

***Oriental(ist) Scenes:***  
**Orientalism of Psychoanalysis /**  
**Psychoanalysis of Orientalism<sup>1</sup>**

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*”Strange and secret longings rise up within me, perhaps from the heritage of my ancestors—for the Orient and the Mediterranean and a life of quite another kind: wishes from late childhood ill-adapted to reality.”—*  
Sigmund Freud

## INTRODUCTION

This paper sets out to explore the “Orient” that emerges in the writings of Sigmund Freud (1856-1939). Largely biblical or in Minor Asian key, Freud’s Orient pertains not so much to the field of area studies (of the Near and Middle East) as it delineates defining features of his modernist *Weltanschauung* and remains therefore inevitably caught up with the founding of psychoanalysis as a general science. While this Orientalism does not fail to draw (East/West) boundaries and binaries from a perceived history of “difference,” its ongoing ambition is reflected in European colonial appetites and its hierarchical constructions of self/otherness (Reid 2002; Marchand 1996). It also reveals an intricate interplay of race and gender identification as Gilman (1993) and others have noted (Geller 1998; Boyarin 1997).

If the 19<sup>th</sup> century saw the birth of modern Orientalism in the sense of Edward Said’s (1978) path breaking and at the same time precarious critique, it also witnessed the unraveling of European colonial pretensions on an unprecedented scale.<sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud’s Orientalist discourse mirrors in this context not just European ambitions abroad. In an atmosphere of growing nationalist fragmentation of an otherwise multinational Austro-Hungarian Empire and accompanied by the massive influx of so-called “Eastern Jews” (*Ostjuden*), Freud’s Orient unfolds as a mise-en-scene of the “Occidental” self. This enactment of the Western self goes hand in hand with a conceptualization of psychoanalysis as universal, that is, as “Western” science. This Orientalism typically presupposes essentialist assumptions of both Occident and Orient in which the latter helps to define the former “as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience”

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1. The title of this paper is inspired by a letter Freud wrote in September 1883 to his then fiancée Martha Bernays. In it, he mentions “A tooth out of the Caliph’s Jaw” and employs the German term “Morgenland” (Orient) for the first time (Freud 1992:55).

2. Postmodern and Marxist observers come together in their critique of Said’s *Orientalism* (1978). James Clifford, for example, argued how by fixating Europe and the West as self-identical entity that has always had an essence and a will, and the “Orient” as no more than its silenced object, Said had (re-)created “a monolithic Occident” (1988:271). Similarly, Aijaz Ahmad noted that Said completely neglected the subaltern voice and thus the ways in which Orientalism may have been “received, accepted, modified, challenged, overthrown, or reproduced” by those involved, “not as an undifferentiated mass but as situated social agents impelled by our own conflicts, contradictions, distinct social and political locations of class, gender, region, religious affiliation, and so on . . .” (1994:172). For more extensive commentary and critique of the implications of Said’s work and its later developments, see my “Sanfancon: Orientalism, Self-Orientalization and ‘Chinese Religion’ in Cuba” (2001:155-158).

(Said 1978:4). It may come as a surprise to some that the founder of psychoanalysis, and a theory that contributed profoundly and consistently to the dismantling of a unified Cartesian subject and the breaking down of conventional ideas of identity as whole and stable in itself, would present us with this impasse.

Whereas Edward W. Said defines the Orient as “one of [Europe’s] deepest and most recurring images of the Other” and Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating and [...] having authority over the Orient” (1978:1-5), almost two centuries earlier, G.W.F. Hegel’s “master-slave dialectic” had made clear that the struggle between self and other, as well as the double duplicity of their mutual existence, is about “staking one’s independence, die, or be enslaved” (O’Neill 1996:8). Thus enabled to broaden our scheme of interpretation and simultaneously to sharpen its focus, we can now advance with the following premise: that Freud’s self-construction in terms of Jewish male scientist and as Orientalist, clearly opposes and, in its reversal, strongly resists anti-Semitic notions of the feminized Jew as “Oriental,” then commonly held within and outside the confines of Austro-Hungary. However, the same opposition that operates here between Orientalist and “Oriental,” also feeds into the one surrounding the notion of science (psychoanalysis) as a “rational” versus dogma (religion) as an “irrational” *Weltanschauung*. Thus both distinctions collaborate in the making of Freud’s “Western” self as well as in the development of his universal (“Western”) science (psychoanalysis).

