



Article

Joking Around, Seriously: Freud, Derrida, and the Irrepressible Wit of Heinrich Heine

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Abstract: This essay sets out to explore the unexpected but amusing entanglement of three Jewish writers—Harry (“Heinrich”) Heine, Sigismund (“Sigmund”) Freud, and Jackie (“Jacques”) Derrida. You will not often find a reference to Heine in the work of Jacques Derrida, but you will find a Heine joke in Derrida’s discussion of forgiveness in *Le parjure et le pardon* (1998–1999), where the name Heine is invoked precisely in order to recall the scandalous automaticity, the machine-like quality of forgiveness. Beginning with Derrida’s surprising reference to the man George Eliot called a “unique German wit”, this essay will begin by arguing that there is something about Heine’s jokes, his *Witze*, his *mots d’esprit*, that not only plays up, but also paradoxically takes seriously, what Derrida, echoing Nietzsche in *Of Grammatology*, describes as the “play of the world.” The second part of this essay will engage Freud’s particular and quite special relation to Heine: Heine is the third most cited German writer in all of Freud’s work (after Goethe and Schiller). Neither Homer nor Sophocles is cited more often than Heine. Indeed, a bon mot from Heine is always ready-to-hand in the face of theoretical obstacles (e.g., “Observations on Transference Love”, “On Narcissism”, etc.). But perhaps nowhere is Freud’s affinity with Heine more apparent and more striking than in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), where Heine’s witticisms offer the best and most canonical examples of jokes. In conclusion, this essay will argue that Heine’s wit can be read as a playbook—not only for psychoanalysis’s economic understanding of jokes, but also, more radically, for deconstruction’s thinking of play.

Keywords: death drive; deconstruction; humor; Jewish jokes; play; psychoanalysis



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“The realm of jokes knows no boundaries.” (Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*)

1. The Heinrich Maneuver

I begin with an unexpected and amusing entanglement: one in which the Father of deconstruction, Jackie (“Jacques”) Derrida, uses a joke attributed to Harry (“Heinrich”) Heine to poke fun at the Father of psychoanalysis, Sigismund (“Sigmund”) Freud. In fact, this may be the only instance in which one can speak of a “throuple” of joking, Jewish writers (all of whom also happened to Europeanize their insufficiently European “Christian” names). It is not often that one finds a mention of Heine in the work of Derrida (in the case I am about to mention, it is in a posthumously published seminar). By contrast, Heine is the third most cited German writer in all of Freud’s published works. Heine ranks third after Goethe and Schiller, fourth among writers if you include Shakespeare. Freud cites Heine more often than he does Homer or Sophocles, more often, that is, than he cites those authors whose works are among the “most magnificent” (Freud [1907] 1959, p. 245)¹ of world literature. “Of all the creative writers whom Sigmund Freud read and quoted”, writes one literary critic, “none has quite as unique a place in his mental library as does Heinrich Heine” (Gilman 1991, p. 150). Or, in the words of the psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, Heine is a writer “in whom Freud truly is steeped [*dont Freud est véritablement pénétré*]” (Lacan 2017, p. 16; 1998, p. 22). All of this is to say that when Derrida enlists Freud’s “favorite” German writer to take a pot shot at the Father of psychoanalysis, there is something amusingly

Oedipal about this maneuver, just as there is something amusingly Freudian, an omission of an inescapably Freudian nature, when this unconsciously Oedipal operation leads the Father of deconstruction to fall on his Jewish *heinie*.

To be sure, the Heine joke that Derrida tells in the second year of *Le parjure et le pardon* (1998–1999) does not lead the reader far astray; it is a joke about forgiveness in a seminar on forgiveness. Indeed, by telling this joke—which, I should note, is not Derrida’s joke; it is one of the many jokes Freud tells in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*—Derrida’s intention is to stage a contrast between Hegel and Freud, between Hegel’s serious (Christian) notion of forgiveness and Freud’s blasphemous (Jewish) forgiveness joke, between Hegel’s *L’Esprit du christianisme et son destin* [*The Spirit of Christianity and Its Fate*] and Freud’s *Le mot d’esprit et sa relation à l’insconscient* [*Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*—that is, between “*l’esprit* (not the journal *Esprit* but the *Geist* [the Spirit] of Christianity according to Hegel) and Freud’s *mot d’esprit* (his Witz, his joke)” (Derrida 2020a, p. 133).

