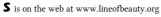# S

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BOOK REVIEW

READING BACKWARDS

Constructing God the Impossible in Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam

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In his 1937 essay, "Constructions in Analysis," Freud reorients the analyst's work, claiming that instead of offering a series of associative interpretations, the analyst's task is "to make out what has been forgotten from the traces which it has left behind or, more correctly, to *construct* it."[1] The shift from interpretation to construction signals an important moment in psychoanalysis in which it becomes irrevocably distinguished from the diachronic narrativization of an individual psychic development. Construction inaugurates a new kind of clinical work that doesn't simply locate psychic events as causes for one's symptoms but provides the appropriate place where one's symptoms can begin to present themselves in their various permutations, thus opening them up to a work of an analysis, rather than a dramatization of one's history. To be sure, one's past provides the material for a construction in analysis, and Freud likens the work to archeological excavation. But unlike interpretation, which attaches this material to a prefixed drama—Oedipal or other—this excavation uncovers material not to merely discover and identify it but rather to work with it in conjunction with one's present symptoms. Freud's late essay thus gives psychoanalysis an experimental edge where it both risks the effects of and assumes responsibility for its own work: "We do not pretend that an individual construction is anything more than a conjecture which awaits examination, confirmation or rejection."[2] Freudian construction calls for a confirmation founded upon analytic effects as opposed to verification of past events.

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[1] Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, *Standard Edition* 23, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1978) 259.

[2] Freud, 265.

It is within this experimental tradition of psychoanalytic construction, then, that Fethi Benslama's book *Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, recently translated into English, makes a welcome introduction into a field that has only begun to take off. Taking up this Freudian task, Benslama delves into the vast archive of Islam, reading many of its literary, ontological, ethical and theological works in order to uncover nothing less than an impossibility at its origin.

Benslama undertakes his investigation of psyche and civilization in order to read and "examine" certain problems of Islam "through the eyes of our universal psychoanalytic knowledge" (*Psychoanalysis and the Challenge of Islam*, 7). Although at first Benslama seems to propose a psychoanalytic "approach" to Islam, he rather undertakes a number of close readings, including acute attention to Arabic etymology, and nicely avoids a flat-footed application of a theory to the material. If one of psychoanalysis's goals—that is, for itself and the material it assumes—is to achieve a clinical effect, then Benslama's book provides a deft and fascinating survey of the challenges Islam poses for the clinic. Benslama acknowledges the clinical stakes of his work as seen, for instance, in the chapter entitled "The Clinic of the Nights," and his advice to analysts working with Muslim analysands is: "be receptive to anger, to identify despair, to analyze its figures" (92). Though psychoanalysis has historically articulated the problems of psyche and civilization through the Judeo-Christian monotheistic tradition, Islam provides its own unique material and, indeed, challenges. To his credit, Benslama approaches these challenges not via a transcendental application of some *a priori* worked-out theory, but through an immanent working through of material already present in Islam. Benslama's work is clinical, then, to the extent that it attempts to *read* Islam's traits and construct its impossible beginning rather than merely interpret them through some unacknowledged hermeneutic. And in its most ambitious moments, *Psychoanalysis* redevelops the theory itself within the Islamic literary, philosophical and theological traditions and thereby ends up posing a challenge back to psychoanalysis: how does this "universal psychoanalytic knowledge" treat and reinscribe itself in an encounter with Islam's singularities?

No doubt the most profound move in *Psychoanalysis* is the argument that, unlike the Judeo-Christian God, the god of Islam is not a father. That is to say, at its inception, Islam has "excluded god from the logic of paternity" (104). This provocative gesture doubles Benslama's project: one, if the god of Islam is not a father, then what exactly is he and what part does he play? Two, as Benslama puts its, "How can we conceptualize the question of the father in a religion in which god is not the father?" (105). To address the latter question, Benslama rereads the figure of Abraham and his first born son, Ishmael. While nowadays one accepts Ishmael as an ancestor of the Arabs, this was not always the case. As Benslama points out, it was not until the birth of Islam that Ishmael becomes an Arab. To be more precise, it was not until Muhammad, long after Ishmael's life, uttered the putatively constative phrase, "Ishmael was an Arab," that this genealogy gets constructed and the father put into place. Muhammad doesn't merely discover some lost truth about the essence of the Arabs' origin—nor does he interpret it—he rather reads backwards into their lost

origin and *makes* Ishmael a father. In this manner, then, the father comes about through a work of construction—a speech act. At the place where no father exists, Muhammad's performative utterance supplements this lack of essence with a work of fiction. In so doing, or better, so *saying*, Muhammad appropriates for the Arabs what is not quite proper.