An overview of his substantial literary production reveals the significant extent to which Freud engaged in Orientalist practices. From the insertion of Turkish imaginings in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) to the use of Babylonian etymologies in *Character and Anal Eroticism* (1909) to the staging of Pharaonic Egypt in *Moses and Monotheism* (1939), there is a multitude of “Oriental” textualities, i.e. anecdotes, dreams, metaphors and other references, which combine to (re)produce a pervasive Orientalist presence. This presence found tangible expression in the museum-like interiors of his consulting room and study in Vienna’s Berggasse 19 as shown by the photographer Edmund Engelmann (1993). In these rooms the patient was met by an overwhelming collection of antiquities while “Oriental” rugs covered the floor as well as the “Diwan,” Freud’s famous analytical couch<sup>1</sup> (Ransohoff 1975; Dimock 1994; Marinelli 1998). Surprisingly, no study exists that would examine Freud’s “Orient” and much less one that could clarify the relation between the development of psychoanalysis and Orientalist discourse, which is why my paper will explore precisely this privileged and yet inaccurately—if at all—mapped province in the conceptual geography of Freud’s writings.

Scrutiny of the English translation of Freud’s works reveals a similar neglect. While meticulously edited and reworded by James and Alix Strachey and a team of high profile translators, their insistent attempts to medicalize Freud’s prose in addition to the presence of a host of problems—from simply unfortunate renderings to certain amnesic omissions—in the *Standard Edition* (1966) cannot be ignored (Ornston 1992). Similarly, Freud’s cultural “Orient” was first erased, then replaced by a geo-strategic category, namely the “East,” and thereafter indexically ignored.<sup>2</sup> A fate that is, in my view, symptomatic for the total absence of a critical discussion of Orientalism in Sigmund Freud, his “Complete Psychological Works,” or the development of psychoanalysis.<sup>3</sup> Thus, almost 150 years after Freud’s birth and 25 years after Said’s *Orientalism*, this marked absence of a debate surrounding the Orientalism of perhaps one of the most influential figures in the “Western” (canon) conceptualization of the mind can only be characterized as a major blind spot in contemporary critical thought.

## FREUD’S ORIENT/S

Two fundamental and intimately related concepts of psychoanalytical thought are the workings of “the uncon-

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1. It is not without interest to inquire into the curious fact of how Freud’s “Diwan” (1895/1999:100) was eventually re-modeled into an “analytical couch.” When James and Alix Strachey translated the term in 1933 for the *Standard Edition* with “sofa,” from the Arabic *suffa* (a long padded seat), they stayed within the realm of the “Oriental,” but had, at the same time, erased its central meaning, which in Turkish is “seat of government” (*divan*). In contrast, the term “couch” (alternate use for sofa in English) is derived from the French word for “to sleep” (*coucher*).

2. Curiously, James Strachey’s photography appears on the first page of the last volume of the *Standard Edition* (XXIV), which contains “Indexes and Bibliographies,” and shows him posing “in Egypt, 1933.”

3. Penguin Books (U.K.) began publishing a new English translation of Freud’s most important works in 2003 (a total of fifteen volumes are planned). In this innovative, admirable effort led by Adam Phillips who ensured the return of the “Orient” to its pages, the reader is now closer to the German original. To offer but one example, the new edition includes Freud’s *The ‘Wolfman’ and Other Cases* (2003) translated by Adey Huish. In *The Ratman* it is precisely the “Orient” to provide a crucial context: “Now, during the halt we got into conversation and the captain told me that he had read about a particularly terrible form of punishment practiced in the Orient ...” (2003:134). See also: Daphne Merkin’s “The Literary Freud” (2003).

scious” and the dynamics of “repression,” topics to which Freud dedicated two seminal papers in 1915. Only little later, in 1922, the well-known Viennese writer Hugo von Hofmannsthal proposed “a secretive and mystical Orient” to represent the “Empire of the Unconscious” (1979:195, my translation; see also: Le Rider 1991). What he did not mention and what is even more striking, however, is the precision of the correspondences between Freud’s psychoanalytical definition of the unconscious, the system *Ucs.*, and late 19<sup>th</sup> to early 20<sup>th</sup> century literary and conventional Germano-Austrian ideas of the “Orient.” Here, I want to cite a key-passage from one of the above mentioned papers, *The Unconscious*, which offers an impressively concise definition:

