



How *I* was betrayed by *the ego*: A reading of *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*

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There is at least one thing Freud's *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* establishes clearly, and that is that "id" and "superego" are engaged in a merciless battle. Between the two, however, in this fight, the place of the ego is not easy to define. In a word, Freud's inquiry into or demonstration about the nature of the concept of ego can be open to criticism, and this mostly because Freud himself has a strikingly ambiguous manner of dealing with a notion he introduced himself to form his second topology. Readers of *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* may remember how Section V ended on a rather disparaging portrait of the ego, pointing out the inability of the said ego "to carry out its office of mediator."

The result of this process [the ego's inclination to synthesis], which approximates more and more to a complete failure of the original purpose of defence, is an extremely restricted ego which is reduced to seeking satisfaction in the symptoms. The displacement of the distribution of forces in favour of satisfaction may have dreaded the final outcome of paralysing the will of the ego. (The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud. Ed. and trans. James Strachey. 24 vols. London : Hogarth Press, 1953-74. XX,118.)

Such a portrait is not much help when we try to define the place the ego occupies in the general model drawn by Freud to illustrate the way the "*seele*" functions. "Id" and "superego", on the other hand, are much easier to understand, their respective places are clearly given, and it can be remarked that nothing is more freudian than their articulation: on one side *Trieb*, the drive (rather than a particular desire yet, the "contents" of which are still to be decided upon), on the other, what stands in the way, prohibits that the "bar" should be crossed: ----->I<---. I write "bar" and not superego because the term seems to me a better and more specific illustration of the radical loss which occurred at our birth, the original loss which made us "incomplete" even before anything like a superego could come into existence. Both Freud and Lacan have used the term. That the superego is a likely agent of prohibition and has a place in the model is obvious, but this is not sufficient for us to confuse it with the concept of "*la barre*" which is more comprehensive. In the end, what matters is that we are dealing with two opposing forces, two opposed instances tied in an "over-acute conflict" (118). Naturally, such a structure raises an embarrassing question: if there are only two places in the model, where does the ego fit?

For even though it "can undertake nothing which is not drawn into the sphere of the conflict [...]" (118), we are still at a loss to decide what its specific function is.

Such is the interrogation at the heart of Section VI, as if this "chapter" of Freud's text were a complement, if not an answer, to the last lines of the preceding section. One might have thought, though, that the case was closed, or that no good, or at least nothing really useful, could come from "a restricted ego" (118), an agent which had failed in its task, we remember, but Freud insists and does try to make room for this instance he considers as the third actor in the "struggle" he has just described.

And at this point I wonder if we are not facing, more than a simple answer, a response to the question touching the place of the ego in the model Freud is constructing, as if the first lines of Section VI were some addition to the preceding section, something like a painter's retouch. And indeed, after having insisted so much on the weakness of this "extremely restricted ego", an agent "unable to carry out its office of mediation"(118), Freud suddenly speaks to us at length of its "activities".

Was it, after having witnessed the failure mentioned in the last lines of Section V, a way to say it would have been nice if the ego had been capable of fulfilling this active role, even though, unfortunately, such had not been the case?

What is certain is that with the very first line of Section VI and immediately after "*Kampfe*" we are told of the ego's activity in the formation of symptoms, as if all that had just been said about the inaptitude of that agent and about the failure of its efforts were suddenly forgotten. Wasn't this a way to broach to

another subject, a way, in fact, to run away and avoid discussing the contradiction?

In the course of these struggles we come across two activities of the ego which form symptoms and which deserve special attention [...] (119)

Naturally, it is only because the action Freud attributes to the ego can be observed--this is what he says--that he can speak of it. Between an active ego and an incompetent one, then, there would not be any contradiction. And indeed, when we come to think of it, it is true one can be active and incompetent at the same time; what I mean is that one can be incapable of obtaining any result whatsoever while frantically trying. We can even extend this interpretation of Freud's statement and consider it today as an essential information touching the ambivalent and contradictory nature of what he calls *das Ich*, the ego, and this in spite of his efforts to enable such an ego so badly treated a moment ago to regain some of its lost glory.