Now, by staging this contrast, the joke itself takes on a certain “theatrical” (Derrida 2020a, p. 135) quality. It becomes a *mise en scène* of forgiveness or, more precisely—since the joke is a “forgiveness” joke—a *mise en jeu* of a *mise en scène* of forgiveness. Derrida will even give the scene a title: “Heine à son lit de mort et toujours en verve [Heine on his death-bed and just as spirited as ever]” (Derrida 2020a, p. 135). So, here is the joke:

Heine [“this converted Jew” (Derrida 2020a, p. 135), as Derrida is quick to remind us] is said to have made a definitely blasphemous joke on his death-bed. When a friendly priest reminded him of God’s mercy and gave him hope that God would forgive him his sins, he is said to have replied [and Heine’s *bon mot* is in French in Freud’s text]: “*Bien sûr qu’il me pardonnera: c’est son métier*”. (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 114)

Although Derrida’s comments on the joke are brief (Derrida tells this joke at the very end of his seminar session), he is nonetheless quite captivated by it. Not once but twice in the space of five lines, he refers to the “scene or sequence” of the joke as being “remarkable” (Derrida 2020a, p. 135).

What is remarkable for Derrida is the fact that, by turning the business of forgiveness into a *métier* (a job), the joke “raises the curtain on a certain automaticity of forgiveness, a certain functional, professional and institutional machinality in the mechanism of forgiveness” (Derrida 2020a, p. 135). God is in the business of forgiving or, rather, and this is what makes the joke so funny, he’s in the forgiveness business. It’s God’s *job* to forgive; that’s what he’s there for. And here Derrida turns to Freud’s explanation of the joke in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*: “since a ‘*métier*,’ a trade or profession, is what a workman or doctor has [*hat etwa ein Handwerker oder ein Arzt*]—and he has only a single *métier* [in Marie Bonaparte’s translation, which is the translation Derrida quotes, we read: “*car un métier, un commerce, une profession, c’est là le fait d’un ouvrier ou d’un médecin, par exemple, qui n’ont l’un et l’autre qu’un seul et unique métier*”]” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 114; [1905] 1940, p. 126; [1905] 1971, p. 171), there is something disparaging (*herabsetzend, qui rabaisse*) about Heine’s comparison. God’s only job would be forgiveness and the need for forgiveness would be the only reason humans created God in the first place.

But what is also remarkable, muses Derrida, is that, when it comes to evoking comparable (helping) professions, professions that resemble that of the priest, neither Heine (!) nor Freud has anything to say about the psychoanalyst: “evoking similar professions, that of doctor and lawyer, he [Heine] says nothing, and for good reason, but neither does Freud, about the kind of doctor that a psychoanalyst is and of whom it is impossible not to think here” (Derrida 2020a, p. 135). If it is impossible *not* to think of a psychoanalyst in the context of confession professions—“one cannot not think [*on ne peut pas ne pas penser*]” (Derrida 2020a, p. 135) of the psychoanalyst—if the psychoanalyst, like God or his “secretary–confident–confessor, the priest”, is a professional forgiver, a forgiveness “pro”, “the ‘pro’ of forgiveness [*le ‘pro’ du pardon*]” (Derrida 2020a, p. 135), then the psychoanalyst is also implicated in the joke. Like God or priest, the psychoanalyst would be a kind of

forgiveness machine. Like God or priest, the psychoanalyst (Freud) would be the butt of (Heine's) joke. In other words, Derrida wants to have his *mise en jeu* of forgiveness and his Oedipal play too.

