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## **Freud as a Psychical Researcher: The Impossible Freudian Legacy**

### **1. Introduction**

Sigmund Freud's interest in occultism—and especially thought transference—is now well documented (Moreau, 1976; Evrard and Rabeyron, 2012; Massicotte, 2014), along with the place of “psychical research” in the history of psychology and psychoanalysis (Le Maléfan, 1999; Méheust, 1999; Evrard, 2016; Brower, 2010). Yet, this history still contains certain shortcomings linked to a lack of contextualization. The following pages propose an in-depth exploration of one particular aspect of the intersections between psychoanalysis and psychical research by contextualizing Freud's (1925) “The Occult Significance of Dreams.” This text presents an important turning point in Freud's epistemological positioning. Yet, some of his counsellors—most notably his “wizard” Ernest Jones (Maddox, 2009)—worked to repress the text's enthusiasm towards telepathy. As Freud's official biographer and a fervent opponent of the interactions between psychoanalysis and psychical research, Jones erected a biased perspective on “Freudian parapsychology,” a perspective that remains important today (Onfray, 2010). Jones further favored a certain marginalization of what Freud and other analysts have called “psychoanalytic parapsychology” (Devereux, 1953).

This article thus retraces some key points in Freud's evolution concerning the paranormal. It then situates the controversial experiments of Gilbert Murray from whom Freud extracted his increasing conviction regarding the reality of telepathy. Lastly, this paper discusses Freud's (1925) “The Occult Significance of Dreams,” a text presenting his now favorable views on the topic, and explores the reception of this Freudian “conversion” in the psychoanalytic milieu, as well

as the ulterior development of a marginal “psychoanalytic parapsychology” aiming to erect an experimental paradigm to test certain Freudian hypotheses.

In the space of twenty years, as a result of his new position regarding telepathy, Freud shifted from the admired position of myth slayer to the ill-fated role of myth purveyor. Retracing this internal transition in the psychoanalytic movement, the following pages aim to inform more general discussions on the decline of psychoanalysis’s authority (Lézé, 2010), a decline associated both with the self-destruction of the discipline (Dupont, 2014) and with the effort of external critics (Cioffi, 1998; Borch-Jacobsen and Shamdasani, 2005).

## 2. The evolution of Freud’s relationship to occultism

From his earliest writings, Freud defined psychoanalysis as an extension of the Enlightenment project endeavoring to interpret rationally the nature of the human psyche. In this respect, he defined the discipline in contrast with previous clinical models derived from magical beliefs or from authoritarian hypnotherapy, a move held today as having participated in the construction of the “golden legend” of psychoanalysis (Ellenberger, 1970; Borch-Jacobsen and Shamdasani, 2005). Can we say the same about the so-called epistemological rupture between psychoanalysis and what Freud called “occultism”?

Certainly, the father of psychoanalysis was partly successful in his rationalist project with his work on *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900). The German term, *Traumdeutung*, makes explicit reference to the ancestral practice of onirocritique (Carroy and Lancel, 2016). Freud attacked the ancient belief in “prophetic dreams,” by reducing dream contents to the realization of an unconscious wish according to memories of the past. Thus, in response to the question: “what of the value of dreams in regard to our knowledge of the future?” Freud wrote:

“That, of course, is quite out of the question. One would like to substitute the words: in regard to our knowledge of the past. For in every sense a dream has its origin in the past. The ancient belief that dreams reveal the future is not indeed entirely devoid of the truth. By representing a wish as fulfilled the dream certainly leads us into the future; but this future, which the dreamer accepts as his present, has been shaped in the likeness of the past by the indestructible wish.” (Freud, 1900: 526)

Similarly, for Freud, dreams presaging sickness could exist, but they were neither supernatural nor occult: rather, they could be explained by certain internal organic stimuli, usually not accessible to the guarding consciousness, but sur-

facing during sleep through a combination with the usual dream material. Freud proposed this theory in both *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900, pp. 39 ff.) and “Metapsychological Supplement to the Theory of Dreams” (Freud, 1915). This later work explained that narcissistic interest in the body (of the dreamer or of a dear person) was the cause of this “diagnostic achievement” in dreams—an achievement that was neither premonitory nor prophetic in an occultist sense.

As early as 1899, Freud illustrated his rationalistic onirocriticism in a text reprinted in his *Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (Freud, 1901) and published posthumously in 1941. Ironically titled “A Premonitory Dream Fulfilled,” this text narrated the dream of a patient of Freud who claimed to have lived its exact content the following day. Freud’s interpretation suggested that her remembrance of the dream had in fact been reconstructed after the day’s events and, having no counterevidence to offer, the patient accepted this analysis. Understanding the dream through the associations and history of the patient, Freud thus argued that the latter’s memory had in fact been a reconstruction *après-coup* or paramnesia. He then held repressed desire as the sole organizer of her apparent premonition. This first hypothesis on prophetic dreams was thus already framed by an original psychoanalytic approach, in which occult experiences were not simply reduced to the refutation of their authenticity, but understood through their psychological impact and function for patients.

