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## Close-Ups

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## Close-Ups *by Adam Phillips*

*O'HARA: Which reminds me: some of your detractors say that you're merely fashionable.*

*BARTHELME: Well, the mere has always been a useful category.*

Donald Barthelme: 'The Art of Fiction LXVI', *Paris Review* 80, 1981

In Freud's *Remembering, Repeating, and Working Through*, published in 1914 but written just before the outbreak of war, he wrote that a certain kind of patient, 'does not remember anything of what he has forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it, without, of course, knowing that he is repeating it'.<sup>1</sup> We repeat in action, Freud suggests, what we are unable or unwilling to remember. It is not merely that we fail to construct a historical distance from this past that we repeat; it is that we have not noticed, to all intents and purposes, that such a distance exists. It is as though whatever it is that makes something a memory has not happened. But also, Freud intimates, there is something about remembering that can put a stop to the past as prescriptive. It is precisely the acknowledgement of historical distance – the construction in language of the past as proximate rather than immediate – that is the modern individual's most difficult task. The patients Freud invented, one could say, were living in the past but not living in history. Freud was struck by the fact that modern individuals resisted having a history. They preferred, often at exorbitant personal cost, to go on repeating themselves; as though there was an uncanny sense in the which the personal past – the traumatic personal past – never changed: was itself being actively preserved like an (unconscious) archive.

Where there is repetition, Freud says, there was repression; and where there was repression, there was trauma. Repetition is the sign of trauma; our reiterations, our mannerisms, link us to our losses, to our buried conflicts. When Freud says that the patient repeats as an action what he cannot remember, we should remember that writing is itself an action, and that genre is itself a form of repetition that easily obscures its own history, the conflicts it was born out of, the problems which made it feel like a solution. Freud is inviting us to distinguish between something he calls remembering, which is presumably veracious and potentially transformative, and something called an action, a repeated action in which the so-called patient – like an actor with a script, or a figure in a dream – unwittingly performs something from his past. That he knows he is repeating something, but that he doesn't know he is repeating something from the

past means that unwittingly he is living in the present as if it were the past (though it is not an 'as if' to him). The patient who repetitively re-enacts something from the past clearly has no distance from it, because for him there is no it from which he could take his distance. Freud is alerting us to the idea that there is nothing that the individual defends himself against more than the construction of distance from the traumatic past. What Freud refers to as remembering here is a making of links to the past – linking involving a prior separating out; and what Freud is calling psychoanalytic treatment here is a therapeutic technique that makes the past memorable rather than spellbinding. That makes the past into history, into something that one can consider the advantages and disadvantages of knowing about. So Freud's question is: what stops the past becoming available as memory, what is it about the distancing that makes memory possible that the individual cannot bear? What would it mean to have – what kind of sentences would follow on from having – some distance from one's own past? The psychoanalyst, one could say, is trying to help the so-called patient become the historian of himself. There is, Freud can't help but notice, a resistance to history making; and the resistance makes itself known in the ways people tell their histories.

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Bill Schwarz, in an essay titled 'Already The Past', reminds us that 'history and memory are not the same', and that 'historiography and memory are not the same'; even though 'historians are not wrong in seeing the enormity of the impact of memory on historiography'.<sup>2</sup> All these notes are in the service of promoting a contemporary historiography, 'troubled by the realm of subjective time', attentive to the preoccupations of the great modernist writers, of whom Freud is one. Indeed, in the example given above, the patient who cannot remember is living entirely in the realm of subjective time, with Freud as his historian (even if the whole notion of subjective time is as perplexing, in its way, as the notion of a private language). Freud is describing the immediacy of something called the past that is mediating (or not) something called the present. Freud has a distance, apparently, that the patient does not have; Freud becomes the historian of how this patient has been unable to have a history. Freud is preoccupied by the immediacy of the past – or rather, its being insufficiently mediated by language – and the resistances to history, by the ways people have, at once, too much and too little distance from their past, and most notably, from their childhoods: the patient is always the failed historian of his own life. But by the same token Freud is tempting us to wonder what it would be to be the successful historians of our own lives. In what would this success consist, and what would be its benefit? And what, if anything, has this got to do with historiography in which, until relatively recently, personal memory has only played a bit part? And in which, in R. G. Collingwood's definition, 'evidence is a collective name for things which singly are called documents,