And yet, how shall I put it? A bit of unconscious wit seems to have slipped into Derrida's analysis of Freud's analysis of Heine's joke. For Derrida omits a crucial step in Freud's gloss on *métier* (job, trade, profession, occupation) when he claims that Heine or Freud evokes "similar professions, that of doctor and lawyer" (Derrida 2020a, p. 135). Now, it is true that Freud mentions the legal profession; he does so parenthetically, at the end of his discussion. But it is also true that he does so merely as an alternative, a recognizable alternative, to the medical profession ("as one engages one's doctor or one's lawyer" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 114)): it is also a personal alternative; biographically, as we know, Freud chose medicine over law, in the end). *Métier*, on the other hand, as Freud goes to great pains to show in his analysis of the joke, is something that refers *both* to a trade (*Geschäft*) and to a profession (*Beruf*). Like God or priest, *both* workman (*Handwerker*) and doctor (*Arzt*) have *métiers*; they are *métiers* holders who are precisely sought after for their handicraft, their expertise, their knowledge. That is to say, Jacques Derrida has assimilated *métier* to profession, and he has done so in the blink of an eye, without missing a beat, before you can say Jack Robinson. It is as if *métier* were simply synonymous with "doctor and lawyer." So, the question is why? Why replace "workman and doctor" with "doctor and lawyer"? Why forget or scotomize the workman? We have no way of knowing, of course. Although it is difficult not to suspect that something very Jewish, inescapably Jewish, Jewish-joke-worthy, is afoot—a kind of Jewish *automaticity* that immediately and mechanically associates *métier* not with workman, but with doctor and lawyer (and, perhaps, accountant!). What this means, I will suggest, is that Derrida's (symptomatic) reading of Freud's (symptomatic) omission betrays something like the "Jewishness" of this Jewish joke: a joke made by a "converted Jew", told by a "completely godless Jew [*einem ganz gottlosen Juden*]" (Freud and Pfister 1963, p. 63; 2014, p. 105) and retold by a witty philosopher "who [is], as everyone knows, half-Catholic, half-Calvinist [*qui [est], chacun le sait, à moitié Catholique, à moitié Calviniste*]" (Derrida 2014, p. 3; 2004, p. 35). In the context of Derrida's seminar, you might say that Judaism was returning—laughingly—at the heart of Hegel's Christian *Weltanschauung*, which is why I spoke of a Jewish Hein(i)e earlier.

What I would like to suggest, however, is that we take Derrida's Oedipal play with Freud to heart. For, if we insist on accentuating Derrida's scotomization of the workman, if we agree with him that "a logic of the symptom will always have more force than an ethics of veracity" (Derrida 2022, p. 238), then we cannot avoid thinking (we cannot *not* think) that what links the "Jewish science" to "the Jewish poet Heine" (Freud [1939] 1964, p. 30n2) is a particular and quite special kind of humor. Is it not Derrida himself who reminds us, and on more than one occasion, that "Freud himself did not exclude the existence of something Jewish in psychoanalysis" (Derrida and Roudinesco 2004, p. 192)? Or, to put this in slightly different terms, how can we explain that "the Jewish poet Heine" was always up in psychoanalysis's *business*? Or that Heine's handiwork played a role in the development of this "'impossible' profession" (Freud [1937] 1964, p. 248)?

2. Hanging with Heine: Civilization and Its Discontents

Heine is everywhere in Freud. No matter where you look in Freud's published works, you will find a Heine joke, quip, verse, or witticism. The number of books and essays in which the Jewish poet plays a cameo role is truly impressive: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (1901), *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905), "Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis" (1909), "On Narcissism" (1914), "Observations on Transference Love" (1915), "Thoughts for the Times on War and Death" (1915), "The Uncanny" (1919), the *Introductory Lectures* (1916–1917), *The Future of an Illusion* (1927), *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), "The Acquisition of and Control of Fire" (1932), the *New Introductory Lectures* (1933), *Moses and Monotheism* (1939).