However, Freud’s position evolved over the following years. On the one hand, he generally continued to approach occult phenomena as myths or creations of the human mind. On the other hand, this approach at times left him unsatisfied and he felt increasingly the need to explore the possibility of genuine paranormal phenomena (Massicotte, 2014). Here, he was partially influenced by a number of disciples who were more receptive to the field of psychical research, among them Carl G. Jung and Sándor Ferenczi (Gori, 1996). As their correspondence reveals, certain transference issues were crystallized around this topic. Indeed, Freud encouraged his closest disciples to undertake “dangerous expeditions” in the occult countries, from which he claimed to be unable to restrain them, but he also warned that he could not himself accompany them (Freud’s letter to Ferenczi, May 1911, in: Freud, Ferenczi, 1994: 289). In spite of such claims, the Viennese physician enthusiastically experimented with his disciples on various mediums and psychics (Rabeyron and Evrard, 2012). Like them, he also became a member of the British Society for Psychical Research (SPR)—then of its American and Greek branches—until his death.

The SPR had played a pioneering role in the development of psychology in England, although its members specialized in fields related more closely to hypnotism, extraordinary mental abilities, and the occult (Gauld, 1968). The Society also participated in introducing Freud's work in the English language, creating vocations like those of psychoanalysts James Strachey and Joan Riviere (Powell, 1979; Keeley, 2001). In spite of these meeting points, Freud hesitated for several years before reviewing his positions, and this ambivalence reverberated on his disciples. Jung eventually explored these regions alone, while Ferenczi saw his desire for communication on this topic systematically restrained by Freud, yet infiltrating his clinical practice and thought (Rabeyron and Evrard, 2012; Gyimesi, 2012).

Around 1920, Freud began to communicate a different interpretation of so-called occult facts, openly accepting a kernel of truth in the subject of telepathy. Four texts mark this period, but their destinies are symptomatic.

- The first, "Psychoanalysis and Telepathy" (1921), is the subject of a conference reserved for a limited circle of psychoanalysts (Abraham, Eitingon, Ferenczi, Jones, Rank and Sachs). It will be published posthumously in 1941 (Granoff and Rey, 2005).
- The second, "Dreams and Telepathy," is a long, convoluted and careful text in which Freud concludes: "If the existence of telepathic dreams were to be established there would be no need to alter our conception of dreams in any way" (Freud, 1922: 120). There is no lack of commentators to question, like Derrida (1983) and Gay (1988), the interest of such an article consisting of 25 pages of tergiversation that do not lead to any clear proposal. Yet, this text is of importance because it apprehends telepathy as a possible phenomenon that deserved scientific and psychoanalytical attention (Massicotte, 2014).
- The third, "The Occult Significance of Dreams" (1925), contains Freud's first public affirmation of his belief in telepathy, to which we shall return.
- Finally, the 1933 "Dream and Occultism" is a late publication in which he expresses an even stronger conviction.

Collectively, these articles discuss five clinical cases related to his practice or reported by others. Through these, Freud endeavored to show the psychic processes shaping the emergence of thought transference, but he did not argue decisively about their evidential value. To understand what played a decisive role in the evolution of Freud's position, we must examine a particular episode in the encounter between psychoanalysis and psychical research.

### 3. Freud and Gilbert Murray's "parlour game"

In December 1924, the *Proceedings of the SPR* published an account of the experiments carried out by the University of Oxford Hellenist Professor Gilbert Murray (Sidgwick, 1924). After reading this article, on February 19, 1925, Freud distributed a very positive circular letter to the secret committee composed of renowned psychoanalysts:

"The strongest literary impression of this month came to me through a report on telepathy experiments from Professor Murray (Sidgwick, 1924). I confess that the impression of these reports was so strong that I am prepared to give up my opposition to the existence of thought transference, although I naturally cannot make the least contribution to explaining it. I would even be prepared to lend support to the cause of telepathy through psychoanalysis." (Brabant, Falzeder and Giampieri-Deutsch, 2000: 205)

How could these experiments make such an impression on Freud? From 1910 to 1924, the famous professor Gilbert Murray carried out more than 800 variations of an experiment in which an "agent," usually his daughter or his wife, thought of something, a "target," and said it aloud in front of witnesses before writing it down. Then, a "percipient" - usually Murray himself - who had previously stood in an adjacent room, entered and attempted to guess the thought in question, in a process similar to free association. This methodology evolved little over the course of time, Murray being extremely reluctant to engage in more controlled scientific experiments. This classicist, famous for his "ritualistic" interpretation of Greek dramas, indeed maintained the ritual framework for his "family parlour-game," where words took a central place (Lowe, 2007).

According to observers' reports, Murray had been able to accurately guess the agent's thought about once in every three experiments (Verrall, 1916; Sidgwick, 1924), whether it concerned a real-life event, a literary scene, or an imaginary episode. The SPR received this accumulation of anecdotes as "the most important ever brought to the notice of the Society, both on account of their frequently brilliant success and on account of the eminence of the experimenter" (Sidgwick, 1924: 212).