To do so, then, he now draws a portrait of an ego "active" in the formation of symptoms, and immediately we cannot help wondering whether this rescue manoeuvre was not somewhat too hasty. For in a structure with two places only, where, as we have just noticed, the "bar" is opposed to the "drive", it doesn't seem there is any room left for a third agent.

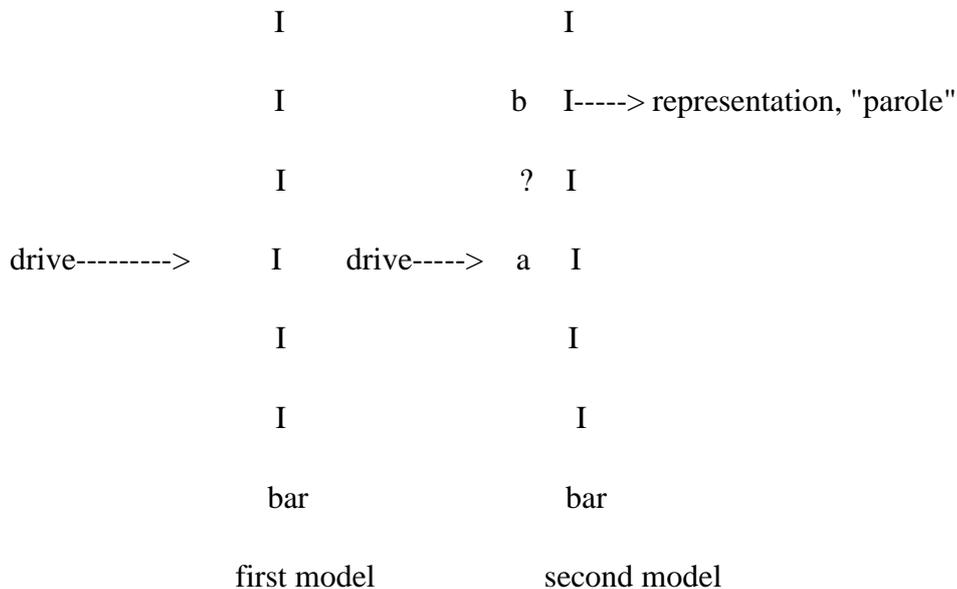
To construct his second model, then, Freud inserts a third instance--this is the word he uses: "*ingeschoben*"--into what I call the original model, and we end up with a new structure, just as "freudian" as the original one and almost as original, but with three places this time, corresponding to three distinct movements. In fact, such a model had been at his disposal for a long time, it was the model which made room for representation, I mean the transformation of a non-conscious impulse, drive, into a particular unconscious desire. This is a three place structure where the notion of substitution, which he had invented at the very beginning of his research on the dream, naturally finds its place. We quite simply recognize here the figure which describes, 1, the drive, to which, 2, the bar first imposes its prohibition, refusing any trespassing, and then, 3, the movement thanks to which, with the help of a substitute, the interdiction will be circumvented, a deviation, the passage, in a word, from O, which represents the absolute, the ideal, to o' which is only a representation of it, a symbol, the trajectory from *a* to *b* in my drawing below. The result is the sequence I so often mention: drive/bar/signifier.

Both models are right, of course, the second being a consequence of the first, a sequel to it, and completing it as it were, but even though the new model improves our understanding of the symbolization process, this new presentation of the ego's activity nevertheless calls for some questions.

To begin with, to insert an active ego--let's forget its inaptitude--not only amounts to changing its function and to giving it a new role, but seems highly contradictory. For how can one attribute to the force which was in charge of

repression (or, to be accurate, which helped the repressive forces in their task) the power and responsibility of precisely avoiding repression? But there is more, and not only is the agent first chosen to organize repression entrusted with the task of going against that injunction, but it is also entrusted with an "active" role in the production of symptoms. Although this is considered by Freud as "a fine illustration of the tendencies and techniques of the ego" (119), we cannot help thinking that the logic of the demonstration is at fault here.