and a document is a thing existing here and now, of such a kind that the historian, by thinking about it, can get answers to the questions he asks about past events';<sup>3</sup> psychoanalysis as a therapy is, of course, merely hearsay; though it is about history, and it produces documents of psychoanalytic theory that may be of historical interest. Freud's writing may be merely a footnote, an afterthought, to Nietzsche's *On the Advantages and Disadvantages of History for Life* (1874), with the figure of the psychoanalyst speaking up for the advantages of history – of personal, remembered history – for life. But in psychoanalysis, as perhaps part of the modern history of historiography, the idea of historical distance, to paraphrase Mark Phillips, has always been a term of art. Indeed, it is inconceivable without the figures of distanciation. Consideration of the word identification alone in historiography and psychoanalytic theory would, I imagine, reveal considerable areas of overlap. Psychoanalysis, like historiography, is about the re-presentation of the significance of events; and about what makes such capacities as we have for representation problematic.

The paradox of Freud's patient is that by re-enacting rather than remembering, by collapsing the present back into the past, he keeps the past at a distance. Freud, in other words, is referring to two forms of distancing. There is the distancing of memory – more akin to Collingwood's documents as evidence – in which there is space for reflection. By thinking about the memories the patient might get answers to the questions he asks about the past. And as memories, again like documents, they can pass into the public realm, and be available for shared consideration. But in the distancing of repeated re-enactment the only evidence is the repeated action, and the disavowal that this is evidence of something that could be called the past; the only evidence of the past is repetition itself, but as evidence this only exists for the psychoanalyst. The repeated actions would be like a set of more or less identical documents with just the word history written on them. The patient who compulsively repeats in this way has very little to reflect upon, other than the fact that he keeps repeating himself. He is living in that infinite distance from the past that is no-memory. Only by describing repeated actions as a defence against memory is the distance between the past and the present constructed. Repetition is the sign of traumatic history that must not or cannot be remembered as such; wherever there is repetition in the Freudian individual's life there is, there has had to be, a breakdown in the making of history. Freud adds repeated action to the stock of available evidence of the past. Distancing – the mapping, in language and/or symptoms, of time on to space – is a prerequisite for psychic survival. And the personal past – re-presenting itself as dream, as screen-memory, as symptom or slip, as desire or repeated action – from a psychoanalytic point of view comes, as Mark Phillips says history writing should come, 'as a family of related genres, rather than (as customarily) a simple unitary one'.<sup>4</sup> Freud finds that for his modern individual personal history can only be inscribed in these hybrid genres. And indeed that the method required for

the treatment of personal history problems was itself a hybrid of the methods proposed for historiography by Collingwood and Wilhelm Dilthey; a hybrid of what Phillips calls ‘the grand narratives of scientific reason’ and the reading of ‘every type of human activity as belonging to its own expressive context’. Psychoanalysis, as both theory and practice is, in Phillips’s phrase about modern historiography, ‘a . . . tension between abstraction and immediacy’.

In the attempt to combine the sciences of nature and the sciences of culture that Freud called psychoanalysis the analyst oscillates – in his quest for a therapeutic oral history – between what Phillips refers to as empathetic imagination, and a more detached sense of the so-called patient as, in Dilthey’s words, ‘a structure governed by laws’. And what Freud discovers, among other things, are the myriad ways in which the patient keeps himself at a distance. When it comes to memory and desire – the reconstruction of his own history – the modern individual, in Freud’s description, is a distancing machine. The patient, as Freud sees him, is always working on his ignorance. So when Phillips says, à propos of Dilthey and the hermeneutic tradition, that ‘it is the strangeness or opacity of the historical record that produces the need for a leap of understanding’ this would be an accurate description of the psychoanalyst in relation to the patient, and of the patient in relation to himself. The modern individual that Freud describes has an investment, so to speak, in maintaining the strangeness and opacity of his historical record of himself. Freud’s therapeutic method of free-association then is itself a disillusionment with, a suspicion of, previous forms of oral historical narrative. Personal history shows through only when narrative coherence is not required. Indeed in the light of Mark Phillips’s paper one might see Freud’s work as one site in which the constructing of historical distance – at the level of the individual – is being studied. That, at least, personal history is all about, for Freud, the regulation of distance in language; and psychoanalysis, as a body of writing, is a kind of phenomenological account of what Freud’s modern individual subject needs to keep his distance from. Psychoanalysis is a close-up on distancing techniques akin, perhaps, to Picasso’s close-up on faces, as described by David Hockney. ‘On the whole we don’t see close up’, Hockney writes.