And it is never simply a numbers game. A *bon mot* from Heine fits every occasion. Thus, whether the Father of psychoanalysis is describing the production of absurdity in dreams (Freud [1900] 1958, p. 435n1); putting forward an analogy for the concept of “secondary revision” (Freud [1900] 1958, p. 490); showing that the most trivial elements of dreams are indispensable to their interpretation (Freud [1900] 1958, p. 513); giving a concrete example of meaningful forgetting (Freud [1901] 1960, p. 18); advancing an interpretation of unconscious motivation (Freud [1901] 1960, pp. 25–26); providing a clinical instance of homophonic play (Freud [1909] 1957, p. 294); cautioning against the dangers of a “strong egoism” (Freud [1914] 1957, p. 85); highlighting the material limits of “transference love” (Freud [1915] 1958, pp. 166–67); giving an account of Western attitudes towards death (Freud [1915] 1957, p. 290) both in modernity and in ancient times (Freud [1915] 1957, p. 294); expounding on the question of unconscious motivation (Freud [1916] 1963, p. 52); evoking the terror of the “double” (Freud [1919] 1955, p. 236); shoring up his critique of religion with a “fellow-unbeliever” (Freud [1927] 1961, p. 50); defending the hypothesis of a death and destruction drive (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 110n1); conjuring up the eternal struggle between Eros and Thanatos (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 122); waxing poetic over the dual function of the male sexual organ (Freud [1932] 1964, p. 192); posing the “riddle of the nature of femininity” (Freud [1933] 1964, p. 113); denouncing the totalizing systems of philosophers (Freud [1933] 1964, p. 161); identifying the Egyptian roots of Jewishness (Freud [1939] 1964, pp. 30–31n2), a zinger from Heine is always ready to hand.

On the one hand, of course, one might play down Heine’s privileged position. One might say, for example, that wit begets wit. Freud delights in Heine’s wit because he himself was a witty man:

Virtually every description of Freud. . . highlights his sense of humor and penchant for joke telling. Joan Riviere: “The awe-inspiring appearance was lightened by the glow of an enchanting humor, always latent and constantly irradiating his whole person as he spoke.” Franz Alexander: “He propounded the most significant ideas in a light, conversational, casual tone. He liked to illustrate a point with anecdotes and jokes, was an excellent raconteur, and even serious topics were robbed of the artificial austerity with which they are so frequently invested.” Ernest Jones: “A Gentile would have said that Freud had few overt Jewish characteristics, a fondness for relating Jewish jokes and anecdotes being perhaps the most prominent one”. (Oring 1984, p. 2)

As all of those who knew him attested, Freud was a “witty conversationalist, a master story-teller of Jewish jokes” (Roazen 1975, p. xx).

On the other hand, however, as Freud himself tells us, jokes are not neutral. There is no such thing as an innocent joke; “[j]okes . . . are in fact never non-tendentious” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 132). Freud may well have been a funny guy, but Heine jokes are no joke. They mean business for the father of psychoanalysis. Thus, when “the poet’s words” (Freud [1915] 1958, p. 167) suddenly emerge on the page, the business of jokes becomes a funny business indeed (funny peculiar, rather than funny ha-ha). At such moments, Heine’s jokes remind us that there is always another use of jokes, a use that extends beyond the production of pleasure. “A joke”, Freud reminds us in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, is “a psychical force-factor: its weight, thrown into one scale or the other, can be decisive” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 133, modified). That is, and here Freud invokes the (German) idiom, a joke can always be used to “bring the laughs over to one’s side” (*die Lacher auf seine Seite ziehen*) (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 103). In short, a Heine joke not only amuses us (though it does this as well); it also serves the “theoretical intellectual interests” of psychoanalysis. A Heine joke promotes psychoanalytic thought “by augmenting it and guarding it against criticism” (Freud [1905] 1960, pp. 132–33).

But perhaps not without untoward effect. After all, as Freud also reminds us, a joke is not something that can be mastered (no matter how perfect one’s timing). There is always something surprising, involuntary, undecided, unconscious at play/at work in a joke: “it is most doubtful whether a person who gives free play to a joke must necessarily know its

precise intention" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 104). In *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, Freud tells us quite pointedly that the ego is not the master of its own joke:

We speak, it is true, of "making" a joke; but we are aware that when we do so our behavior is different from what it is when we make a judgment or make an objection. A joke has quite outstandingly the characteristic of being a notion that has occurred to us "involuntarily." What happens is not that we know a moment beforehand what joke we are going to make. ...We have an indefinable feeling, rather, which I can best compare with an "absence", a sudden release of intellectual tension, and then all at once the joke is there [*und dann ist der Witz mit einem Schlage da*]. (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 167; Freud [1905] 1940, p. 191)

[I]n the formation of a joke one drops a train of thought for a moment and. . .it then suddenly emerges from the unconscious as a joke. (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 168)

And Freud is not alone in pointing to the question of surprise. For Lacan too, "[t]here is no possibility of a joke emerging without an element of surprise" (Lacan 2017, p. 96). In fact, Lacan will often insist that *Witz* be rendered not as *mot*, but as *trait d'esprit*, in order, precisely, to emphasize the *flash*-like quality of wit (*der Blitz des Witzes*).