Naturally, this is what Freud could observe: it is indeed precisely what happens.



The second sketch illustrates several operations: first, propelled by its original energy, the drive finally avoids the prohibition represented by the bar, it is a turning, a deviation as when water meets with an obstacle, but then, without warning or explanation, this is followed by a new task for the ego, the transformation (as Freud found out when studying the dream) whose consequence is the production of desire, call it parole or symptom. We have thus moved **from** deviation to symptom formation which does seem to be an entirely different activity. We have learnt that the selection of a substitute--the word is Freud's--, is the condition of a successful symbolical passage, thus is the energy of the drive, *libido*, transformed into desire. (I write "symbolical" because this passage is only a passage in imagination, as in the case of the dream or of an hallucination. And we also know that although there is no "real" passing of the bar, no actual reaching of the absolute--what Freud and Lacan call *das Ding, la Chose*, the Thing with a capital--, this symbolical trespassing is for us humans a necessity, the only way we have, indeed, "to suffer / The slings and arrows of outrageous fortune [...]", the only way, in other words, to

accept our incompleteness.). I am here speaking of the trajectory which runs from *a* to *b*, that is to say of the *space* which in my sketch illustrates the production of unconscious desire, the space of the Subject. So that while we were still busy looking for a place for the ego in Freud's diagram, a figure describing the forces at work, the distribution of energy, trying to find out what the ego's specific role could be, we have suddenly come across this new activity which amounts to the choice of a particular trajectory from *a* to *b*, but are still lacking the explanation which would render plausible the shift from inability to production. In more ways than one, this portrait of the ego is highly contradictory and not really satisfactory: silent as to what is repressed but productive of meaning, how can that be?

An hypothesis is worth considering: what is eluded in the logic of the argument we are considering is no other than the specific nature of the trajectory that goes from *a* to *b*, that is to say, forgive me for repeating this, the selection by each unconscious subject, *S/*, of a particular mode of symbolization, the "choice" of a semantic content attached to unconscious desire. We can speak of hesitation or of ambiguity in the argumentation, and there is nothing surprising there when one realizes the extraordinary difficulty implied when it comes to handling such an extraordinary concept as that of the unconscious, a concept Freud himself invented, even if a few others before him had had an inkling of it and had timidly advanced the idea, although not saying much about it. And at this point we cannot help noticing that the reasoning produced by Freud in 1925 quite reminds us of the view he held in 1915, so ten years before, in his two papers on "Repression" and on "The Unconscious". In fact, what he wrote in 1915 when presenting that bizarre object labeled "Preconscious" which he inserted between *Cs* and *Ucs* announces what he says about the ego in 1925. There is no doubt indeed that in the 1925 model the ego occupies the same place the preconscious occupied in the structure described in the 1915 text. It is this particular space, between *a* and *b*, that I am here examining, greatly helped in this by Lacan's essential clearing up of the field. (See my articles: "Freud on 'Repression' and on 'The Unconscious'," *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ISPA, Lisbon, 2008,79-90, and "Relire Freud: l'Inconscient," *Gradiva* Vol. VIII, N.2, Univ. Paris-Diderot, 2005, 153-167.)

a----->{ }----->b

In the two 1915 texts already, it is easy to see how contradictory the concept of unconscious is, and this is not too far from "incomprehensible", or even "inacceptable", no to say "terrifying". But at the same time, and for us this is more important, we can, as if between the lines, begin to understand how such an unthinkable concept could come to mind, its foundation in fact. For what is essential in Freud's discovery--an epistemological break--is not only the fact that he unearthed an unsuspected dimension of the human mind--and I should perhaps write "soul", as he did--, but also that he stressed the difficulty, and,

until his book on dreams, our impossibility of accepting the existence of such an incongruous dimension. This is where what is radical in psychoanalysis lies, and it is not so easy to encompass.

