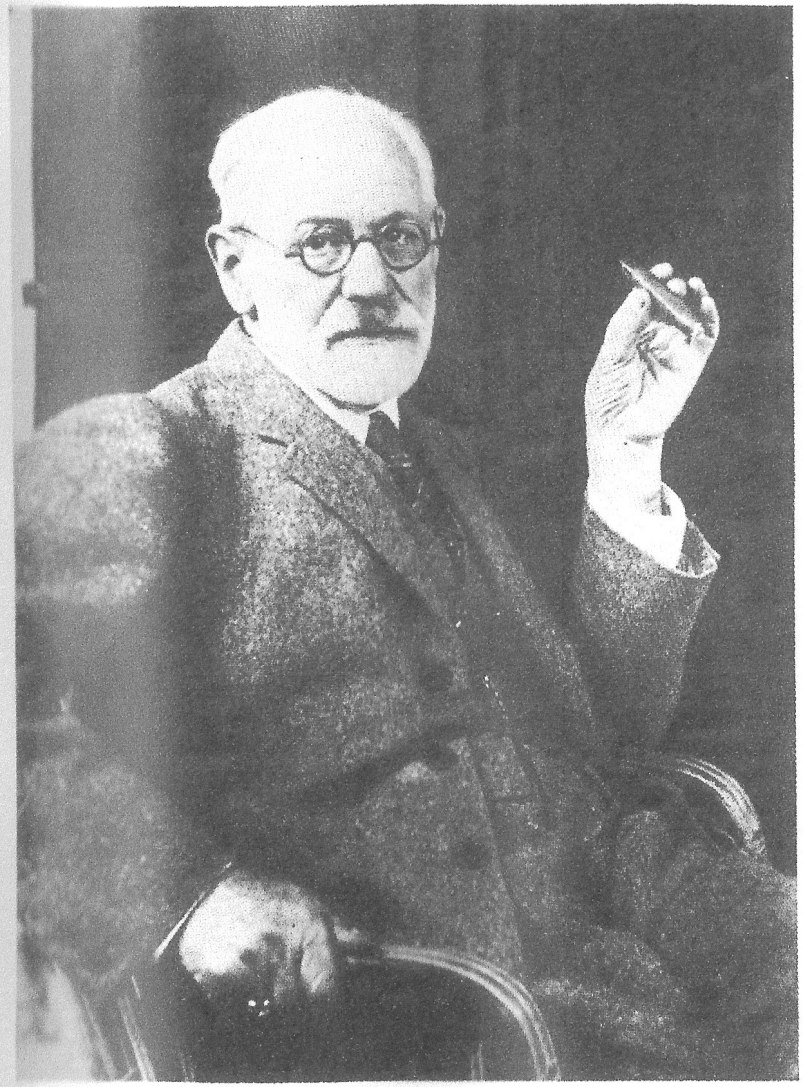

SIGMUND FREUD IN 1929

THE STANDARD EDITION
OF THE COMPLETE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKS OF

SIGMUND FREUD

Translated from the German under the General Editorship of

JAMES STRACHEY

In Collaboration with

ANNA FREUD

Assisted by

ALIX STRACHEY and ALAN TYSON

VOLUME XXII

(1932–36)

New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis

and

Other Works

LONDON
THE HOGARTH PRESS
AND THE INSTITUTE OF PSYCHO-ANALYSIS
1964

BRIEF AN ROMAIN ROLLAND
(EINE ERINNERUNGSSTÖRUNG AUF DER AKROPOLIS)

(*a*) GERMAN EDITIONS:

1936 *Almanach 1937*, 9–21.
1950 *G.W.*, **16**, 250–7.

(*b*) ENGLISH TRANSLATION:

'A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis'

1941 *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.*, **22** (2), 93–101. (Tr. James Strachey.)
1950 *C.P.*, **5**, 302–12. (Reprint of above.)

The present translation is a corrected version of the one published in 1950.

Romain Rolland was born on January 29, 1866, and this paper was dedicated to him on the occasion of his seventieth birthday. Freud had the greatest admiration for him, as is proved not only by the present work, but by the message to Rolland on his sixtieth birthday (Freud, 1926*a*) and by the four or five letters to him which have been published (Freud, 1960*a*), as well as by a passage at the beginning of *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930*a*), *Standard Ed.*, **21**, 64–5. Freud had first corresponded with him in 1923, and had met him, for the only time, it seems, in 1924.

