

# ON “CONSTRUCTIONS IN ANALYSIS” AND PSYCHOANALYTIC TRUTH<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** By way of a close reading of “Constructions in Analysis,” this paper discusses the specificity of psychoanalytic truth, focusing on Freud’s notion of “construction” as it illuminates the functioning of repression in the analytic scene. Furthermore, the author suggests that “Constructions in Analysis” should be considered as a companion piece to “Analysis Terminable and Interminable” which was written just a few months earlier in 1937. “Constructions in Analysis” is viewed as having been underappreciated as a guide to both the impasses and possibilities both Freud and Lacan identified for the end of analysis.

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“Every truth has the structure of fiction,” Lacan famously declared in his seminar on Ethics (1959-60/1992, p. 12). Far from declaiming truth as unattainable and fiction as a counterfeit construction, this statement is one of the myriad ways Lacan specified the particularity of psychoanalytic truth over the course of his life’s work. In fact, we could say that both Freud and Lacan gave the name “psychoanalysis” to the search for truth—the truth of the subject. Because it proclaims the “good news” no one cares to know—that the subject’s existence is structured by repression and access to speech granted only by way of the impossibility of saying the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth—psychoanalysis marks

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a rupture with any epistemology that would *oppose* truth to lies, appearances to actuality, “reality” to fiction.

I would like to approach the inexhaustible, many-faceted subject of psychoanalytic truth by way of Freud’s extraordinary and (in my opinion) underappreciated 1937 text “Constructions in Analysis,” which opens dazzlingly onto the entirety of metapsychology and clinical practice. Its scope and insights become most apparent when considered alongside “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” the two papers linked not only by temporal proximity, but also by a shared focus on the limits of psychoanalysis. While the slightly earlier paper, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” explicitly addresses the end of analysis, I believe that “Constructions,” written just a few months later, has many implications for this question as well. Taken together, these essays map Freud’s confrontation with the “bedrock,” that point he identified as stymying any passage psychoanalysis could offer, while offering us a crucial point of departure.

I’ll begin with the statement that ignited my interest in “Constructions in Analysis,” where Freud remarks upon the analytic “construction” in its clinical context. Here is what he says:

...if the analysis is carried out correctly, [the construction] produce[s] *an assured conviction of truth which achieves the same therapeutic result as a recaptured memory*. The problem of what the circumstances are in which this occurs and of *how it is possible that what appears to be an incomplete substitute [unvollkommener Ersatz] should nevertheless produce a complete result* – all of this is a matter for a later enquiry” (1937b/1999, pp. 266, emphasis mine).

Isn't this astonishing? Here Freud is saying that at the point where an analysis bumps up against the limits of the analysand's memory, a construction can produce the same truth effect as the recollection of an actual past experience. Nevertheless, he leaves us with an enigma, an invitation to a later enquiry. I propose to take him up on this, motivated not by the need to provide a solution, but the desire to explore those unexpected places Freud's thoughts and questions may take us...

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It is striking to contrast the somber coloration of "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" with the more genial tone of "Constructions in Analysis," the latter having been structured according to one of Freud's favorite rhetorical devices: as a rejoinder to a supposed interlocutor. Freud says he is responding to someone who has been a good friend to psychoanalysis who nevertheless ventured the "unjust" and "derogatory" opinion that the psychoanalytic setting is simply a rigged game: A "heads I win, tails you lose" set up. This "friend" observed that if the patient assents to the analyst's construction, all is well and good. But if he disagrees, the analyst will interpret it as resistance. Hence, his "friendly" accusation that analysis is simply an exercise in domination when it comes to the confirmation of a construction: the analyst is always right and the patient is always wrong.