No doubt, it was this "*radicalité*" which incited Freud to somewhat blunt the edge of his theory. This may explain why the space "in which" we say today that unconscious desire is signified remains, in 1925 as in 1915, less thoroughly explored than other techniques so brilliantly described. It may well be for this reason that when he came to describe the "activities" of what he called the ego he chose the structure of denial as the best example of the "tendencies and techniques" of the said ego, thus symbolically expressing his own refusal to search further.

The above hypothesis about Freud's procrastination when it comes to studying the passage from drive to desire can easily be verified if we only read the rest of the first paragraph of Section VI of *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*:

The fact that such auxiliaries and substitutive techniques emerge may argue that such repression has met difficulties in its functioning. (119)

"Difficulties", here, may have more meanings than one, and the statement above, in any case, can lead us astray. I thought that the "regular form of repression", *der regelrechten Verdrängung*, was what was happening when the drive, in a first part of the movement, encountered the "impassability" of the bar or even discovered the irreversible character of the original loss at birth, which led, in a second moment, to the suspension of the intention to trespass. In short, I was still under the impression that repression and drive belonged to one and only conception of the "psychic apparatus". For if the word "unconscious" has any meaning at all, any understandable signified, it is not surprising we should find the concept in the debate about repression. After all, the 1915 article on The Unconscious was preceded by the shorter paper on Repression, a preamble in fact to the essential and longer demonstration which followed. Both papers rest on a radical conception of the unconscious and this is the reason why I find it so difficult to accept the ambiguous portrait of the preconscious drawn there by Freud as I find it contradicts the conception which emerges from both works--written almost at the same time--, namely **the** notion of an unconscious domain or register illustrated by the image of an impassable bar: no trespassing, period.

Period? Well, yes and no, the ambiguity again! For it is not so simple and instead of the clear cut "No trespassing" it is "No way in without a disguise" that must be written. Yes, no way in without a disguise, a mask and substitute. If the drive is still present in the scene, it is only because of its energy; in order to be accepted, recognized, heard or seen, it needs a signifier, un *signifiant*. Without this there is no way. We recognize here the articulation of need and desire pointed out by Lacan.

So it is understandable we should be surprised to read that repression can come across "difficulties". For the phrase reveals a conception far less radical than the one we first learnt from Freud, a conception so well illustrated by the first topology simply made of *Cs* and of *Ucs* with an obstacle in between. In fact, when he advances that "true" repression can meet with difficulties, Freud is no longer thinking in terms of structure--for a "structural" concept would suffer no variation--and is rather thinking of a quantum of energy susceptible to vary in intensity, which is of course quite possible but has nothing to do with the conception of this fundamental feature of the human psyche which consists in keeping hidden, out of reach of consciousness, what, after him, we call unconscious desire. And we may indeed wonder whether the unconscious to which Freud offers here a "vacation" is still the entity whose portrait he himself so carefully designed as the founding stone of psychoanalytical thinking. Of course, we can understand that the instance in charge of repression may exert a force likely to vary, be more or less intense, but then are we still speaking of what happens in the non-conscious domain? Once more, we encounter the debate about the nature of an instance called Preconscious.¹ Could it then be possible that I consider the small fragment of the text we are examining as lessening the rigor of the bar only for the reason that repression is *no longer* exclusively conceived as a movement of the soul which admits no conscious "thought" whatever, a movement which succeeds in remaining unknown and cannot be conceived to be under the influence of will-power or intention, a movement, in short, perfectly illustrated by the way parapraxis or the slip of the tongue function? I think so. We all know this: when "something" is not conscious, no will-power can be accounted for, all that remains is an effect, what is experienced, action, feeling, good or bad decision, word spoken, which, as in a flash of lightning, is produced unawares. The dream is of course the best example of this.