To sum up: *exemption from mutual contradiction, primary process [...], timelessness, and replacement of external reality by psychological reality*—these are the characteristics which we may expect to find in processes belonging to the system *Ucs.* (Freud 1915/1981:186-187)

Fassen wir zusammen: Widerspruchslosigkeit, Primärvorgang [...], Zeitlosigkeit und Ersetzung der äußeren Realität durch die psychische sind die Charaktere, die wir an zum System *Ubw* gehörigen Vorgängen zu finden erwarten dürfen. (Freud 1915/1999: 285-286)

These same characteristics—timelessness, no contradiction, no negation—which Freud identified in the “deeper” strata of the human psyche, have long been associated with stereotypical representations of the “Orient” in the West, or rather, have become part and parcel of the very process of Orientalising and thus of (re)producing the Orient (Said 1978:19). Whereas the *exemption from mutual contradiction* corresponds to the idea of the “irrational” Orient; Freud’s reminder that we are dealing with a *primary process* of (libidinal) presences and absences invites similarly obsessive Western imaginings of the Orient in terms of the “Despot” (politic) and the “Harem” (domestic); furthermore, the notion of *timelessness*—and here we are facing perhaps its most incisive characteristic—is stereotypically employed to evoke a static, frozen, unchanging, “eternal” Orient; and last but not least, *the replacement of external reality by psychological reality* opens the gates to an essentialist, secularist, Western day-dream of a realm of spirituality from where the wisdom of the “mystic” Orient is thought to emanate (*ex Oriente lux*). However, a fifth element, *the influence the unconscious has on somatic processes*, only found articulation two years later in a letter to Georg Groddeck (Groddeck/Freud 1985:20; my translation). While the linking of disease and Orient typically betrays modernist anxieties, it also responds to more entrenched Western imaginings of “Oriental degeneracy.” Overall, Freud’s concept of the unconscious is clearly distinguishable as a space of radical otherness and as the quintessential “Orient.”

To take up the second part of our foundational tour—the dynamics of repression—we will briefly discuss Freud’s psycho-archaeological work *par excellence*, “Delusions and Dreams in Jensen’s *Gradiva*” (1907). Effectively, it examines a piece of then popular literature by entering and exiting an “archaeological sphere of imagination,” that is, a privileged space of excavation which eventually comes to dominate the entire text. Staged around the most prominent of 19<sup>th</sup> century European archaeological tourist destinations, Pompeii, Italy, Freud’s idea of “repression” is here being explained along psycho-archaeological fault-lines:

There is, in fact, no better analogy for repression, by which something in the mind is at once inaccessible and preserved, than burial of the sort to which Pompeii fell a victim and from which it could emerge once more through the work of spades. (Freud 1907/1981:40)

Es gibt wirklich keine bessere Analogie für die Verdrängung, die etwas Seelisches zugleich unzugänglich macht und konserviert, als die Verschüttung, wie sie Pompeji zum Schicksal geworden ist, und aus der die Stadt durch die Arbeit des Spatens wieder erstehen konnte. (Freud 1907/1999:65)

Nicholas Rand and Maria Torok (1997) who discussed the *Gradiva* in much detail and not without psychoanalytical insight into Freud’s own unconscious are very helpful here. In their attempt to unearth some of Freud’s own repressed strata of the soul, they found beneath his elaboration of Jensen’s “Pompeian Fancy” an unspoken family-trauma that, according to them, ultimately informed his way of conceptualizing psychoanalysis.<sup>1</sup>

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1. The authors describe it as “a trauma of inaccessibility” originating with the conviction of Freud’s uncle Josef by the Austrian Imperial Court in 1866 for circulating counterfeit money. The case also incriminated Freud’s father Jacob, his two older half-brothers, Emanuel and Phillip, and was repeatedly reported in the Austrian press. Rand and Torok’s main point is young Freud’s inability to break through the family-silence, which would have profoundly affected his subsequent psychoanalytic research (1997:145-155).

Their reading highlights the way in which Freud's need to fit his model of sexual repression in the Pompeian mould led him to overlook a major contradiction. In fact, they identified "two incompatible ideas" in Freud's attempt to link a) the protagonist who "suffers from sexual repression" to b) a discussion of the mechanism of repression based on "the fate of the ancient Pompeii" (Rand and Torok 1997:77-78). Thus, if we define repression in terms of a *dynamic* concept, that is, as a continuous struggle between two opposing forces involving censorship on the one hand and the return of the repressed on the other, then the Pompeian analogy must fall apart. Most significant to our discussion remains the fact that Rand and Torok reject Freud's statement of there being "no better analogy for repression" by clarifying why Pompeii, "at once inaccessible and preserved," cannot hold as an explanatory image for the dynamics of repression (see also Laplanche and Pontalis 1973:393).