All of this brings me to one of the most surprising examples of Freud's invocation of Heine in his work. Now, it is impossible to say exactly why a blasphemous Heine joke should have flashed through Freud's mind in the middle of his discussion of the death drive in Chapter 5 of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. What one can say is that Freud's flash of wit appears as a footnote and that it literally illustrates, typographically on the page, as it were, both the dropping of a train of thought below the considered (conscious) argument of the text and its dazzling reappearance in/as a lengthy footnote. As we will see, Heine's joke—which, like so many Heine jokes, is a cynical one²—makes us laugh while at the same time advancing the theory of psychoanalysis (in this case, the theory of the death drive). But it is also the case, in a way that exceeds the actual body of Freud's text, that what calls for comic relief turns out to be something Christian, all too Christian. The dictums of Christianity disavow the truth of the death drive, whereas the joke of the "Jewish poet" takes it seriously.

There is nothing particularly cheery or amusing about Chapter 5 of *Civilization and Its Discontents*. In it, Freud embarks on an exploration of the aggressive drive, the drive that is "the derivative and the main representative of the death drive" (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 122, modified) and whose goal is the destruction of the object. Not only, says Freud, is the aggressive drive "original" and "self-subsisting"—i.e., there is an "inborn human inclination to aggressiveness and destructiveness" (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 120)—but, insofar as the aggressive drive is directed at the outside world, it constitutes "the greatest impediment to civilization" (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 122). What this means, and Freud does not mince words here, is that human beings are not warm and fuzzy creatures who just want to be loved. They are creatures endowed with a powerful share of aggressiveness and destructiveness. Our neighbor may be someone who comes to our aid or attracts us, but "he" may also be "someone who tempts [us] to satisfy [our] aggressiveness on him, to exploit his capacity for work without compensation, to use him sexually without his consent, to seize his possessions, to humiliate him, to cause him pain, to torture and to kill him" (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 111). We are a long way from Mister Rogers's "It's a beautiful day in the neighborhood."

Thus, when "Christianity. . .puts. . .forward" the commandment to "love one's neighbor as oneself" "as its proudest claim" (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 109),³ Freud must protest. Nothing runs more "counter to the original nature of man" (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 112); no demand could be more impossible to satisfy. And just in case the command to "love thy neighbor as thyself" were not bad enough, Freud mentions another, one that strikes him as "even more incomprehensible" (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 110), even more irreconcilable with the psychological truth of the death drive than the first. And that is the command to "Love thine enemy."⁴ What could be more ridiculous, more preposterous, more laughable than

such an injunction? “Love thine enemies. . .?!” , we can hear Freud’s incredulous gasp, “You must be joking! *Dass ich nicht lache!*”

Freud does not say this literally, of course, but there is something about the evocation of “conventional Christian values” (Roazen 1975, p. 24), about the “*Credo quia absurdum*” (Freud [1927] 1961, p. 28) of the early Church Fathers, that brings out the Heine in Freud. All at once, *mit einem Schlage*, the Heine joke is there. Following the mention of “Love thine enemies”, which is both the same as and worse than “Love thy neighbor as thyself”, a Heine joke suddenly pops into his head and on to the page, as a footnote:

A great imaginative writer may permit himself to give expression—jokingly, at all events—to psychological truths that are severely proscribed. Thus Heine confesses: “Mine is a most peaceable disposition. My wishes are a humble cottage with a thatched roof, but a good bed, good food, the freshest milk and butter, flowers before my window, and a few fine trees before my door; and if God wants to make my happiness complete, he will grant me the joy of seeing some six or seven of my enemies hanging from those trees. Before their death I shall, moved in my heart, forgive them all the wrong they did me in their lifetime. One must, it is true, forgive one’s enemies—but not before they have been hanged”. (Freud [1930] 1961, p. 110n1)

It would seem, in other words, that what elicits this cynical joke, in which a great imaginative writer bolsters Freud’s theory of the death drive, is the absurdity—the risibility—of the demands of Christianity. “I’ll be hanged”, says the (Heine) joke, “if I let Christian dogma have the last word!”