Indeed, Gilbert Murray was considered the greatest specialist of ancient Greece in the first half of the twentieth century (Dodds, 1957–1958). At the age of 23, he accepted the position of Chair of Greek at the University of Glasgow, before taking up the Regius Chair at Oxford University in 1908. And although his commentators tried to conceal it, he cultivated a deep interest in psychical research throughout his life (Lowe, 2007).

It was through his friendship with another Hellenist, Arthur W. Verrall (Lowe, 2005), that Murray met Margaret Verrall (Duncan, 1987: 274). The latter was very involved in the activities of the SPR and Murray consented, in April 1901, for the Society to publish a private letter to Mrs Verrall in which he recounted three personal experiences foreshadowing future events quite evocatively (Murray, 1901–1902). In the first, while playing on a swing, he anticipated that a rope would let go. In the second, he sensed that the chain of a lamp on the ceiling was on the point of yielding, just before it did. Finally, he distinctly heard the footsteps of a fly on paper. To explain the strangeness of these three experiences, he proposed the hypothesis of hyperesthesia: his senses would have detected subtle information without their treatment being integrated directly into his conscious awareness. This “intuitive” form of “subliminal thought” made him question the nature of other seemingly paranormal experiences.

Murray joined the SPR in 1894, as did many other illustrious figures of the late-nineteenth century, and was elected to its Council in 1906. His pupil, Eric Robertson Dodds, succeeded him both on this Council and as the Regius Chair at Oxford. In 1915, Murray was even elected president of the SPR (like Bergson, two years earlier) and became president again in 1952, at the society’s 70th birthday. It was during his first presidential address that he referred to “small experiments” (Murray, 1916: 48), which he had carried out at home since 1910, and which he would pursue regularly until 1946 (Verrall, 1916; Sidgwick, 1924; Salter, 1941, Murray, 1949-1952; Dodds, 1972).

The account that so impressed Freud was thus part of a series of experiments that would still be debated long after his death (Dingwall, 1973). It must be mentioned here that these experiments were not exempt of methodological flaws, seemingly unnoticed by Freud but illuminated by many of his contemporaries. The targets were not chosen randomly, opening the possibility of a certain complicity, and were not always properly concealed from the percipient as he entered the room. Interactions between participants (especially tactile ones) suggest “cold-reading” strategies (Roe and Roxburgh, 2013), muscle-reading (Richet, 1886) or even cheating, since it was mainly the same close family members who met during each trial. The reports are incomplete: they are transcriptions that could be edited in the aftermath. Factual verification was based solely on subjective corroborations of what constitutes success or failure. Finally, one commentator ironically questioned whether it was now sufficient for a medium to possess a certain social and academic status for the phenomena produced to be considered authentic (More, 1925).

Yet, the most important methodological problem of Murray's experiment was the lack of distance placed between the percipient and the agent. Murray canceled certain attempts because he was able to hear the agent's idea while he was on the other side of the door (Sidgwick, 1924: 231). That said, the Hellenist admitted that the experiments most often failed when the agents did not proclaim the thought aloud, or when there were parasitic noises (Murray, 1916: 104). The experiments also failed when Murray was not in the adjacent room (Dingwall, 1973). Since his first address, Murray, prudent and humble, thus favored the hypothesis of unconscious auditory hyperesthesia, that is to say, a transitional disposition to better employ his sense of hearing, as had been shown in several cases of pathological and healthy subjects under hypnosis. But he complicated this hypothesis by wondering whether this hyperesthesia did not also foster a new sense, closer to telepathy. Some agreed with the latter hypothesis (Verrall, 1916; Sidgwick, 1924; Lodge, 1924; Salter, 1941), including Aldous Huxley, following his participation as an agent (Smith, 1969), and Murray's successor, Eric R. Dodds (1972), himself immersed in the fields of psychoanalysis and parapsychology (Cambiano, 1991; Dodds 1977: 97-111). For these researchers, hyperesthesia alone could not explain cases where the percipient had delivered correct impressions of ideas that had not been mentioned by the agent and could not have been inferred.

However, this opinion was far from consensual in the field of psychical research. Nobel Prize Charles Richet, in his *Treatise on Metapsychics* (1922: 179-180), concluded that the hypothesis of unconscious hyperesthesia was amply sufficient to explain Murray's first published essays. More cautious, the psychologist Robert Thouless sent a letter in the *Manchester Guardian* (reproduced in the SPR journal: Thouless, 1925) where he asked that measures be implemented to determine whether, in this case, the hypotheses of telepathy and/or hyperesthesia could be applied. He reiterated the same suggestion almost half a century later, for Murray never attempted to implement these measures (Thouless, 1973-1974). The SPR directors were likely to protect one of their own, and this may have prevented further criticisms regarding the integrity of Murray's performance (Price, 1939: 171; Mauskopf, McVaugh, 1980: 213), an issue that prompted one of the SPR's research directors to resign (Gauld, 1987). Later, Keith Ellis (1974) assumed that the whole story of hyperesthesia was only a smoke screen to conceal professional "mentalism" techniques. Such critiques reinforced the ambivalence of Murray, who then refused to deploy his abilities for further investigations and chose to restrict his public pronouncements con-

cerning psychical research, confiding to several witnesses his uneasiness and fears relative to his possible loss of academic credibility.