As we will see, Freud felt the need to reach the Orient, and the Sphinx, in order to "solve" the problem/riddle. Thus, in the *ante bellum* summer of 1914, only weeks before the July crisis and the subsequent outbreak of WWI, Freud added a crucial footnote to *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), in which he turned to an exotic and unequivocally Orientalist travel-metaphor so as to illustrate the workings of the unconscious and, in particular, the dynamics of repression (we find the same footnote inserted into the 1915 edition of his *Three Essays on Sexuality*). Here, Freud's analogy centers on Egypt and the historical and archaeological uniqueness of the Great Pyramid of Giza as seen through the eyes of the tourist:

In any account of the theory of repression it would have to be laid down that a thought becomes repressed as a result of the combined influence upon it of *two* factors. It is pushed from the one side (by the censorship of the *Cs.*) and pulled from the other (by the *Ucs.*), in the same kind of way in which people are conveyed to the top of the Great Pyramid" (Freud 1900/1981:547).

In einer Darstellung der Lehre von der Verdrängung wäre auszuführen, daß ein Gedanke durch das Zusammenwirken zweier ihn beeinflussenden Momente in die Verdrängung gerät. Er wird von der einen Seite (der Zensur des *Bw*) weggestoßen, von der anderen (dem *Ubw*) angezogen, also ähnlich wie man auf die Spitze der großen Pyramide gelangt (Freud 1900/1999:553).

It should be remembered that Freud's tourist metaphor is almost identical to a passage in Gerard de Nerval's 1851-*Voyage en Orient* in which the Great Pyramid is again demoted from royal burial site to panoptic viewing platform as "teams of Bedouin" were organized "to heave and push the writer or tourist to the top, where two more Bedouin would carry the European on their shoulders to all four corners, to observe the view" (in Mitchell 1988). Tourist attractions aside, the tense atmosphere of colonial domination that unfolds in the foregoing passage is completely ignored. Instead, together with his admiring references to "hieroglyphics" and other uncounted treasures of the land of the Nile—the cradle of civilization—these decidedly positive representations remain inextricably linked to their flipside, that is, to a set of demeaning images of the Orient. Indeed, we find in Freud's writings numerous references to "Turkey" which is always identified with the Ottoman Empire and always framed in negative terms. Two brief examples may suffice to make the point.

In the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901) we are told: "These Turks place a higher value on sexual enjoyment than on anything else, and in the event of sexual disorders they are plunged in a despair which contrasts strangely with their resignation towards the threat of death" (Freud 1901/1981:3). In a brief but prominent exchange of letters with Albert Einstein on the topic of "Why War?" Freud wrote: "It is impossible to make any sweeping judgment upon war of conquest. Some, such as those waged by the Mongols and Turks, have brought nothing but evil" (1933/1981:207). Sustained by a number of similar instances, there can be little doubt, "Turkey" is treated by the author of *The Ego and the Id* rather harshly and represented in terms of backwardness and cruelty, which reflects the general tone that comes to the fore when he refers to Austro-Hungary's immediate (imperialist) neighbor, the Ottoman Empire. Thus, if in Freud's Orient Egypt, where the Jewish people left slavery behind to find perhaps one of their greatest moments of self-making, is consistently idealized; Turkey, seen as the persistence of barbarism, despotic rule and bondage, is constantly devalued.<sup>1</sup>

There can be little doubt that Freud's Orientalist discourse is characterized by its double oppositionality (Occident/Orient; positive/negative Orient/s) and thus complicated by its unconscious machinations. After focusing on the development of psychoanalysis through the lens of Freud's Orientalist discursive practices, we have reached a propitious moment for reversal and may want, for added benefit, attempt to look at Orientalism from a psychoanalytical perspective. In the course of reviewing Freud's Orientalist leanings, we have witnessed not only the production and subsequent

polarization of Occident and Orient, but also the unfolding of a dual Orient: there is, on the one hand, a good/noble Orient (Egypt) and juxtaposed to it, on the other, a bad/miserable Orient (Turkey). This dividing of the (“Oriental”) object into benign and malign opposites is known in psychoanalysis as *Ichspaltung*, or splitting of the ego, a mental process that is generally associated with pre/ambivalence and considered one of the most primitive defense mechanisms against anxiety in which the object, with both erotic and destructive instincts directed toward it, splits into “good” and “bad” (Laplanche and Pontalis 1973: 427-429).