The only people you ever really see close up are the ones you are in bed with. When your face is close to, moving around, features move to different places, the shapes change, you see double, and so on. The closer things are to you the more difficult it is to locate their exact position – they don’t really have an exact position. In genuine close-up, if you look at a face very close to, the subject is far more distorted, similar to the way Picasso would have treated a face. So one of the important things that Picasso was getting at – in cubism as in his later work – was an intimate form of seeing.<sup>5</sup>

'The closer things are to you', Hockney writes, 'the more difficult it is to locate their exact position – they don't really have an exact position.' The closer you get to your internal delirium in free-association, Freud says, or in a dream, things – call them historical events – don't really have an exact position. Indeed the need for things to have an exact position – the determined commitment to a definitive historical narrative – would itself be a sign of internal conflict, of repression at work. It is clearly of interest that we describe the face close up as 'distorted'. As Mark Phillips's paper indicates, our normative assumptions about distance are unusually difficult to discern; and yet, at the same time, distance, and linguistic strategies of distantiating, must be something about which we are most sensitive. Certainly all of psychoanalysis revolves around separation from object of need, and proximity to the forbidden object of desire. Distance from and distance for are the building blocks of the micro-historical enquiry that is psychoanalysis.

If, as Phillips says, 'historicism rests upon a dogmatic relationship to history which it seems unable to examine' Freud's work must be a symptom, a working through, of precisely this problem. The psychoanalytic patient that Freud invented is, in his view, suffering from a dogmatic relationship to his own history that he is unable to examine. The question is whether psychoanalysis has been able to avoid having a dogmatic relationship to both its own history, and the histories of the individuals it has treated. Freud's work certainly makes one wonder – as does Phillips's paper – what it would be to have an undogmatic relationship to history, or whether all we can do is to examine the dogmas.

In psychoanalysis dogma about distance is called phobia; but one could redescribe all of Freud's diagnostic categories – hysteria, obsessionality, paranoia and so on – as the modern individual's repertoire of distancing techniques; with each group having its own kind of dogma about its own history, and its own characteristic inability to examine this history (its own preferred historiography, as it were). And as documents of micro-history it is always interesting to read psychoanalytic case-histories for the ways in which the writer constructs his distance from the patient: the ways in which the clinician as writer keeps his distance from his own history and the history of the so-called patient. The historiography of the case-history – of what Freud refers to in the case of Dora as, 'the patient's inability to give an ordered history of their life',<sup>6</sup> and the doctor's ability or otherwise to construct what he considers to be an ordered history – would clearly be one way to consider how, in Phillips's words, 'historicism protected history itself from deeper enquiry'. Because the questions Phillips is asking in his paper are about writing as distantiating. And he is not merely saying that distance is inevitable in the writing of history – in the sense that all writing is by definition after the event and therefore always an after-effect of the event; but rather that this fact serves to obscure the ways in which we are constructing this historical distance, and with animating intentions. It is as though