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Freud's enthusiasm for Murray's experiments could be attributed to his own lack of interest in the experimental method. But the truth is just the opposite. While Murray's experiments present several biases, they seem to account for a setting that is easy to access and conducive to the exploration of telepathy in the waking state. The scientific approach would consist in reproducing the same protocol while correcting the methodological problems. Freud was one of few scholars to attempt to replicate the experiment, but he did not provide a detailed account permitting readers to understand the precautions he applied. In fact, he seemed to have retained many of the defects of the original experiment: he carried out, on February 15, 1925, experiments with his daughter Anna and his disciple Ferenczi, whom he had both received in analysis. He also realized his divination in the presence of people informed of the nature of the target, thus leaving open the possibility of non-verbal interactions—rather than telepathy—directing the exchanges.

However, these apparent flaws are perhaps indispensable ingredients to the possible production of ostensible telepathic phenomena. This proximity, which is both emotional and physical, is, according to Murray, the very medium of telepathic communication: “as far as my own experience goes it seems to me to be a communication of feeling rather than of cognition, though the cognition may follow as the feeling is interpreted” (Murray, 1949–1952: 169). Further, what seems to interest Freud above all else is the place taken by unconscious processes in the emergence of this communication. Indeed, Freud not only concerns himself with the subliminal aspects of thought or perception transference, but with the importance of free association and, through it, symbolization as a psychodynamic effect.

Eleanor Sidgwick (1924: 239-240) considered that the most decisive of Murray's experiments were those in which the percipient relied on associations of ideas and progressed from the most general to the most particular, or towards a target becoming clearer little by little. For example, on August 17, 1918, Gilbert Murray's son thought of “the Etruscan seer who during the siege of Veii was captured by a young Roman warrior. He told them to drain the Alban lake in order to take Veii.” Gilbert Murray returned to the room and pronounced, “I don't think it's Balaam, but it's something like—It's a prophet who's serving the



wrong side—not Hebrew. I think it’s early Roman—I’ve got the impression that he’s telling them to drain a marsh.—Does he come in Livy? I get an impression that he’s caught and made to reveal a secret.” The percipient here relied on his feelings and successions of images. He flowed between different interpretive crossroads from his own subjective experience. Such a process would be characteristic of divinatory statements and its form would be comparable to the reminiscence of distant memories (Méheust, 2011). Offering another example of such process are the experiments of May 29, 1919. Here, the agent invented a scene where “Don Juan [was] eating cucumber sandwiches with [X. Y. a modern woman] on Mount Vesuvius.” Murray started with a curious feeling of terror, but clearly perceived Mount Vesuvius. Then he went on: “It isn’t an eruption. It is some one quite idly on the top, *not* frightened—picnicking [sic]—simply my own feeling how dangerous it is.” The Oxford professor thus appeared to work with his own internal images in order to reach the target with great precision. If one disregards all the methodological reservations and the explanation by hyperesthesia, Murray’s device would therefore seem to combine free association and thought transference, which probably consolidated Freud’s views concerning the interest of the psychoanalytic approach for psychical research.

By reproducing Murray’s “family parlour-game” and, according to his terms, by playing the role of “medium” in attempting to discover the target through his free associations (Brabant, Falzeder and Giampieri-Deutsch, 2000: 208), Freud stated that he had verified the existence of telepathy. Echoing the couple constituted by Murray and his daughter, he claimed for Anna and himself a gift of “telepathic sensibility.” In the case of Murray, it was suggested that a subliminal and supraliminal hearing, combined with free associations, was the possible source of this sensitivity (Dixon, 1956; Faroe, 1973–1974). The absence of detailed accounts of the Freudian experiments prevents one from concluding in one direction or the other. Nevertheless, the explicit use of free association to examine telepathy is a methodological innovation introduced by Freud.

This episode, never examined in such details within the psychoanalytic field, illustrates a Freud who read SPR journals with interest, reproduced parapsychological experiments, and quickly communicated his enthusiastic results, because he was persuaded that psychoanalysis could effectively contribute to psychical research.

#### 4. The occult significance of dreams

Despite their shared enthusiasm, Freud again restrained Ferenczi, who wished to reveal his belief in telepathy at the next Congress of Psychoanalysis (Jones, 1957: 393). He claimed:

“With it you would throw a bomb into the psychoanalytic edifice, which will certainly not fail to explode. We are probably in agreement not to wish to hasten this disturbance in our development, even though it may be inevitable.” (Freud’s letter to Ferenczi of March 20, 1925. Brabant, Falzeder and Giampieri-Deutsch, 2000: 209).