It has been impossible to trace any earlier publication of this paper in German, other than that in the *Almanach* noted above. It should be borne in mind that any publications connected with Romain Rolland, as with many other authors, including Thomas Mann and of course all Jewish writers, were suppressed during this period by the Nazis.

A DISTURBANCE OF MEMORY ON THE ACROPOLIS

AN OPEN LETTER TO ROMAIN ROLLAND ON THE OCCASION OF HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY

My dear Friend,

I have been urgently pressed to make some written contribution to the celebration of your seventieth birthday and I have made long efforts to find something that might in any way be worthy of you and might give expression to my admiration for your love of the truth, for your courage in your beliefs and for your affection and good will towards humanity; or, again, something that might bear witness to my gratitude to you as a writer who has afforded me so many moments of exaltation and pleasure. But it was in vain. I am ten years older than you and my powers of production are at an end. All that I can find to offer you is the gift of an impoverished creature, who has 'seen better days'.

You know that the aim of my scientific work was to throw light upon unusual, abnormal or pathological manifestations of the mind—that is to say, to trace them back to the psychical forces operating behind them and to indicate the mechanisms at work. I began by attempting this upon myself and then went on to apply it to other people and finally, by a bold extension, to the human race as a whole. During the last few years, a phenomenon of this sort, which I myself had experienced a generation ago, in 1904, and which I had never understood, has kept on recurring to my mind.[1] I did not at first see why; but at last I determined to analyse the incident—and I now present you with the results of that enquiry. In the process, I shall have, of course, to ask you to give more attention to some events in my private life than they would otherwise deserve.

Every year, at that time, towards the end of August or the

[1] [Freud had made a short allusion to the episode some ten years earlier, in Chapter V of *The Future of an Illusion* (1927*c*), *Standard Ed.*, **21**, 25, but had not put forward the explanation.]

beginning of September, I used to set out with my younger brother on a holiday trip, which would last for some weeks and would take us to Rome or to some other region of Italy or to some part of the Mediterranean sea-board. My brother is ten years younger than I am, so he is the same age as you—a coincidence which has only now occurred to me. In that particular year my brother told me that his business affairs would not allow him to be away for long: a week would be the mot that he could manage and we should have to shorten our trip. So we decided to travel by way of Trieste to the island of Corfu and there spend the few days of our holiday. At Trieste he called upon a business acquaintance who lived there, and I went with him. Our host enquired in a friendly way about our plans and, hearing that it was our intention to go to Corfu, advised us strongly against it: 'What makes you think of going there at this time of year? It would be too hot for you to do anything. You had far better go to Athens instead. The Lloyd boat sails this afternoon; it will give you three days there to see the town and will pick you up on its return voyage. That would be more agreeable and more worth while.'

As we walked away from this visit, we were both in remarkably depressed spirits. We discussed the plan that had been proposed, agreed that it was quite impracticable and saw nothing but difficulties in the way of carrying it out; we assumed, moreover, that we should not be allowed to land in Greece without passports. We spent the hours that elapsed before the Lloyd offices opened in wandering about the town in a discontented and irresolute frame of mind. But when the time came, we went up to the counter and booked our passages for Athens as though it were a matter of course, without bothering in the least about the supposed difficulties and indeed without having discussed with one another the reasons for our decision. Such behaviour, it must be confessed, was most strange. Later on we recognized that we had accepted the suggestion that we should go to Athens instead of Corfu instantly and most readily. But, if so, why had we spent the interval before the offices opened in such a gloomy state and foreseen nothing but obstacles and difficulties?

When, finally, on the afternoon after our arrival, I stood on the Acropolis and cast my eyes around upon the landscape, a

surprising thought suddenly entered my mind: 'So all this really *does* exist, just as we learnt at school!' To describe the situation more accurately, the person who gave expression to the remark was divided, far more sharply than was usually noticeable, from another person who took cognizance of the remark; and both were astonished, though not by the same thing. The first behaved as though he were obliged, under the impact of an unequivocal observation, to believe in something the reality of which had hitherto seemed doubtful. If I may make a slight exaggeration, it was as if someone, walking beside Loch Ness, suddenly caught sight of the form of the famous Monster stranded upon the shore and found himself driven to the admission: 'So it really *does* exist—the sea-serpent we've never believed in!' The second person, on the other hand, was justifiably astonished, because he had been unaware that the real existence of Athens, the Acropolis, and the landscape around it had ever been objects of doubt. What he had been expecting was rather some expression of delight or admiration.