And this is where our difficulties begin: the narrative of the dream, when we happen to remember what we dreamt, represents the *conscious part* of the process, yes, but this is presented to our consciousness in such a manner that it is *not readily intelligible* and often looks as if it had no sense. The bar, undoubtedly, is porous. We saw this. But what manages "to go through" is only the visible part of the iceberg and cannot be dissociated from what is hidden below, the image is well-known. This led Freud to think of a new object composed of " what is conscious (manifest) and of what is unconscious (latent) at the same time". Again, *porter et masquer*, this is what the dream does, and the two movements are inseparable. We can here grasp the essential duality of what is produced by our "psychic apparatus": if it seems meaningless it is

¹ It is obvious that this debate also implies a discussion touching the nature of the concept of ego. It is worth noticing that in the first edition of the article, in 1915, only "*Cs*" is present while in the following editions Freud added, but between parenthesis, ("*Pcs*"), which can be read, I think, as a sign of some hesitation on the part of the author.

simply because it has retained what was essential to its production, the invisible roots of the dream as it were, namely the reason for its production, its *raison d'être*: unconscious desire.

I spoke of a space between *a* and *b*, and defined it in the structure as the place of desire. The uncertain status of the ego as we find it in *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety* disqualifies it as an active agent in that space, which is the place of symptom formation. A silent place in the structure, a theatre only, it cannot be mistaken for the agent productive of unconscious desire, no more than it can be considered as an active factor susceptible of the slightest control of such desire (since there is no controlling of what is unconscious beforehand). In the end, *das Ich*, with its hybridity, now conscious, now unconscious, was a convenient way to describe what constitutes any human person whose actions are always at once conscious and unconscious, a place in the structure where "it happens", yes, but certainly not where desire can be controlled or directed. Thus is the "I" the person that I see in the mirror, an image, *but also*, because of the duality discovered by Freud, the unconscious subject; on one side of the mirror, me, and only this, *l'imaginaire*, on the other, hidden, veiled and only accessible thanks to analytic interpretation, *le symbolique*, that is to say, for the psychoanalyst, the Subject.

For once, accusation and defense are of the same opinion: "It cannot be the ego, it had nothing to **do** with desire; there must have been something else, a more effective cause".

What made our investigation so difficult, of course, was that Freud's argument was founded on an observation that was quite correct. If we read the first sentence of our excerpt again, we remark that "the two activities which form symptoms and which deserve special attention" are considered by him as "surrogates of repression" (119), *Surrogate der Verdrängung*, and this is accurate, well, almost so. Almost, only because only one part of the statement is correct: these surrogates do have "a function of assistance", yes, but it is not repression which they help in its difficulties (as we saw, repression does not need any help, nor does the bar). The substitution, quite on the contrary, is designed to help the energy of the drive which was refused admission and still pushes at the door (and this process is not conscious), thus do we go from unconscious impulse to desire with the ego a useless witness.

Not that the symbolic scene is not at the heart of Freud's preoccupation, for in the second paragraph of his Section VI he offers a superb presentation of two unconscious "techniques": "undoing what has been done", *das Ungeschehenmachen*, and "isolating", *das isolieren*. Simply, in his defense of the ego, he seems to forget for a moment that these processes are unconscious and that the Subject must always be thought of, first, as not knowing, the result being that we are confronted with an unstable object. For these two presentations are not devoid of ambiguity, the trace of a regret, no doubt, that the ego did not have any part in the process. The vocabulary used in the presentation does confirm the contradictory nature of the notion that is

being presented: on one hand, what is described belongs to the unconscious register and we are told of "precautionary measures" which are "irrational and in the nature of magic" (119), while on the other hand the same ego "has a great deal of isolating to do in its function of directing the current of thought" (121), must be "more watchful" and "must not relax" (121), which hardly seems to apply to what is not conscious.