It is beautiful to observe how Freud deftly bypasses this trap by subverting the very premise of the accusation, explaining to his critic that, in fact, neither the patient's "Yes" nor "No" can establish confirmation because both are ambiguous for the analyst. Paradoxically, in the analytic setting, "No" can function as an affirmation (as elaborated in the 1925 paper "Negation") and "Yes" can be the mark of resistance (a false assent

intended to sustain what is concealed). And once he overturns “Yes” and “No,” Freud proceeds to undermine the categories “true” and “false,” explaining to his friend that sometimes an incorrect, “false” construction can evoke the truth more effectively than a “correct” one. Invoking Shakespeare’s Polonius, Freud notes that a “wrong” construction can elicit crucial material from the analysand and “...as though...our bait of falsehood had taken a carp of truth” (1937b/1999, p. 262). By pointing out that the patient’s “Yes” or “No” are of “little value” to the analyst, and that the “false” can be the royal road leading to the “true,” Freud unveils the specificity of the psychoanalytic scene, where the players cannot be reduced to a couple, a duo of analyst and “patient” engaged in an imaginary back-and-forth struggle as to who is right and who is wrong. Fundamentally, this is because the analyst is not responding to the *patient* (the ego) but to the subject of the unconscious - the subject of the statement to be distinguished by the analyst from the subject of the enunciation. Freud is very clear in saying that only the “indirect” responses of the analysand can be trusted as confirmation of a construction, affirming that “indirect” from the *patient* means directly from the *unconscious*. “We do not claim that an individual construction is anything more than a supposition that will eventually be investigated, confirmed or rejected,” writes Freud, “We do not require any direct agreement with it from the patient, and do not discuss it with him if initially he contradicts it. In short, our model is that character in Nestroy, the porter who had one answer ready for every question or objection: “Everything will become clear in the course of events” (1937/2002, p. 219). Meaning, of course, in the après-coup, in accordance with logical time, which operates according to the beats of subjective truth and is to

be radically distinguished from chronological time. This is the *sine qua non* of psychoanalysis.

In “Constructions in Analysis,” Freud specifies what a construction *is* by pointing out what it is *not*: he states that a construction is not an interpretation. While an interpretation aims at a particular formation of the unconscious (a dream element, a parapraxis), Freud defines a construction as bricolage, made of snippets, fragments and traces: fabricated by the analyst, it is composed out of remnants, affects, and transference manifestations that emerge during the unfolding of an analysis. It is in the context of specifying the “construction” that Freud discusses (*encore!*) his beloved analogy between the analyst and the archeologist, observing that both seek to situate excavated elements of unknown temporal provenance into their proper historical strata—albeit under the conditions of an impossible-to-achieve certainty. Freud calls this process “re-construction,” an act that cannot be defined as merely excavating what is already there since the construction does not pre-exist its creation in a specific context (which implies that the unconscious is not-all already-written).

In fact, “Constructions in Analysis” is far from the first instance that Freud discusses his concept of “construction.” Two of the best-known earlier references are the Wolf Man case from 1918 and “A Child is Being Beaten” (1919/1999). Let’s start with the latter: in “A Child is Being Beaten,” Freud spells out three logical, grammatical phases that comprise the masturbatory beating fantasy: 1. My father is beating a child; 2. I am being beaten by my father; and 3. A hazy scene of the father (or a substitute) beating a child accompanied by the phrase “I am probably looking on.” “This second phase,” Freud famously wrote, “is the most important and the most momentous of all. But we may say of it in a certain

sense that it has never had a *real* existence. It is never remembered; it has never succeeded in becoming conscious. *It is a construction of analysis, but it is no less a necessity on that account*" (1919/1999, p. 185, emphasis mine). "Most momentous," we could say, in that it formulates the truth of the subject's articulation to *jouissance*, the unconscious incestuous phantasy that the "I" cannot assume. "The unconscious for its part *preserves* a truth that it does not avow!" said Lacan in his seminar on phantasy (Session June 21, 1967, p. 266). Thus the "I" articulated to "am being beaten by my father" is a phrase that can *only* come into being as a construction of analysis; it is otherwise a foundational gap in the subject's history, inexorably repudiated by the "I." That is why Freud says this second phase "never had a *real* existence," meaning that it could not, would not, come into being if not for the existence of a place where that which cannot be spoken, remembered, or forgotten can nevertheless be heard.