This retrospective construction already signals an impossible father at the origin of Islam. But in order to present his work's most provocative thesis concerning the father, Benslama interestingly turns his attention to the mothers of the monotheistic traditions, Sarah and Hagar. As Benslama claims, the question of the woman in Islam repeatedly articulates itself through his book, and an entire chapter is devoted to Islam's "Other Woman," in addition to a fascinating reading of Scheherazade's use of fiction in her desire to preserve life. Turning to *Genesis*, Benslama argues that because Isaac's conception occurs through divine intervention—God intervenes in order to impregnate the barren Sarah—the god of the Judeo-Christian tradition functions as an exception, unbound by natural law. The conception of Ishmael, however, occurs very naturally between Abraham and Hagar. Whereas Abraham is the "symbolic father" in Judaism and Christianity, he is simply the "real father" of Islam. So if Abraham naturally fathers Ishmael, then Allah functions in a very different way than the god of the other monotheistic traditions. The "god of Islam is not an originary father," notes Benslama, "he is the impossible: trans-paternal [*hors père*]" (125).

Just how, then, is the god of Islam impossible? As Benslama puts it,

> The fact remains that the god of Islam is connected neither with a sexual relation, nor with its absence of spiritualization through symbolic filiation. Rather, this god should be seen as being *in the background* of relation and non-relation; he is the incommensurable withdrawal of the no-place, through which the place of the father finds its opening. *God is the originary withdrawal of the father.* (126)

Benslama locates the structure of this impossible originary withdrawal in a "mechanism" that suspends the father, the son and the origin through an impossible withholding that he nevertheless writes out: "*there is, there is not*" [*il y a, il n'y a pas*]. And because this impossible articulates the "real of the origin," Benslama uncovers an invariant which he nicely extends: "there is that there is not," "there is a there is not," "there is there is not." These various permutations each repeat the same thing and reach the "limit of writing the origin," a limit that "constitutes the radical alterity of every origin" or, in other words, the Other (132).

Turning to Benslama's own work, it's interesting to note how *Psychoanalysis* handles the impossible through a Freudian construction. In the last chapter of his work, entitled "Within Himself," Benslama retrieves a concept of the transfer (*naqala*) in the ethical treatise of the eleventh-century philosopher Ibn Miskawayh in order to bring out a constitutive difference built into identity and identification. Locating a transfer in the filiation between father and son, Miskawayh claims that the father "sees" himself in the son—or more true to the Arabic, the father sees "another himself" (*huwa huwa*). The father's identity is transferred, claims Miskawayh, to the

son, whose body provides an exterior place for the extension of the father's identity. Importantly, the Arabic word for transfer, *naqala*, can also mean translation and transmission.[3] Benslama provides a fine anthropomorphic reading of the transfer of another self (*huwa huwa*) in which he examines how identity is achieved through filiation.

The immediate stakes of this transfer is nothing short of man's (in)capacity to identify with god's essence, that is, god's identity within himself. Benslama focuses on the name that Miskawayh gives to this transfer, *huwa huwa*, one of the many names of Allah. In Arabic, *huwa* is both the third person singular and a proper name for god and the Qur'an consistently refers to god as he. It is also helpful to note as well that the Arabic word for essence and identity (*huwiya*) is derived directly from this name of god, the third person singular *huwa*. Yet each of these cases of identity is brought about by recourse to something else. God's *huwa huwa* is doubled in the other self of Man who engenders a son, making him a doubled "he"—Man and Father. This identity is made possible only through its reduplication: "the principle of human identity is to be separated in two," says Benslama. But, at the same time, this doubling also inscribes an impossibility: "through the son, the father is confronted with something like the possibility of identifying with the impossible" (275).

Importantly, Miskawayh does not specify precisely how this transfer comes about. For instance, where exactly in the son does the father see and recognize himself? The eyes? The hands? The voice? Underneath the transmission of an entire self lie particular traits, material characteristics that both support, yet can also undermine, the recognition of one's self. This identification is made possible and impossible through the manifestation of the traits shared between father and child. And while these markers allow for an identification to occur, they can also disrupt the process:

> The relation god/man becomes a double game of doubling thanks to the child, because god's *huwa huwa* is doubled by the *huwa huwa* of the Man-Father once he engenders a child-son, while this child becomes the mediating factor—the unitary characteristic [*trait unaire*] (*einziger Zug*) to use the Freudian concept—that makes the two sides of the equation similar. (275)

Man qua father becomes "another himself" through child qua son. Benslama sets up the anthropological transmission of a trait in terms of analogy: "The Man-Father becomes *huwa huwa* through his child-son, as god is *huwa huwa* in himself." In this way, Man-Father assures his identification with god's essence through an indirect recognition of self in the child-son, who can only function as a "model of god's identify" rather than his essence (275).