Now it would be easy to argue that this strange thought that occurred to me on the Acropolis only serves to emphasize the fact that seeing something with one's own eyes is after all quite a different thing from hearing or reading about it. But it would remain a very strange way of clothing an uninteresting commonplace. Or it would be possible to maintain that it was true that when I was a schoolboy I had *thought* I was convinced of the historical reality of the city of Athens and its history, but that the occurrence of this idea on the Acropolis had precisely shown that in my unconscious I had *not* believed in it, and that I was only now acquiring a conviction that 'reached down to the unconscious'. An explanation of this sort sounds very profound, but it is easier to assert than to prove; moreover, it is very much open to attack upon theoretical grounds. No. I believe that the two phenomena, the depression at Trieste and the idea on the Acropolis, were intimately connected. And the first of these is more easily intelligible and may help us towards an explanation of the second.

The experience at Trieste was, it will be noticed, also no more than an expression of incredulity: 'We're going to see Athens? Out of the question!—it will be far too difficult!' The accompanying depression corresponded to a regret that it *was*

out of the question: it would have been so lovely. And now we know where we are. It is one of those cases of 'too good to be true' [1] that we come across so often. It is an example of the incredulity that arises so often when we are surprised by a piece of good news, when we hear we have won a prize, for instance, or drawn a winner, or when a girl learns that the man whom she has secretly loved has asked her parents for leave to pay his addresses to her.

When we have established the existence of a phenomenon, the next question is of course as to its cause. Incredulity of this kind is obviously an attempt to repudiate a piece of reality; but there is something strange about it. We should not be in the least astonished if an attempt of this kind were aimed at a piece of reality that threatened to bring unpleasure: the mechanism of our mind is, so to speak, planned to work along just such lines. But why should such incredulity arise in something which, on the contrary, promises to bring a high degree of pleasure? Truly paradoxical behaviour! But I recollect that on a previous occasion I dealt with the similar case of the people who, as I put it, are 'wrecked by success'.[2] As a rule people fall ill as a result of frustration, of the non-fulfilment of some vital necessity or desire. But with these people the opposite is the case; they fall ill, or even go entirely to pieces, because an overwhelmingly powerful wish of theirs has been fulfilled. But the contrast between the two situations is not so great as it seems at first. What happens in the paradoxical case is merely that the place of the external frustration is taken by an internal one. The sufferer does not permit himself happiness: the internal frustration commands him to cling to the external one. But why? Because—so runs the answer in a number of cases—one cannot expect Fate to grant one anything so good. In fact, another instance of 'too good to be true', the expression of a pessimism of which a large portion seems to find a home in many of us. In another set of cases, just as in those who are wrecked by success, we find a sense of guilt or inferiority, which can be translated: 'I'm not worthy of such happiness, I don't deserve it.' But these two motives are essentially the same, for one is only a projection

[1] [In English in the original.]

[2] [Section II of 'Some Character-Types Met with in Psycho-Analytic Work' (1916*d*).]

of the other. For, as has long been known, the Fate which we expect to treat us so badly is a materialization of our conscience, of the severe super-ego within us, itself a residue of the punitive agency of our childhood.[1]

This, I think, explains our behaviour in Trieste. We could not believe that we were to be given the joy of seeing Athens. The fact that the piece of reality that we were trying to repudiate was to begin with only a *possibility* determined the character of our immediate reactions. But when we were standing on the Acropolis the possibility had become an actuality, and the same disbelief found a different but far clearer expression. In an undistorted form this should have been: 'I could really not have imagined it possible that I should ever be granted the sight of Athens with my own eyes—as is now indubitably the case!' When I recall the passionate desire to travel and see the world by which I was dominated at school and later, and how long it was before that desire began to find its fulfilment, I am not surprised at its after-effect on the Acropolis; I was then forty-eight years old. I did not ask my younger brother whether he felt anything of the same sort. A certain amount of reserve surrounded the whole episode; and it was this which had already interfered with our exchanging thoughts at Trieste.

If I have rightly guessed the meaning of the thought that came to me on the Acropolis and if it did in fact express my joyful astonishment at finding myself at that spot, the further question now arises why this meaning should have been subjected in the thought itself to such a distorted and distorting disguise.