In short—and here one cannot *not* think of Derrida’s analysis of Freud’s analysis of the death drive in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—Freud clearly takes pleasure in the theory of the death drive. In his *Life Death* seminar, Derrida playfully, crudely imagines Freud’s response to his detractors, to those would-be critics who will (and did) decry the idea of a death drive: “Screw you all [*allez-vous faire foutre*], I myself am rather pleased with this, the beyond of pleasure, that’s my pleasure [*tel est mon bon plaisir*]; the hypothesis of the death drive—that’s what I like, that’s what interests me” (Derrida 2020b, p. 280; 2019, p. 344). There is no need to excuse Derrida here—or rather to excuse his French. For the sudden appearance of Heine’s joke in *Civilization and Its Discontents* serves only to confirm Derrida’s reading. Though not, I would argue, without adding a new twist: what we learn from *Civilization and Its Discontents* is that Freud’s pleasure in the theory of the death drive is not just some run-of-the-mill pleasure: it is the pleasure he takes in this fundamentally *unchristian* line of thinking—and hang the consequences!

3. Learning the Ropes: Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious

But here we must take a step back in time. If this were an episode in a Netflix series, I would begin with the words “twenty-five years earlier” displayed prominently at the bottom of the screen. Such a banner would carry the reader-viewer back in time, but also suggest an inevitable sequence of events. Twenty-five years earlier, or twenty-five years before Freud tells his “death drive” joke in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud takes a crack at solving the problem of jokes or witticisms (*der Witz*) in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* (1905). This book, which I simply alluded to earlier in the list I gave of Freud’s works, actually contains as many Heine jokes, quips, verses, or witticisms as all the rest of Freud’s books put together. In his helpful “Index of Jokes”, at the end of *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious* in the Standard Edition, James Strachey puts the number of different Heine jokes in the Joke Book at nineteen (and this number does not include the dozen or so times that Freud returns to, in order to revisit, one of Heine’s jokes).

If Heine is everywhere in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, it is because his jokes are exemplary, absolutely exemplary. Freud has no sooner begun the Joke Book than “a brilliant joke of Heine’s” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 12) springs to mind. This “excellent and most amusing” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 16) joke not only gets the first laugh; it also immediately reappears in the very next chapter (four pages later), where it becomes the

example *par excellence* of the joke technique known as “condensation” (*Verdichtung*). And then, lo and behold, half-way through the very same chapter, another “excellent” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 48) Heine joke emerges as the prototype of the technique of “displacement” (*Verschiebung*). A quip from Heine is to be found in Freud’s discussion of double meaning, *double entendre*, allusion and analogy, and it is once again the poet’s wit that features prominently in Freud’s description of “unification”, particularly where unification makes use of the conjunction “and”:

If things are strung together...it implies that they are connected: we cannot help understanding it so. For instance, when Heine, speaking of the city of Göttingen...remarks: “Speaking generally, the inhabitants of Göttingen are divided into students, professors, philistines and donkeys”, we take this grouping in precisely the sense which Heine emphasizes in an addition to the sentence: “and these four classes are anything but sharply divided.” Or, again, when he speaks of the school in which he had to put up with “so much Latin, caning and Geography”, this series, which is made even more transparent by the position of “caning” between the two educational subjects, tells us that the unmistakable view taken by the schoolboy of the caning certainly extended to Latin and Geography as well. (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 69)

In other words, Freud appeals to the jokes of Heinrich Heine not just for grins and giggles. He appeals to them because they are models of technique. He turns to them in order to get the hang of how jokes work.

