ANALYSIS CURES: On Rereading Freud

Gila Ashtor

I

In 1984, Heinz Kohut titled his final book *How Does Analysis Cure?,* a provocation that Fred Busch repeated in his 2024 book of the same name. How *does* analysis cure? It is indeed a question that every analyst might answer differently, depending on their theoretical orientation, technical preferences, or when in their life and career you ask them. But I find myself curious about what rereading Freud might have to do with the answer. I want to think about the role of rereading the *Standard Edition* in our formation as analytic thinkers and healers. Why do so many of us return to Freud again and again, in spite of his limitations and disproven theories? After so many of his conjectures have been historicized and his methodology criticized, why do we return to rereading him? What are we hoping to gain?

II

In one of the undergraduate classes I teach, we read excerpts from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920). One student was so excited about the reading, he told me that he always knew Freud had written about things that were of deep interest to him. But he had never allowed himself to read Freud directly. When I asked why this was—why he would avoid reading a text that he had correctly anticipated would be compelling to him—he looked a bit embarrassed and said, "Because I didn't want it to influence me. I wanted to see if I could come up with my own ideas first." I smiled because I recognized the intense felt fear he described. Instead of perceiving my recognition, he imagined I would retort with disapproval, and so he proceeded to apologize for his Oedipal cowardice. When I reassured him that I understood his reticence (understood it

Psychoanalytic Review, 111(4), 421–425, 2024
 https://doi.org/10.1521/prev.2024.111.4.421

better than he thought), he couldn't hear me over his loud promises to start reading Freud from now on.

III

In my analytic training, we read Freud slowly and talmudically. We poured over his definitions, argumentative twists, leaps, and regressions. We approached Freud as though there was no such thing as "post-Freudian," that is, as though we needed to reconstruct his arguments regardless of their accuracy or validity. As if it wasn't for *us* to critically evaluate his ideas but merely to strive to comprehend them, in all their original splendor. I resisted and resented this approach to engaging with Freud. It didn't suit my disposition or the historical moment we were in. After all, by the time I entered training, I had already been steeped in debates waged by Jacques Lacan, the Relational school, and poststructuralism. And, by the start of the 21st century, it seemed inconceivable (and frankly, indefensible) that we would approach Freud (or anyone) as a sacred object cordoned off from critique. It didn't help that I was negatively suggestible, and nothing ever bothered me more than being told to worship something I hadn't "freely" chosen.

IV

When I discovered Jean Laplanche's (2011) attitude toward Freud as one of "faithful infidelity," it seemed to me that a window had opened and fresh air was being let in: "A fidelity with respect to reading and translation, restoring to Freud what he means—including his contradictions and his turning points; an infidelity with respect to the interpretation of Freud's 'goings astray', in order to try to find what I call 'New Foundations for Psychoanalysis'" (p. 285). *New Foundations for Psychoanalysis*? It was Laplanche's wager that we could read Freud the way we never read him; with a commitment to developing ideas that he suggested but neglected, with an insistence on retiring concepts that had been proven wrong. Laplanche told me it was okay to be Freudian and say that so much of Freud was mistaken. That engaging with Freud actually meant

maintaining fidelity to an essential Freudian discovery ("enlarged sexuality" for Laplanche) and critiquing whatever was incompatible with this discovery, getting it out of the way. You were allowed to read Freud for what was radical, and illuminating, and get rid of the rest. It was a revelation.

V

I am writing this around the Jewish holiday of Yom Kippur. It reminds me of attending synagogue as a child, and once hearing the Rabbi ask the congregation why so many Jews felt obliged to show up for this holiday, no matter how little they practiced the rest of the year. He asked this question to a room full of "High Holiday Jews," as the expression goes, meaning people who don't observe any other aspect of Judaism but find their way to synagogue to fast and mark the Day of Atonement. The Rabbi suggested it was fear—of letting go of the very last vestige of what made you as a Jew fear that if there actually was a God, you'd be punished for not observing this holiest day, fear that if there was a Book of Life, you wouldn't be in it. I was 10 or 11 years old, and this made perfect sense to me then. When now I see colleagues strain to link their thinking to Freud's, I wonder if it isn't driven by a similar fear? The fear that if we let go of Freud, there is nothing, specifically, that makes us psychoanalysts. What distinguishes us, really, from psychodynamic therapists who talk about childhood and try not to judge? Do we read and reread Freud to identify as psychoanalysts?

VI

When I began teaching Freud to analytic candidates, I felt a duty to explain why I thought it was necessary to read Freud at all. I said some analysts didn't think Freud was that relevant, but I was not one of them. And yet I also was not someone who read Freud as though I needed him to teach me something, or not something I could definitively name. I knew it mattered deeply that we read Freud and engage with him. Maybe only the quality of our engagement could determine why we read him in the first place?

VII

In his magisterial essay "On the Therapeutic Action of Psychoanalysis" (1960/1980), Hans Loewald writes that

> in promoting the transference neurosis, we are promoting a regressive movement on the part of the preconscious (ego regression) that is designed to bring the preconscious out of its defensive isolation from the unconscious and to allow the unconscious to recathect, in interaction with the analyst, preconscious ideas and experiences in such a way that higher organization of mental life can come about. (p. 251)

The patient needs to return to a set of experiences that are utterly familiar, in order to transform them into a higher level of organization. Loewald demonstrates exactly what he means by this in his very own writing, dense as it is with the language and meanings of Freud's original texts. Indeed, instead of disposing of Freud's language for how it may be mistaken, Loewald returns and reanimates it, as if to experiment with how transformation runs through, not around, what we already know.

VIII

Rereading Freud as an exercise in therapeutic action. Transforming ourselves by returning, again and again and again, to what we know in order to finally unknow it or know it differently this time. Because otherwise what is our model of change? True change must integrate the parts of us that give us the most trouble, the parts of us that hurt. We can't change without going back to where we started, without including the past in the future we build. Rereading Freud as a lesson in therapeutic action. As an exercise in how analysis cures.

REFERENCES

Busch, F. (2024). *How does analysis cure? Essays on a psychoanalytic method, psychoanalytic organizations and psychoanalysts*. Routledge.

Freud, S. (1920). Beyond the pleasure principle. In J. Strachey (Ed. & Trans.), *The standard edition of the complete psychological works of Sigmund Freud* (Vol. 18, pp. 7–64). Hogarth Press, 1958–1973.
Kohut, H. (1984). *How does analysis cure?* University of Chicago Press.
Laplanche, J. (2011). Incest and infantile sexuality. In N. Ray (Trans.), *Freud and the sexual* (pp. 285–302). Unconscious in Translation.
Loewald, H. (1980). On the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis. In *Papers on psychoanalysis* (pp. 221–256). Yale University Press. (Original work published 1960)

139 West 82nd St., #1CD
New York, NY 10024
E-mail: ga2390@columbia.edu

The Psychoanalytic Review
Vol. 111, No. 4, December 2024