In the end, the alternative is simple: either we have an *unconscious* ego, and this is no longer the ego as one would like it to be, that is to say capable of control and master in its own house, or else we have a *conscious* ego, but which is not capable of any action as far as our unconscious world is concerned, a useless ego, as Freud said. All this is not too difficult to understand: to belong to the two "camps" at the same time is impossible; such ambiguity, such uncertainty deprives the concept of ego of any solidity. One must make a choice and give up the hope of saving a role for this agent, mourn the possibility, indeed, of leaving it an ounce of responsibility in the conflict which opposes Id and Superego, a field clearly unconscious where such a conscious instance can only be powerless and misleading, to say the least.

All is not lost, though, for in spite of the ambiguity noticed in the particular text we are reading, one conviction remains and that is that le symbolique is present in Freud's presentation. For the two processes he gives as examples of symptom production have the structure of denial and perfectly illustrate the way we symbolically signify:

As the neurosis proceeds, we often find that the endeavor to undo a traumatic experience is a motive of first-rate importance in the formation of symptoms. (120)

Repression, lost remembrance, such is the universe where those operations take place; we definitely are not in the conscious world. What is said of "isolating", the other psychic movement, is just as explicit:

This behavior, which seems strange at first sight, is soon to have a relation with repression. (120)

Carefully examining the two "techniques" which to him seem good examples of the ego's activities, Freud puts an end to his ambiguous presentation. With this short sixth section of *Inhibitions, symptoms and anxiety*, in the last two paragraphs, we are back to what I take to be essential in psychoanalysis. The observation concentrates on the taboo on touching. One may not at first realize what the relationship with the four long preceding paragraphs is, and yet it is there and even entirely justifies the following demonstration. *Denial* is what is being discussed, and when Freud explains that he sees this movement as an interruption of the flow of conscious thoughts in the Subject, a stop in the chain of discourse, his analysis is brilliant:

[...] isolation is the removing of the possibility of contact; it is a method of withdrawing a thing from being touched in any way. And when the neurotic isolates an impression or an activity by interpolating an interval, he is letting it to be understood symbolically that he will not allow his thoughts about that impression or activity to come into associative contact with other thoughts. (122)

One thing is clear: to go from the interruption represented by denial--a way to divert the attention from what could be found out--to the prohibition to touch is quite logical, the suspension of the association of ideas perfectly corresponds to the suspension of an action. This introduction of distance applies in both cases, and it could well represent what separates subject and object and even what the person loses or has lost.

[...] touching and physical contact are the immediate aim of the aggressive as well as the loving object-cathexes. Eros desires contact because it strives to make the ego and the loved object one, to abolish all spatial barriers between them. (122)

Here is the bar again; not only the dividing line supposed to illustrate loss in a simple sketch on paper, but the representation of separation in the flesh itself, that void which makes of the human person at his or her birth a separated and lonely being. Freud, it is true, is more prudent and contents himself with speaking of erotic satisfaction, the idea, however, is the same:

To 'touch' a woman has become a euphemism for using her as a sexual object. Not to 'touch' one's genitals is the phrase employed for forbidding auto-erotic satisfaction. (122)

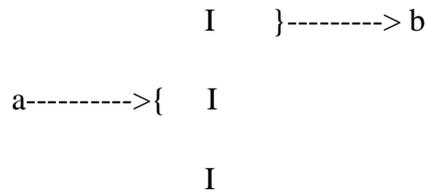
What is fundamental for psychoanalysis is not forgotten in any case, and a short allusion to the Oedipus complex reminds us of the triangular structure I so often mention: Subject/bar/object. In the end, Section VI finds its "cause", perhaps unconscious at the beginning, and this is of course castration, the term to be taken in its widest sense: assault on our integrity, incompleteness.² Our research on anxiety can now continue.