The question of "real existence" and its link to psychoanalytic "construction" is nowhere more present than in "The History of An Infantile Neurosis." There Freud refers to the primal scene, the source of the Wolf Man's neurosis, as a "construction," the fruit of the analysis. You may remember Freud's countless oscillations and reversals in this case as to whether or not the Wolf Man "really" witnessed the coitus of his parents. He ultimately concludes by saying he will, "close the discussion of the reality of the primal scene with a *non liquet*" (1918/1999, p. 60). *Non liquet* is a Latin phrase indicating that the matter cannot be resolved due to a lacuna in the law; no applicable law exists. That is where Freud leaves it, but in Seminar XIV, Lacan responds to Freud's relentless wavering by invoking what he calls the "criteria of truth": Not did it "really" happen or not, but "Is it *true*?" thus re-situating Freud's quest to

determine the actual as origin as a question regarding *truth*. Referring to the Wolfman's symptom and the emergence of the signifier of the Roman numeral five in his analysis (the V-shape that appears in the case as the spread out legs of a woman or the wings of a butterfly) Lacan highlights that the Wolfman "had been able to verify this [primal] scene, to verify it with his whole being" (Session Dec. 7, 1966, p. 34). Lacan's "criteria of truth" gives emphasis to Freud's discovery that the analytic construction arises in that place where establishing *material* truth fails, where the limits of memory cannot be surpassed. A perfect moment for us to remember that Freud's capacity to be astonished by the truth contained in the hysteric's beautiful lie led him to abandon the illusion of memory's transparency and discover the unconscious...

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It is in the final section of "Constructions in Analysis" that Freud directly confronts the limits of analysis to undo repression and recover memories: "That path that starts from the analyst's construction ought to end in the patient's recollection; but...[q]uite often we do not succeed in bringing the patient to recollect what has been repressed" (1937b/1999, p. 265). He follows this with a most fascinating comment: "*The delusions of patients appear to be the equivalents of the constructions which we build up in the course of an analytic treatment*" (p. 268, emphasis mine). Freud makes this equivalence on the ground that the delusion, (a phenomenon he does not associate exclusively with psychosis), like the construction, touches the "kernel of truth" that can only be transmitted by way of "historical truth" (p. 267). As Freud will go on to elaborate in *Moses and*

*Monotheism*<sup>2</sup> (published in 1939, but already underway in 1934), historical truth marks that limit of direct remembrance and establishes a history that can only be known through after-effects. Like a crime with no witnesses, historical truth can only be deduced from attempts at concealment and is totally barred from any possibility of direct recollection. Here we discover an important clue as to how the construction, that which lacks a “*real* existence” in memory can nevertheless provoke a *real* effect. It is precisely the Real, in the Lacanian sense, that is the key: for the construction to achieve its optimal effect, it must hit the mark of the repressed and reverberate with the “kernel of truth” that constitutes the unspeakable core of speech and language. Striking this chord is what allows “an incomplete substitute” to resound as “complete truth” for the subject. It is the capacity of the construction to resonate with the beyond of what knowledge can contain that gives both the construction and the delusion their peculiar power to elicit absolute and unwavering conviction.

No doubt, remembering, repeating, and working through over the course of analysis can, to some degree, ease fixations of the drive and, in part, dissipate the work of repression. Nevertheless, we know that if the analysis goes far enough, it will invariably encounter what Freud called the “bedrock of castration,” a testament to the two-beat structure of repression. That there can be no “repression proper” without “primal repression” has profound consequences for the subject along with significant implications for analysis and its possible endings. It is by way of these two beats that the subject comes into being only thanks to an impossible-to-say-it-all that founds the possibility to speak at all. Thus,

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<sup>2</sup> It is interesting to note that “Moses”, which Freud called a “historical novel,” has itself been referred to as a *construction* (see J. Press, 2006).

contiguous with, and constitutive of, the gaps and stumblings through which the unconscious speaks there is a structuring void: An ineffable deafening silence that we would do anything to a-void.