The essential subject-matter of the thought, to be sure, was retained even in the distortion—that is, incredulity: 'By the evidence of my senses I am now standing on the Acropolis, but I cannot believe it.' This incredulity, however, this doubt of a piece of reality, was doubly displaced in its actual expression: first, it was shifted back into the past, and secondly it was transposed from my relation to the Acropolis on to the very existence of the Acropolis. And so something occurred which was equivalent to an assertion that at some time in the past I had doubted the real existence of the Acropolis—which, however, my memory rejected as being incorrect and, indeed, impossible.

[1] [Cf. Chapter III of *The Future of an Illusion* (1927*c*), *Standard Ed.*, 21, 17 f.]

The two distortions involve two independent problems. We can attempt to penetrate deeper into the process of transformation. Without for the moment particularizing as to how I have arrived at the idea, I will start from the presumption that the original factor must have been a sense of some feeling of the unbelievable and the unreal in the situation at the moment. The situation included myself, the Acropolis and my perception of it. I could not account for this doubt; I obviously could not attach the doubt to my sensory impressions of the Acropolis. But I remembered that in the past I had had a doubt about something which had to do with this precise locality, and I thus found the means for shifting the doubt into the past. In the process, however, the subject-matter of the doubt was changed. I did not simply recollect that in my early years I had doubted whether I myself would ever see the Acropolis, but I asserted that at that time I had disbelieved in the reality of the Acropolis itself. It is precisely this effect of the displacement that leads me to think that the actual situation on the Acropolis contained an element of doubt of reality. I have certainly not yet succeeded in making the process clear; so I will conclude by saying briefly that the whole psychical situation, which seems so confused and is so difficult to describe, can be satisfactorily cleared up by assuming that at the time I had (or might have had) a momentary feeling: '*What I see here is not real.*' Such a feeling is known as a 'feeling of derealization' ['*Entfremdungsgefühl*'].[1] I made an attempt to ward that feeling off, and I succeeded, at the cost of making a false pronouncement about the past.

These derealizations are remarkable phenomena which are still little understood. They are spoken of as 'sensations', but they are obviously complicated processes, attached to particular mental contents and bound up with decisions made about those contents. They arise very frequently in certain mental diseases, but they are not unknown among normal people, just as hallucinations occasionally occur in the healthy. Nevertheless they are certainly failures in functioning and, like dreams, which, in spite of their regular occurrence in healthy people, serve us all

[1] [The word has been rendered variously into English. Henderson and Gillespie *Text-book of Psychiatry* (Fifth Edition, 1940), 102, use the term 'derealization', and make the same distinction as Freud between it and 'depersonalization' (Freud's '*Depersonalisation*').]

models of psychological disorder, they are abnormal structures. These phenomena are to be observed in two forms: the subject feels either that a piece of reality or that a piece of his own self is strange to him. In the latter case we speak of 'depersonalizations'; derealizations and depersonalizations are intimately connected. There is another set of phenomena which may be regarded as their positive counterparts—what are known as '*fausse reconnaissance*', '*déjà vu*', '*déjà raconté*' etc.,[1] illusions in which we seek to accept something as belonging to our ego, just as in the derealizations we are anxious to keep something out of us. A naïvely mystical and unpsychological attempt at explaining the phenomena of '*déjà vu*' endeavours to find evidence in it of a former existence of our mental self. Depersonalization leads us on to the extraordinary condition of '*double conscience*',[2] which is more correctly described as 'split personality'. But all of this is so obscure and has been so little mastered scientifically that I must refrain from talking about it any more to you.

It will be enough for my purposes if I return to two general characteristics of the phenomena of derealization. The first is that they all serve the purpose of defence; they aim at keeping something away from the ego, at disavowing it. Now, new elements, which may give occasion for defensive measures, approach the ego from two directions—from the real external world and from the internal world of thoughts and impulses that emerge in the ego. It is possible that this alternative coincides with the choice between derealizations proper and depersonalizations. There are an extraordinarily large number of methods (or mechanisms, as we say) used by our ego in the discharge of its defensive functions. An investigation is at this moment being carried on close at hand which is devoted to the study of these methods of defence: my daughter, the child analyst, is writing a book upon them.[3] The most primitive and thorough-going of these methods, 'repression', was the starting-point of the whole of our deeper understanding of psychopathology. Between repression and what may be termed the normal

[1] [Freud discussed these phenomena twice at some length: in Chapter XII (D) of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901*b*), *Standard Ed.*, 6, 265 ff., and in a paper on '*Fausse Reconnaissance*' (1914*a*).]