Paradoxically, Freud then rapidly began to write certain supplements to his *Interpretation of Dreams*, as if he reserved to himself the privilege of this explosive announcement. “The Occult Significance of Dreams” appeared in the journal *Imago* in the same year and Freud here distinguished between the *prophetic dream*, which is merely a mnemonic illusion (as Freud had suggested already in 1899) and the *telepathic dream*, which defines a real phenomenon. Freud conceded that a “countless multitude of witnesses speak in favour of both of them, while against both of them there is the obstinate aversion, or maybe prejudice, of science” (Freud, 1925: 186). He himself admitted that he rejected the possibility of predicting the future, for it would be too much “in contradiction to all the expectations and presumptions of science” and for such a claim would rely too weakly on empirical basis. However, like Bergson, whose theory of duration was incompatible with prophecy but open to telepathy (Méheust, 1999), Freud introduced this last phenomenon into his repertoire (Eshel, 2006). Redeploying a case already introduced in the 1921 lecture<sup>1</sup> of a fortune-teller who had predicted to her client (Freud’s patient) that she would have two children at the age of thirty-two, Freud demonstrated that the prophecy was not realized, but that telepathy occurred because the clairvoyant had perceived the unconscious desire of her client. The latter, Freud claimed, had indeed wished to imitate her mother who had to wait until her thirty-second year to have a child. This half-true prophecy later became the origin of Octave Mannoni’s expression: “I know very well, but even so” (Sauret, 1982: 246). The latter is often cited as a formula of denial, whereas it expresses something else for Freud, namely the exchange of a “prophetic power” for an “unconsciously-processed telepathy.”

There can be little doubt that Freud referred to Murray’s and his own experiments when he asserted, in this essay, that free association appeared to play a

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<sup>1</sup> According to Lou Andreas-Salomé’s testimony (1970: 401), Freud already discussed this “curious case of thought transference” in 1913.

central role in thought transference. “I have often had an impression,” Freud writes, “in the course of experiments in my private circle, that strongly emotionally colored recollections can be successfully transferred without much difficulty. If one has the courage to subject to an analytic examination the associations of the person to whom the thoughts are supposed to be transferred, correspondences often come to light which would otherwise have remained undiscovered.” (Freud, 1925: 188). “The Occult Significance of Dreams” thus established a theoretical and practical foundation for the integration of telepathic phenomena within the discipline. While “Dreams and Telepathy” (1922) protected the theory of the dream from any revision induced by the existence of such a paranormal phenomenon, the fields of psychical research and psychoanalysis were now intermingled. Freud assumed, in this new text, that telepathy would be facilitated by the transition from primary processes to secondary processes, and therefore especially by the work of elaboration within the dream. He concluded his paper on a progressive note, urging his fellow psychoanalysts to accumulate observations of telepathy, as the psychoanalytic method could lead to a greater understanding of the phenomenon. Through this connection between telepathy and *Traumtheorie*, Freud therefore challenged “the watertight limit between psychoanalysis and telepathy” (Turnheim, 2008). Yet, such subversive statements later led to the ire of his Welsh disciple, Ernest Jones, who convinced his master not to include this text in the final version of the *Interpretation of Dreams*, as the latter had intended.

## 5. Ernest Jones and the risks of psychoanalytic parapsychology

Freud’s interest in parapsychology triggered an internal controversy within the psychoanalytic movement. His main opponent was none other than his disciple, Ernest Jones, then the president of the International Psychoanalytic Association and the founder of the British and American Psychoanalytic Associations—in short, Freud’s designated guardian of psychoanalytic orthodoxy. Thus, the Viennese master apparently caught himself in his own trap after having institutionalized a movement that finally came to oppose him for his disregard of psychoanalytic conventions!

Already in 1911, Freud had been informed of Jones’s suspicions towards the British SPR:

“You ask me of the Society of [sic] Psychical Research. I am sorry to say that in spite of the good names in it, the society is not of good repute in scientific circles. You

will remember that they did some valuable work in the eighties on hypnotism, automatic writing, etc., but for the past 15 years they have confined their attention to ‘spook-hunting’, mediumship, and telepathy, the chief aim being to communicate with departed souls.” (Paskauskas, 1993: 97)

Jones’s opinion on this matter did not follow the same trend as that of some other Freudians. He always regarded Freud’s interest in telepathy as a dangerous aberration, and feared the public association of Freud with dubious beliefs in magic, thereby bringing the psychoanalytic movement into disrepute and needless controversy. In 1921, he positioned himself against the public communication of “Psychoanalysis and Telepathy” after its reading to the secret committee. When Freud’s enthusiastic words on the experiences of Murray were circulated, the dispute occasioned by this subject, no doubt known to all, took an official turn. In a circular, Jones warned Freud’s disciples of the risks of confusion between occultism and psychoanalysis, blaming “Ferenczi’s optimism about telepathy being used as objective proof of the contentions of psychoanalysis” (Jones, 1957: 393).