And what is the subject's only defense against this structural abyss? It is the fundamental phantasm, which, in fact, Lacan identified as *the* construction of analysis. (His elaboration of the logic of the phantasm refers repeatedly to Freud's work on constructions in the Wolfman case and in "A Child is Being Beaten.") For Lacan, the fundamental phantasm is a necessary response to the enigmatic desire of the Other. It comes into being to rescue the child from the trauma of the lack in the Other, to construct that object which could provide total *jouissance* as a lost object, rather than an impossibility. The phantasm constitutes the subject's screen onto the world, supplying the coordinates for his way of obtaining *jouissance* while sustaining the Other as unbarred, a "guarantee" that total enjoyment would be attainable except for the obstacles that constitute the subject's deprivation. In this context, we can appreciate why, at a certain point in his work, Lacan identified the construction of the fundamental phantasm and its "traversal" (or crossing) as a way to think about the end of analysis. There where the limits of remembrance and meaning have been reached, when the signifiers and identifications that have determined the subject's existence have been exhausted, the fundamental phantasm can come into relief as that grammatical phrase or formula of the subject's *jouissance*. That is why we cannot bypass those aspects of analysis that pertain to finding the words to say it: it is necessary to pass through this (again and again!) in order to encounter what can never be said and nonetheless finds what can be said. Like a sculptor revealing the art object by chipping away at the marble block, analysis "constructs" by subtracting until what remains are the contours

of the phantasm, circumscribing the hole at the heart of the matter, the unthinkable absence of the sexual relationship and all its ramifications. Thus, we see Möbius topology of the construction: what may appear as a “whole” (a composite of fragments, a narrative, a formula) is, at the very same time, the definition of a gaping hole.

For the analyst, writes Moustapha Safaoun, “the end of analysis is more than the deciphering of the unconscious but the [very] fact of its existence and the impossibility of recuperating its contents once and for all” (2003). While certainly “a necessity of analysis” as Freud stated, the construction with its powerful truth effects is not enough to provide passage to that endpoint, it cannot make way through the bedrock to confront the lack in the Other, the lack of a final word. Lacan accepted Freud’s invitation to find another way through this impasse, which he formulated in various ways throughout his trajectory, one articulation being the traversal of the fundamental phantasm. As Lacan’s two-beat formulation makes clear, the *construction* of the fundamental phantasm is absolutely necessary but not sufficient to make the passage; there must be another logical moment. This is constituted by the “crossing,” a confrontation with the gap as such, that void which never ceases to insist despite every attempt to suture, veil, or bury it.

In his book, *The Three Times of the Law* (recently translated into English), Alain Didier-Weill<sup>3</sup> articulates the coming-into-being of the analyst as a function of the “beats” necessary to surmount superegoic prohibitions, making way for the capacity for astonishment to arise. Written in singular style that, in essence, realizes its thesis, *The Three Times of the Law* calls upon the analyst to intervene in a way that is *not*

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<sup>3</sup>Alain Didier-Weill (1939–2018) was a French psychoanalyst and playwright, a member of the *École Freudienne de Paris*. He co-founded *Le Coût freudien*, and created *Mouvement Insistance: art, psychoanalysis, politics* (2002) and the journal *Insistance*. His many plays have been widely performed.

grounded upon what he already knows, but rather, “based on *what he does not know as yet*” (Didier-Weill, 1995/2017, p. 316, emphasis mine), noting that beyond Oedipal guilt and its ambivalences, is a relation to the unknown and the unknowable (Didier-Weill, 1995/2017, p. 182). It is this “beyond” that can be discovered when “desire as a function ...allows [someone] to let an analysis come to its own conclusion without the interference of his personal desires” (Safaoun, 2003). Here, it is not by way of remembering, but through “...commemorating a psychic act (primal repression) of which the subject’s memory has no representation” (Didier-Weill, p. 316) that we are able to face the irreconcilable debt to language that we incurred by affirming the choice to become speaking subjects. Through this commemoration arises the capacity for astonishment, as essential to the analyst as the dancer’s ability to leap. Thus, beyond the satisfaction offered by the construction, past the truth “effect” of the “incomplete substitute,” we arrive right at the point where we discover the Real truth of the psychoanalytic subject.

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