distance is so taken for granted in the writing of history that the writing effects, the rhetorical strategies and the deployed vocabularies that serve to create a sense of proximity and distance, are obscured by their prevalence. The difficulty, as Phillips shows so compellingly in his *Society and Sentiment*, is in describing what these rhetorical strategies of history writing are under pressure from at any given time; what Phillips calls there, ‘the impact of new understandings of society on conventional definitions of historical knowledge’.<sup>7</sup> And this becomes both a question of what constitutes historical evidence, and of the contemporary pertinence of historical knowledge and enquiry; of the advantages and disadvantages of history. Phillips describes the historians of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as being preoccupied by their negative ideals, by working out what kind of writing history-writing was trying not to be (not like the novel, not like journalism, not like classical models of historiography, and so on). It is a question too of working out the impact of commerce, of a culture of commerce, on inherited forms of historiography. And this is done by making distance a term of art. ‘Just because assumptions about distance lie close to the core of history’s methods and purposes’, Phillips concludes *Society and Sentiment*, ‘these assumptions have seldom been brought to the surface, and have more often been the subject of dogmas than questions’.<sup>8</sup> This, of course, is not worlds apart from the psychoanalytic assumption that making something conscious is a way of turning dogma back into its constitutive conflict. But by way of conclusion I want to rephrase Phillips’s ‘assumptions about distance’ as ‘assumptions about closeness’, and to suggest that there is a peculiar difficulty about historicizing too-closeness; the idea of being too close bringing with it the question of too close for what? For Freud’s patients one could say, for example, that they were too close to the traumas of their childhood, or too close to their forbidden desires to have something that we might call a personal history. That too-close is one of the ways we describe both the experience of intimacy and the experience of trauma. There is an interesting moment in *Society and Sentiment* when Phillips comments on Hume’s remarks about Clarendon ‘hurrying’ through the King’s death in his *History of the Rebellion*. Hume’s ‘remarks do stand’, Phillips writes,

as an important recognition that historical distance is itself a product of history. Hume clearly saw that Clarendon did not freely and individually choose his stance in relation to the regicide; rather he shared with his readers a proximity to the event that made a sentimental representation of Charles’s death unthinkable. By the same token Hume knew that the passing of the pain of the events had meanwhile opened up for his readers as much as for himself possibilities for finding a new meaning.<sup>9</sup>

Distance from pain makes redescription possible; Hume saw that Clarendon’s proximity, and his loyalties, narrowed his narrative options. The

regicide could barely be put into words or dwelt upon by Clarendon. Hume's distance – what Phillips calls the 'passing of the pain of events' – makes the killing of the King available for multiple perspectives. 'Proximity to the event', Phillips writes, 'made a sentimental representation of Charles's death unthinkable'; too close means there is an excess, a too-much of something, that hampers representation, what Phillips refers to as 'possibilities for finding new meaning'. Too much closeness means too much of something – call it feeling, though it could be called various things – means too little of something else, call it meaning, or simply words. Language (and therefore) history, Hume and Phillips imply, come into their own at a distance. But the problem might also be how to historicize this very experience of too closeness; and it is noticeable that in his own account Phillips has recourse to the language of psychology. There appears to be little distance between Hume on Clarendon, Phillips on Hume on Clarendon and W. G. Sebald on the bombing of Dresden:

The death by fire within a few hours of an entire city, with all its buildings and trees, its inhabitants, its domestic pets, its fixtures and fittings of every kind, must inevitably have led to overload, to paralysis of the capacity to think and feel in those who succeeded in escaping. The accounts of individual eye witnesses, therefore, are of only qualified value, and need to be supplemented by what a synoptic and artificial view reveals.<sup>10</sup>

What Sebald refers to as a synoptic and artificial view is the view from a distance that only historians of the event can have. The paradox he presents – not unlike Freud's – is that the survivors of a catastrophe, of what we might call a trauma, do not have a history; there is a history, but not for them; because they are too close, and unlike Picasso studying the faces of the people he is in bed with, they can make nothing of their experience. When it comes to traumatic events – or to certain kinds of event – it is not merely a question of what kind of distance is preferable, but of what kind of distance is possible. To be choosing one's genre is already to be at a sufficient distance.

It would be worth wondering, in Phillips's words, what 'prescriptive views of distance are . . . so embedded in our disciplinary codes' such that a historical account of devastation can sound plausible to us as readers. There is clearly, for example, a preference for coherent, intelligible narrative about events that rendered people vague, incoherent, numbed and hurried. 'The terms in which history congratulates itself on its difference from memory', Phillips writes, 'are remarkably ahistorical and (thankfully) no more than half true.' If history is not as different from memory as it looks; or if we were to model the writing of history on the workings of memory, as the great modernist experiments in writing were prompting us to do, then the coherence and intelligibility of historical narrative, which is



itself inevitably and tendentially distancing, would be radically disfigured. Freud's method of free-association assumed that the coherent account a person can give of their history is, by definition, a defensive account; that a modern person distances themselves from their history through narrative coherence and plausibility. A good story is a bad history. The question is, then, how to historicize too-closeness.

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