Shortly after the publication of “The Occult Significance of Dreams,” Jones openly denounced what he called “the conversion of Freud” (Jones, 1957: 394); and again, in a third circular letter, he expressed his concern in the following terms:

“A few years ago the analysis of dreams must have seemed to many adherents of the Viennese school to be developing into a not altogether inexact science... But today the wild men are once more not far from the fold—for if Telepathy be accepted the possibility of a definite oneiric aetiology recedes some decades, if not centuries, into the future.” (Circular letter by Ernest Jones, 15th February, 1926; Jones, 1957: 394)

In response, Freud addressed this disapproval, not without humor, by adorning his favorite posture: that of the rash discoverer facing the hostility of the conservatives: “finally one must show one’s colours and [not] bother about the scandal” (Jones, 1957: 394). He does not fail to remind his disciple of the “principle of Hamlet” and his epistemological ambition:

“Our friend Jones seems to me to be too unhappy about the sensation that my conversion to telepathy has made in English periodicals. He will recollect how near to such a conversion I came in the communication I had the occasion to make during our Harz travels. Considerations of external policy since that time held me back long enough, but finally one must show one’s colours and need bother about the scandal this time as little as on earlier, perhaps still more important occasions.” (Jones, 1957: 394)

Having experimented with telepathy himself through tests with his daughter and Ferenczi, Freud became convinced that “diplomatic considerations [...] had to give way” (Jones, 1957: 395).

This image of Freud ready to militate for psychical research contrasts with the portrait finally revealed by Jones, who happened to be both an active participant and a reporter of the controversy. Jones indeed formulated a compromise in order to resolve his dilemma as Freud’s official biographer: he scrupulously reported the historical material about Freud and telepathy, but interpreted it as a minor and slightly embarrassing aspect of his character (Massicotte, 2014). This compromise, which Freud himself suggested, permitted Jones to accept Freud’s belief in telepathy, but negate its significance for the institution of psychoanalysis. This appeared to him fundamental given the damage Freud’s occultism could produce to the credibility of psychoanalysis in the Anglo-Saxon countries where “all forms of so-called ‘psychical research’ mingled with hocus-pocus and palmistry [...] prevail” (Jones, 1957: 394). Faced with the responsibility befallen to every founder, Freud found himself limited in the subversion of his own theoretical binds. Finally, he offered a diplomatic solution, faithfully executed by Jones:

“I was once more faced with a case where on a reduced scale I had to repeat the great experiment of my life, namely, to proclaim a conviction without taking into account any echo from the outer world [...] When anyone adduces my fall into sin, just answer him calmly that conversion to telepathy is my private affair like my Jewishness, my passion for smoking and many other things, and that the theme of telepathy is in essence alien to psychoanalysis.” (Freud’s letter to Jones, 7th March, 1926; quoted in Jones, 1957: 395-396)

The psychoanalytic legacy thus underwent a certain scrubbing of Freud’s ambiguous temptation to forge an alliance between psychoanalysis and psychical research, based on both his reading of the field’s most renowned journal and his amateur replication of an experimental protocol. However, Freud did not let his enthusiasm die out completely, as he reiterated his encouragement to deepen this path of research to his followers, a message that Jones refrained from relaying (Massicotte, 2014: 99). Freud further maintained without hesitation his belief in favor of telepathy (Freud, 1933), thus dividing several generations of psychoanalysts between an admiration for his open-mindedness and a condemnation of his credulity (Evrard and Rabeyron, 2012). In an interview with the Hungarian journalist Cornelius Tabori in 1935, Freud still wished to convey his ill-understood “conversion:”

“The transference of thought, the possibility of sensing the past or the future cannot be merely accidental. Some people say, that in my old age I have become credulous. No... I don't think so. Merely all my life I have learned to accept new facts, humbly, readily. I believe that telepathy is a psychical event in one man causing a similar psychic event in another man.” (Tabori, 1951: 218-219)

While indicating that there existed no proof of telepathy or clairvoyance, Freud here insisted that nothing in science could really be regarded as occult, thus retreating from the rhetoric of the Enlightenment.

## 6. Freud as a myth purveyor: the experiments on telepathic dreams

In sessions 2 and 3 of his seminar *Les non-dupes errent* (unpublished lessons of 20 November and 11 December 1973), Jacques Lacan comments on “The Occult Significance of Dreams.” Against Jones's opinion, Lacan suggests that the chapters on dream and occultism should have been included in the supplements of the final version of the *Traumdeutung* in 1930, following Freud's wish. Indeed, Lacan found some theoretical interest in them, supporting his thesis of a mathematizable structuration of desire. Thus Lacan sought to cleanse Freud of the suspicion of Jones, who had represented Freud's interest in the occult as a departure from scientific discourse. Yet, Lacan felt the need to summon two safeguards to demonstrate that Freud did not err: First, Freud did not accept the idea of post-mortem resurrection; second, he did not believe that elements of the future could be predicted. These remarks from Lacan are incongruous: one could still find many other occult beliefs that Freud did not endorse. But why are some of Freud's beliefs considered “rational” while others are defined as “irrational?” It is difficult to say, indeed, whether this Freudian skepticism truly redeems his other aberrations.

A few years earlier, Lacan himself had defined telepathy as a myth of “thought without speech,” a myth of “communicative fusion,” that had captivated Freud, the latter being unable to unmask “the king of this court of miracles of which he announces the cleaning” (Lacan, 1966: 265). Fabrice Lorin (2011) points out that telepathy becomes, for Lacan, a “waste” of the Freudian enterprise, so that his own reading “finds through an original path, a conformist position, where the subversive part of the discourse contained in telepathy is no longer a recipe for research.” Freud's occultism, in other words, no longer defines a set of hidden facts that would disrupt psychoanalytic theory; it constitutes, for Lacan, an “elsewhere” that has nothing in common with the unconscious (Bruno, 2007).