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Freud's reflection was concerned with the nature of the space he had discovered between Id and Superego, the scene of their struggle as it were. In his second

² Thus written, the concept applies to both sexes.

model, second topology, as we saw, he was trying to conceptualize what relationship there was between non-conscious impulse, *Trieb* (a) and its representation (b), that is to say the conditions of production of that representation.



But his desire to see something of what is unconscious in us at last controlled, if not mastered, incited him to insert in the space he had discovered an agent whose powers today appear completely imaginary, which means he disregarded the opportunity he had of asking questions about the Subject's determinations. He named that space, { }, *das Ich*, and turned it into a place of power or control, in complete contrast with what he had so far observed and which **is** in fact the corner stone of psychoanalytic thinking, namely that the Subject cannot have any perception of what is non conscious in him or her (the condition of such an apprehension being that it can only take place "after the event", *dans l'après-coup*). To conceive of such an ambiguous intervention or spontaneous knowledge, the possibility of a control over what is unconscious, amounts to a denial—I use the term knowingly—of the existence of the bar and supposes an agent, the Ego, situated on both sides of it, which is a psychoanalytic impossibility. Naturally, between Id and Superego, there exists a space ; Freud himself described it when he spoke of the substitution movement which is nothing else than the representation of unconscious desire; but then, in his attempt at giving it some power, he made a hybrid of it and created an object not acceptable to psychoanalysis. That space, until Lacan's *Discours de Rome* (1953), remained empty; it is the space of significance, the place where the Subject's unconscious desire, in the aftermath, I repeat, can be somewhat approached, known, and consequently taken into consideration by what is conscious in the Subject, especially thanks to the analysis of the transference.^{3 4}

³ That we, as Subjects, should be watchful--for what the advice is worth...and it is not worth much-- should be remembered, but it may be more technically advisable to realize that what characterizes a Subject is its desire not to know.

⁴ About the weakness of the ego as a concept, what would we have found in *The Ego and the Id* (1922) that confirms the above analysis? The argumentation in the last four pages of that early presentation--which are more specifically devoted to the ego--is not very different from what Freud shall write three years later. Besides, the introduction of the death instinct in the 1922 study adds to our difficulty. It is also my impression that Freud, there, was more concerned with the superego and the id than with the ego proper. As for the ego, I felt this was



rather a good description of the "outside" of a person, as it were, which should save us the trouble of inventing a particular concept for what is, after all, only the seat of perceptions in an individual facing reality. What is worth noticing, finally, is that the portrait is accurate to the point of being that of a "constitutional monarch"--the words are Freud's--, deprived, hence, of any real power, a prey to many illusions also, and who, confronted with the impossibility of submitting "the exterior world", is obliged to remodel the objects he or she desires.

Many times have I tried to depict a "more or less 'neutral' ego", meaning an ego which cannot be considered as having a role in our unconscious guilt, and therefore never to be confused with the superego. (See: "The Ego and the Id and Lacan's schema L," *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, ISPA: Lisbon, 1995, 25-33.)

To this criticism of the ego as a concept, what must be added is that Freud himself was not without having some--unconscious?--doubts about the solidity of the notion. In the well-named *Nachträge of Inhibitions*, symptoms and anxiety, attempting to describe what the anticathexis was, *Gegenbesetzung*, he wrote:

There is another kind of anticathexis, however, which seems more suited to the peculiar character of hysteria. A repressed instinctual impulse can be activated (newly cathected) from two directions: from within, through reinforcement from its internal sources of excitation, and, secondly [zweitens], from without, through the perception of an object that it desires.

Curiously, or not so curiously, the *Standard Edition* did not translate *zweitens*; but this afterthought, which distinguishes an inside--for me a reference to the energy of the Id--and an outside where an object of desire is mentioned does indeed correspond to the final model I have sketched, with a trajectory from a to b pointing to the object of desire. Lacan will speak of this object as the cause of desire. In fact when Freud writes *Gegenbesetzung*, instead of *Gegen*, "against", we can now read "Other".