Although Freud had, mostly in passing, touched on the subject in earlier works such as *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy* (1909), *The Uncanny* (1919), or *The Ego and the Id* (1923), it was only in one of his last papers entitled *Splitting of the Ego in the Process of Defense* (1938/1981:275-278), that he dedicated his exclusive attention to the complexities of its workings. In discussing the case of a young boy (perhaps “Little Hans,” perhaps himself), he begins by pointing out that the process of splitting generally “occurs under the influence of a psychological trauma” and situates the origins of the conflict as one between “the demand by the instinct and the prohibition of reality.” However, the child, and potentially later neurotic patient, “takes neither course or rather takes both simultaneously, which comes to the same thing.”

In fact, the response to the trauma and conflict is twofold and contrary, including a) the rejection of reality thereby refusing the prohibition, and b) the recognition of the dangers of reality, which are then taken over as pathological symptoms to be (ideally speaking) disposed of at a later time. Even though this split solution may appear as an “ingenious” one as both instinct and reality “obtain their share,” the success of this mental operation is only “achieved at the price of a rift in the ego which never heals but which increases as time goes on.” While “good” and “bad” parts will have relatively distinct roles in the interplay of introjections and projections within each individual, it becomes plausible to transpose our psychoanalytical insights in regards to the process of the splitting of the ego onto Freud’s Orient/s, his various Orientalist discursive practices and finally his turning these against the threats—imagined or real—of both “Eastern” Jewry and “Western” anti-Semitism.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, I want to highlight five major points. First, on one hand Freud’s life-span (1856-1939) coincides *in time* precisely with the apex of modern Orientalism, from the beginnings of global European colonial domination to the end of WWII, while, on the other hand, his specific Orientalist discourse corresponds *in space* to regional (Viennese), national (Austro-Hungarian) and international (European) discursive practices. Second, Freud’s construction of an “Occidental” self, of a “Western” identity, remains intimately linked to then common assumptions of essential difference and “Oriental” otherness. Third, these ideas are, at the same time, of highly ambivalent character in that they always appear (split) in idealized (good) *and* devalued (bad) expressions, pointing to a dialectics of desire and recognition. Fourth, both Orientalism (self/other) and splitting (good/bad) reveal a complicity in their duplicity as they function not just on the level of the individual, but play equally important roles in terms of larger social phenomena. Fifth, the “normal” as opposed to the pathological dimensions of Orientalist splitting should be considered not in terms of distinguishable categories, but rather as flowing into each other which is crucial for the conceptualization of what I call “psychoorientalism,” emerging at the intersection of psychoanalytical inquiry and Orientalist critique. Overall, I am convinced of the necessity of a critical re-reading of Freud’s thought along Saidian lines, while I also believe that such a reading does not invalidate the basic tenets of psychoanalytical inquiry which continues to offer important insights into the functioning of the human mind or, in the words of Sigmund Freud, into “the apparatus of the soul.”

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1. At this point, we may want to remind ourselves of two historic “Turkish” sieges of the city of Vienna in 1529 and 1683. Deeply embedded in Austrian imaginings of a threatening Orient, these events may indeed have contributed to Freud’s unfriendly reflections of the Ottoman Empire and later of the Turkish Republic. However, the pre-WWI-situation in the Balkans, where successive attempts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire accompanied the continued retreat of Ottoman Turkey, such as in Bosnia-Herzegovina, may go even further in explaining Freud’s hostility. Moreover, rather than simply pertaining to a general discourse of European, or even German Orientalism—a subject that was completely obliterated in Said’s work—we are in fact dealing with what Andre Gingrich, in a much more specific Austrian context, so appropriately coined as “Frontier Orientalism” (1996). In terms of popular 18<sup>th</sup> century Austrian reflections of “Turks,” Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart’s 1782-opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* (The Abduction from the Serail) offers an eloquent example. For an impressively insightful discussion of the subject informed by Said’s critique of Orientalism, see Matthew Head (2000).

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