumption which, paradoxically, sets up a difference: the city does not tell its past, it exhibits only traces, remains, ruins, in the midst of new constructions, whereas time destroys nothing in mental life.

In the psyche, past experiences, in the guise of memory traces, impact on the present. And they reappear intact in the narratives, when linked to actuality in the psychoanalytic process. What one observes in the process of psychoanalytic historicization is that past and present are absolutely interwoven and that memory functions as a support to becoming.

Jerusalem, on Loss and Exile in the Constitution of the Subject

Paraphrasing Freud, I propose here to approach Jerusalem as “a psychic entity” rather than a city. In this case, it is not difficult to establish a homology between the “holy city” and the experience of exile which serves as ground to the subject. I start from a letter from Freud to Martha (July 23, 1882): “Jerusalem is destroyed... and, according to historians, the invisible building of Judaism was only made possible after the collapse of the visible temple.”

In this letter, the reference to the city of Jerusalem and the invisible edifice of Judaism, actualizes the shift from visible to invisible that constitutes, according to Freud, one of the civilizing moments in which progress in spirituality occurred. The loss of *jouissance* involved in spiritual progress does not represent a cumulative process of knowing, but rather the unending attempt to capture the Real, albeit in an evanescent fashion.

In Vienna, on the arrival of the Nazis and his forced exile, Freud evokes the “holy city” for the last time, summoning his colleagues to carry forth a knowledge which exists but

one is unaware of: the unconscious. He then reminds us that, following the destruction of the temple in Jerusalem which led to the Jewish diaspora, the chief rabbi requested permission to open a school for the study of the Torah in exile and indicated that everyone else should do the same. The act of writing is not based on the immediate relation to the object but to its absence; writing seeks to inscribe what is no longer there. Freud and his colleagues shared the condition of the ancient Hebrews: in the absence of a temple and a city, it was necessary to find elsewhere the means to hold course – in Freud’s case, the course of the practice and theory of psychoanalysis.

The Subject of the Diaspora

Diaspora means dispersion: “being dispersed among the peoples,” “being outside of” or rather, “not belonging to.” In the word itself, one finds the idea of the experience of strangeness to which all of us are condemned. But what does it mean to be dispersed among peoples? Maurice Blanchot points out how the Jewish diaspora is in itself a paradigm connecting the idea of exodus to that of exile; by the authority of this experience, “we learn how to speak.” “Jerusalem is destroyed...,” and in the diaspora resides the assurance of a language that can be transmitted to future generations.

Is it possible, then, to draw a parallel between the subject of the diaspora, the one simultaneously situated inside and outside, in a between-two, whose “frontiers” allow for sharing the cultural identity within which one is inscribed – keeping a “piece of oneself” always somewhere else, in the marginal space – and the structural position of the subject? Psychoanalysis, in fact, makes good use of this paradoxical inside/outside position: it seeks the subject outside that which is visible and, breaking visible links, fosters the emergence of real links; it shows that it is possible to shake exhaustive pre-established meanings to let new effects of sense emerge.

And, when patients address themselves to psychoanalysis because of their suffering, we find that, regardless of the culture, ethnic group, and sex, they are all “subjects of the diaspora.” Since the subject is structurally divided, its identifications cannot be fixed and immutable. The splitting up of the Ego prevents fixation of the subject to the order of the Same.

This allows me to propose that the concepts of the diaspora and of the unconscious share the same topology: that of inside/outside. They are not grounded on a binary concept of difference, based on the construction of frontiers and exclusions. A diaspora is understood as

displacements, passages in which the subject breaks down cultural and political identities and fosters the errant dimension of desire. Displacement, metonymy, is one of the laws of the unconscious. The analytical experience provides an open space for the subject to live through the adventure of finding the exile of oneself and go through successive forms of deterritorializations.

If Freud was able to establish a homology between Rome and psychic temporality it is because a city is a reality that contributes to and affects clinical reality. A city shows the connection existing between psychoanalysis and the public realm. Cities in permanent movement, replete with anonymous people seeking to make One, raise questions and answers. At every moment, life in the city is an update of the unconscious text put into act, without the unconscious being concerned in an individual subjectivity - as Lacan conveyed to us by referring to sunrise in the city of Baltimore. Such a formulation is clarified in light of the recommendation he makes to analysts: if they wish to deserve their practice, they should not fail to grasp the horizon of the social symptom of their time. And this symptom, “a stranger land of interior,” inhabits the subject in exile and exiles from him or herself.

Metropolises in the 21st Century, on Horror of the Stranger

Currently, the tragic dimension of the refugees fleeing violence and misery has become a global fact. If, on the one hand, this depicts something common to all – we are all subjects of the diaspora, exiled, uprooted from ourselves, constituted by the enigmatic dimension of that which is invisible, the unconscious –, on the other hand, it reveals the horror at strangers which inhabits the human soul. The refugees, victims of the segregation of current times, threaten the ethnocentric and essentialist ideal of the State, of a group or even of an individual who thinks himself identical to what he/she is. The narcissistic passion for the ideal of completeness sustains the sense of the uncanny [*Unheimlich*] in the face of the small difference encountered in “the other.” An *ex-timate* difference: the horror of that which is more intimate and that, approached by the Ego as “external object,” comprises itself as an object to which hate is addressed.

If we reflect upon the real dimension of loss and the difficulties refugees have to confront in order to locate themselves in the city – either by way of the identity as “strangers” that is assigned to them, or through the sense of “strangeness” they elicit with their customs and practices of life –, it is not difficult to demonstrate that the refusal some metropolises put

up to them, brings about a defense against, a refusal of, the very process of displacement that is structural to the subject as divided.

We find ourselves nowadays much as Freud did during the First World War, when in the face of the horrors he witnessed, he noted that primitive societies showed themselves more ethical and civilized than modern ones, since, in the latter, life is disposed of with greater ease – and death, desacralized. Today, regarding strangers – migrants, immigrants, exiles, refugees – we are much less civilized than the ancient peoples. A stranger, the “*ksénos*,” of whom Socrates says that “at least you will tolerate their accent and language,” warranted laws of protection in Greece. Hospitality laws regarding the other were also found already in Mesopotamia, in ancient China, and in oral cultures in Melanesia. A passage in the Old Testament reveals that the Hebrew people were ordered: “And you shall remember that you were slaves in Egypt. That is why I order you to respect strangers.”

The fine perception of the biblical poet had brought forth, thus, what psychoanalysis emphasizes: “being born abroad, into the other, into that which is different, into otherness, is an experience no subject escapes.” Yet history has shown us that when strangers cease to be considered as significant beings, their fate is to become sacrificial victims: which leads us to remark that the biblical commandment to respect strangers conceals the unconscious desire to eliminate them – or, to use the language of our time, to exterminate them.