Already in the early twentieth century, several of Freud's colleagues had developed skeptical analyses of the occult phenomena he had explored. Hitschmann (1910, 1923, 1933) notably developed psychological explanations that reduced most materials of telepathic and occult experiences to false memories or deliberate fraud. He suggested that "prophecies" in fact originated from a desire, a rational anticipation or a narrative embellishment, and that cases of clairvoyance were stimulated by an overwhelmingly strong current interest, while their "weirdness" were "due to the hidden or repressed emotions of the unconscious" (Hitschmann, 1910: 95). For Hitschmann, occult experiences, akin to dreams, slips of the tongue, and parapraxes, revealed the complexity of the human psyche and the mechanisms of the unconscious. Zulliger (1934) also held narcissism and the omnipotence of thought as the explanatory principles of so-called prophetic dreams. And Albert Ellis (1947), a psychoanalyst who soon founded his own school of rational emotive therapy, a cradle for cognitive-behavioral cures, interpreted the reported cases of thought transference as mere coincidences or as the results of suggestion.

In sum, Freud appeared to move in posterity from the figure of a myth slayer to that of a myth purveyor, and his interest in the occult came to be marginalized in the psychoanalytic field. In an ironic turn of fate, it came to an opponent of psychoanalysis, Michel Onfray (2010), to recover what he called "Freudian parapsychology." While part of the Freudian legacy, this aspect of Freud's thought has been rejected by most psychoanalysts, and—as Jones feared—deployed by its opponents to reduce psychoanalysis to the delirium of a naive scientist.

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On the contrary, various psychoanalysts have responded to Freud's appeal and discussed new cases arising from their practices. Wilhelm Stekel (1921), for instance, published a monograph on the telepathic dreams of neurotic patients in which he suggested that such experiences emerged from powerful emotional situations, more particularly with regards to love, jealousy, and anxiety. Subsequently, Nándor Fodor (1942) argued that certain dreams of the analysts are better understood by connecting them to events that are not contained solely by their own associations. Thus, an analyst may benefit from interpreting his or her dreams in relation to the yet unknown dreams of patients, as if the latter could have communicated meanings telepathically. In the same vein, Jule Eisenbud (1946) was sympathetic to Freud's rejection of prophetic dreams and

admitted that most cases were easily explained by reductionist hypotheses. Nevertheless, he tried to evaluate the probability of certain motifs emerging in the dreams of two of his patients in a 24-hour period, noting that the probability of appearing the same motif was not mentioned in Freud's (1900) and Stekel's (1911) collections, nor in the last 100 dreams he had recorded from patients. But this way of evaluating a probability without knowing the size of the sample with certainty is far too subjective.

Against Ellis (1947), who attempted to obliterate this current of "psychoanalytic parapsychology" (Devereux, 1953), other psychoanalysts, such as Ullman, have performed experiments to develop further understandings of the potential mechanisms of thought transference. Rejecting cases of telepathy reported by psychoanalysts, Ellis had formulated a series of recommendations for studies of telepathy—most of which were, however, hardly realizable in the analytic context. For instance, Ellis proposed eliminating any emotional factor, suggestion, or previous beliefs and requested that the alleged occult materials of dreams not to be presented in symbolic form, so that the psychoanalytic framework appeared to become irrelevant, if not incompatible, with such inquiries. Nevertheless, psychoanalysts have responded to Ellis's challenge by experimenting in a dream laboratory, with a protocol unanimously recognized for its quality (Child, 1985). Thus, in 1960, at the end of his psychotherapeutic training, psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Montague Ullman received the support of the Parapsychology Foundation to conduct a pilot study for the purpose of applying recent discoveries on REM sleep to test the hypothesis of telepathic dreaming. Ullman found the results convincing enough to terminate his clinical practice in 1961 and accept a full-time position in a hospital, in order to set up a sleep laboratory. He joined Stanley Krippner, with whom he developed a series of studies at the Maimonides Medical Center in New York over the following years (Ullman, Krippner and Vaughan, 1974).

In the researchers' main protocol, participants were asked to sleep in the laboratory and were awakened during deep sleep. Then, their dream narratives were collected and they were allowed to go back to sleep. Throughout the night, in a distant room within the hospital, another person focused on a target—a work of art randomly selected—and aimed to send it telepathically to the dreamer. Then, either the dreamer had to recognize the target among a lineup containing three decoys, or a judge external who was asked to identify the right target among the decoys based on the narratives of the dreams collected that night. Despite following Ellis's recommendations, this parapsychological study



remained within the framework of psychoanalysis because the participants gave free answers expressing their subjective experiences, and thus allowed for a judgment that was both quantitative and qualitative. Ullman thus presented several cases in which the participants' answers followed paths connected to their personal and emotional history.