Benslama's appropriation and writing out of the Arabic expression for "another self" (*huwa huwa*) ends up grounding the transfer's imaginary procedures within a surface, a crucial move towards the analytic kind of work that Freud calls construction. Rather than leave the transfer at the level of the father's "seeing" himself outside the self, Benslama's text uncovers a doubling of the very name *huwa*

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[3] All references to Arabic are taken from *The Hans Wehr Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic*, 3rd ed., ed. J. Milton Cowan (Ithaca: Spoken Language Services, 1976).

huwa at the heart of this process. Literally translated as "he is he" or simply "he he," this repetition of *huwa* identity produces at least two selves—*huwa* (1), *huwa* (2).

Because Benslama locates Freud's *einziger Zug* in the child, he appears to leave transmission at the anthropological level of filiation. Yet it is through an unusual, though brief, turn to Arabic calligraphy that Benslama extends his anthropomorphic reading of identification to the use of traits in a literal writing and reading. Despite his effort to locate this transmission in a human genealogy "constituted as a chain of unary traits," this section of Benslama's own text bears its own traits that ground this discussion of an anthropological linking within a literality (276). Thus another kind of transfer enters a writing that "mirrors" the *huwa* to itself, with impossible effects. "What is it about the identical that is so important?" asks Benslama, before proceeding to an identical writing, "In Islam it is one of the principal names of god. God is, in fact, called: *huwa huwa*, which literally means He He, or He is Himself. Often, in Arabic calligraphy, we find the word 'identical' represented by the mirror form of the word *huwa*" (273). Benslama inserts the following figure to illustrate this mirror form:

To make things trickier, recall that Arabic is written and read in the opposite direction as English. The figure on the right side is the correct way to write *huwa*. The figure on the left, of course, is the mirror image, whose shape does not spell anything in Arabic and is, strictly speaking, nonsense. These reversed traits might lack signification but they also lay bare a literality beyond the letter that opens up god the impossible to the possibility of a construction.

God's identity, that is, his "absolute sovereignty," says Benslama, becomes "represented" by *huwa*'s doubling in its mirror image. But "once the doubled letter *huwa* is interlaced, the mirror is canceled [*annulé*]" (274). *Annulé* may also be translated as "voided" or "written off." It indicates not a total suppression of the mirror, but rather its emptying out, which subsequently introduces another surface. The space in which *huwa* is written at first correctly, and then in reverse, grounds these letters and traits on the two-dimensional surface of the page, which is most certainly *not* a mirror. And if the mirror exists, it does so in an imaginary register as an object whose properties of reversal are assumed in order to make a writing in reverse possible. Although it neatly creates a mirror effect, the asymmetric figure on the left irrevocably challenges this "absolute sovereignty" by rendering its very name illegible.

To be clear, this illegibility does not grind Benslama's work to a halt—far from it. Like the "mechanism" that suspends the father, the writing of *huwa huwa* makes the impossible manifest through a backwards reading. Unlike the letters H and W, those that make up *huwa*—ﻩ (*ha*) and ﻭ (*wa*)—are asymmetric and orientable, that is, they require a specific handedness in order to be read and become immediately illegible once their orientation is reversed. Hold up the letters AllA in the mirror and you'll have no trouble reading what's written. Not so for *huwa*; its doubling as a mirror image does not neatly replicate the Arabic word for he or god. Rather, one asymmetric figure is placed next to another, producing the impossible through an enantiomorphism between the two—each side is identical yet incongruent.[4] While each figure shares the same intrinsic properties, their difference becomes obvious once one side is superimposed upon the other. Because there is no actual mirror here, these figures remain asymmetrical mismatches of one another inscribed onto the surface of Benslama's text. They are identical yet not the same—an impossibility brought out through a literal construction.

By dint of Benslama's own text, the impossible "absolute sovereignty" of god is no longer left at the level of representation. Rather, its very writing in the figure above presents the impossibility. It is here, where an imaginary mirror's reversal uncovers a trait beyond the word and the letter, that I indicate a construction in analysis in Benslama's book. In this reading backwards, an impossibility which is at first merely interpreted becomes literally constructed.

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[4] This kind of incongruent but identical spatiality is exactly what prevents the pre-Critical Kant from telling apart one hand from the other. Kant's incapacity to think through the difference between his right and left hands requires him to move from a Leibnizian *analysis situs* to Newtonian Absolute Space, paving the way for the Transcendental Aesthetic of the First *Critique*. This transfer from an intrinsic to an extrinsic view of space allows Kant to read the difference between right and left. See Kant's essay "Concerning the Ultimate Ground of the Differentiation of Directions in Space" in *Theoretical Philosophy*, 1755-1770, ed. David Walford (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) 361-372.