[2] [The French term: 'dual consciousness'.]

[3] [Anna Freud, *The Ego and the Mechanisms of Defence* (1936).]

method of fending off what is distressing or unbearable, by means of recognizing it, considering it, making a judgement upon it and taking appropriate action about it, there lie a whole series of more or less clearly pathological methods of behaviour on the part of the ego. May I stop for a moment to remind you of a marginal case of this kind of defence? You remember the famous lament of the Spanish Moors '*Ay de mi Alhama*' ['Alas for my Alhama'], which tells how King Boabdil[1] received the news of the fall of his city of Alhama. He feels that this loss means the end of his rule. But he will not 'let it be true', he determines to treat the news as '*non arrivé*'.[2] The verse runs:

'Cartas le fueron venidas
que Alhama era ganada:
las cartas echo en el fuego,
y al mensajero matara.'[3]

It is easy to guess that a further determinant of this behaviour of the king was his need to combat a feeling of powerlessness. By burning the letters and having the messenger killed he was still trying to show his absolute power.

The second general characteristic of the derealizations—their dependence upon the past, upon the ego's store of memories and upon earlier distressing experiences which have since perhaps fallen victim to repression—is not accepted without dispute. But precisely my own experience on the Acropolis, which actually culminated in a disturbance of memory and a falsification of the past, helps us to demonstrate this connection. It is not true that in my schooldays I ever doubted the real existence of Athens. I only doubted whether I should ever see Athens. It seemed to me beyond the realms of possibility that I should travel so far—that I should 'go such a long way'. This was linked up with the limitations and poverty of our conditions of

[1] [The last Moorish King of Granada at the end of the fifteenth century. Alhama, some 20 miles distant, was the key fortress to the capital.]

[2] [Freud used the same phrase to describe the defensive process in Section I of his first paper on 'The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence' (1894*a*), *Standard Ed.*, **3**, 48, and again in Chapter VI of *Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety* (1926*d*), ibid., **20**, 120.]

[3] ['Letters had reached him telling that Alhama was taken. He threw the letters in the fire and killed the messenger.']

life in my youth. My longing to travel was no doubt also the expression of a wish to escape from that pressure, like the force which drives so many adolescent children to run away from home. I had long seen clearly that a great part of the pleasure of travel lies in the fulfilment of these early wishes—that it is rooted, that is, in dissatisfaction with home and family. When first one catches sight of the sea, crosses the ocean and experiences as realities cities and lands which for so long had been distant, unattainable things of desire—one feels oneself like a hero who has performed deeds of improbable greatness. I might that day on the Acropolis have said to my brother: 'Do you still remember how, when we were young, we used day after day to walk along the same streets on our way to school, and how every Sunday we used to go to the Prater or on some excursion we knew so well? And now, here we are in Athens, and standing on the Acropolis! We really *have* gone a long way!' So too, if I may compare such a small event with a greater one, Napoleon, during his coronation as Emperor in Notre Dame,[1] turned to one of his brothers—it must no doubt have been the eldest one, Joseph—and remarked: 'What would *Monsieur notre Père* have said to this, if he could have been here to-day?'

But here we come upon the solution of the little problem of why it was that already at Trieste we interfered with our enjoyment of the voyage to Athens. It must be that a sense of guilt was attached to the satisfaction in having gone such a long way: there was something about it that was wrong, that from earliest times had been forbidden. It was something to do with a child's criticism of his father, with the undervaluation which took the place of the overvaluation of earlier childhood. It seems as though the essence of success was to have got further than one's father, and as though to excel one's father was still something forbidden.

As an addition to this generally valid motive there was a special factor present in our particular case. The very theme of Athens and the Acropolis in itself contained evidence of the son's superiority. Our father had been in business, he had had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant much to him. Thus what interfered with our enjoyment of the journey

[1] [The story is usually told of his assumption of the Iron Crown of Lombardy in Milan.]

to Athens was a feeling of *filial piety*. And now you will no longer wonder that the recollection of this incident on the Acropolis should have troubled me so often since I myself have grown old and stand in need of forbearance and can travel no more.

I am ever sincerely yours,
SIGM. FREUD

January, 1936

SHORTER WRITINGS

(1931–1936)