The Maimonides experiments have been repeatedly reproduced (Child, 1985; Roe and Sherwood, 2009), but given the difficult access to sleep laboratories to perform such studies, most experiments formed conceptual replications with a different procedure, in which participants slept at home and noted the dreams they remembered (rather than being awakened in deep sleep). This new procedure had the advantage of being less expensive and more valid, that is, closer to what subjects relate spontaneously as prophetic or telepathic dreams. Results of one meta-analysis of such experiments conducted by psychologists Simon Sherwood and Chris Roe (2013) showed statistically significant positive results, with a greater efficiency for studies in the Maimonides dream laboratory (Maimonides:  $r = 0.33$ , post-Maimonides:  $r = 0.14$ ). Another meta-analysis, recently published in the *Psychological Bulletin*, compared these findings with those of parapsychological protocols using other forms of trance (Storm, Tressoldi and Di Risio, 2010). It concluded that the dream remains the altered state of consciousness that seems most favorable to extra-sensory perception for unselected participants. The most recent meta-analysis confirmed previous results and concluded that, after 50 years, the dream-ESP paradigm in parapsychology is still worthy of continued investigation (Storm et al., 2017).

A variant of the Maimonides protocol has also shown that the results are the same if one replaces the “sender” with a computer randomly selecting a target after the dream narrative has been collected (Krippner, Ullman and Honorton, 1971; Krippner, Honorton and Ullman, 1972). According to this study, the delimitation proposed by Freud (1925) between “telepathic” and “prophetic” dreams could potentially be a more theoretical than empirical demarcation. More recently, somewhat positive results have been obtained with other procedures where, instead of leaving participants the freedom to integrate the unknown target into their own dreams, experimenters compared the similarity between the participants' dreams and two pre-selected videos. The only uncertainty was which video the dreamers would have to watch in the future, depending on which group they would be randomly assigned to (Schredl, Götz and Ehrhardt-Knutsen, 2010; Watt, 2014; Watt, Wiseman and Vuillaume, 2015). But this attempt to impose a specific type of dream seems removed from a psy-

choanalytic understanding of dream functioning and associativity. Something is lost in terms of validity, for associative thought may no more be applied during the judgment phase, although this form of interpretation seems to be more eligible in the case of dreaming.

In all, these recent studies demonstrate that, contrary to Lorin's opinion (2011) that telepathy became the waste of the Freudian enterprise, the occult significance of dreams remains an important object of studies, many of which are now published in high-ranking, mainstream academic journals. From these, current knowledge of the psychological factors explaining pseudo-prophetic dreams has improved considerably (see Watt et al., 2014; Valášek et al., 2014; Valášek and Watt, 2015). What interpretations would Freud have derived from such reports?

## 7. Conclusion

Following the publication of "The Occult Significance of Dreams," the psychoanalytic field has been faced with a dilemma: to consider Freud's interest in occultism as a game of dupes or as a form of epistemic courage. The majority of contemporary psychoanalysts are not interested in this parapsychological extension of psychoanalysis; yet, some preliminary findings appear to present a potential experimental confirmation of psychoanalytic theories on dream mechanisms. Certainly, such experiments remain controversial and their validation would require more independent replications (Alcock, 2003). That said, retracing the influences and postulates of Freud regarding the field of psychical research appears fundamental to understand the epistemological bifurcation between Freud and Freudian orthodoxy, and their separation following the 1925 proposal of alliance between psychoanalysis and psychical research. This alliance was indeed contrary to all of Freud's earlier writings, aimed at inscribing psychoanalysis in the legacy of the Enlightenment, and insisting on distinguishing it from what he had once termed the "black tide of mud" of occultism (Jung, 1961: 150).

Freud's epistemic impulse regarding telepathy was itself paradoxical: not asserting that he had gathered sufficiently convincing evidence, he assured his audience that he had nevertheless acquired a personal conviction. This division between objective certainty and subjective conviction already puzzled several researchers of the time, who found themselves confronted with the same epistemic pitfalls (Courtier, 1929; Evrard, 2016). However, in the context of psy-

choanalytic epistemology—where the relation to knowledge is marked by reflexivity and negative capability—this uncertainty remains understandable. As with his interpretation of dreams, Freud explored the potential phenomenon of telepathy through an analysis of his own experiences; this methodology was thus not so different from his institution of seminal concepts in psychoanalysis (Massicotte, 2014). Through self-analysis and didactic experience, psychoanalytic knowledge continued to define itself not as a theory entirely transmitted from outside, but as a subjective appropriation of objective elements—including controlled experiments—from which a singular relationship to knowledge is built.

A historical approach to the “conversion” of psychoanalysis certainly demonstrates that Freud may have been more audacious than rigorous in his studies of telepathy. He indeed appears to have glossed over the various flaws in Gilbert Murray’s experiments, which he never explicitly corrected, and the epistemological uncertainty of apparently occult dreams, events, or words exchanged in the uncontrolled setting of the psychoanalytic cure. Hence the fate of Freud’s conviction was marginalized by those who became the guarantors of his legacy. Today, the latter find themselves in a problematic situation, unable to reconcile with their own history. The revival of contemporary interest in telepathic concordances in analytical practice (e.g., Eshel, 2006) illustrates the division between those who underpin their convictions by parapsychological literature (e.g. Mayer, 2007) and those who deny any relevance to such an “unnatural” alliance (Bruno, 2007).

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