But technique alone is not what makes Heine’s jokes exemplary. As we will see, one of Heine’s jokes, the “famillionaire” joke, which is the single most cited joke in all of the Joke Book, does more than just provide an excellent example of the process of condensation. It also provides Freud with a case study of wit. The “famillionaire” joke is the only joke in *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, or in any of Freud’s books for that matter, that gives the father of psychoanalysis the chance to put a “great scoffer” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 142) on the couch. Heine’s “famillionaire” is the only joke that gives us a glimpse into the complicated subjective determinants of jokes; it is the only joke that demonstrates “so convincingly” the “soil [*Boden*] of...subjective emotion” from which a joke springs (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 142; [1905] 1940, p. 158). When it comes to the “famillionaire” joke, the Father of psychoanalysis can thank his lucky stars: “[i]t is a remarkable coincidence” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 140), Freud tells us, that precisely the example of the joke on which he began his investigation of technique should be the joke most accessible to analytic examination. Just as it will be a remarkable coincidence that Freud turns out to be so extraordinarily familiar with the Jewish poet’s biography.

As luck would have it, Lacan also makes great play of the “famillionaire” joke in his 1957–1958 seminar *Formations of the Unconscious* and returns to it again and again. “There is a marvelous quip [*un mot merveilleux*]”, he says, “that blossoms [*fleurit*] in the mouth of Hirsch-Hyacinth, a Jew from Hamburg, lottery ticket agent, hard-working and half starved, whom Heine encounters in the baths of Lucca” (Lacan 2017, p. 16, modified; 1998, p. 22). And, with his usual flourish, Lacan adds: “If you want to undertake a comprehensive reading of Freud’s *Witz*, you will need to read [Heine’s] *Reisebilder*, *Travel Pictures*. ...In it you will discover...this indescribable character” (Lacan 2017, p. 16). Hyacinth (formerly Hirsch) is a comic character who is “a great talker” and gives “the most amusing and plainspoken speeches” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 141). After such a build-up, I am afraid you may be a little disappointed; I am not sure Heine’s “famillionaire” joke possesses the “divine malice” (Nietzsche 2005, p. 91) of his “death-bed” or his “death-drive” joke. But I will let you be the judge. Here is how Freud tells the joke:

In the part of his *Reisebilder* entitled “Die Bäder von Lucca [The Baths of Lucca]” Heine introduces the delightful figure of the lottery-agent...Hirsch-Hyacinth of Hamburg who boasts to the poet of his relations with the wealthy Baron Rothschild, and finally say[s]: “And, as true as God shall grant me all good things, Doc-

tor, I sat beside Salomon Rothschild and he treated me quite as his equal—quite famillionairely [*ganz famillionär*]” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 16; [1905] 1940, p. 14)

Though the punchword, “famillionairely”, may not be hysterically funny, it does give us a clear picture of the mechanism of condensation.

Condensation, briefly, is the name of the process whereby an unspoken but implicit thought—“R. treated me quite *familiär* [familiarily], that is, so far as a *Millionär* [millionaire] can” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 19)—is converted into a joke by having its most important constituents, here the words *familiär* and *Millionär*, fused together. The phonemes *är* and *mili* are present in both words; things get compressed (Freud will even draw a picture) and—presto!—a funny composite word, *famillionär*, appears. This newly constructed word, says Freud, is the “vehicle of the joke’s laughter-compelling effect” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 20). Unintelligible in itself but immediately graspable in its context, the word *famillionär* is full of meaning. And what it means is this: “A rich man’s condescension. . .always involves something not quite pleasant for whoever experiences it” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 17).

Now, in Lacan’s translation of Heine’s joke, a funny thing happens. Lacan translates Heine’s adverbial creation, *ganz familiär*, in two different ways; he translates it both as “tout à fait famillionnairement [which would be the French equivalent of Strachey’s ‘quite famillionairely’]” and as “d’une façon tout à fait famillionnaire [in quite a famillionaire manner]” (Lacan 2017, p. 28). And if Lacan prefers the second (it is the translation he uses first and most often), it is because it facilitates and accelerates his own move to the substantive. After all, it is but one small step from *famillionnaire*—*d’une façon tout à fait famillionnaire* (“in quite a famillionaire manner”)—to *le famillionnaire*, “the famillionaire.” As Lacan argues: “It’s no longer a question just of ‘he welcomed me like an equal, completely famillionairely,’ but of the emergence of this fantastical and pathetic character that we call ‘the famillionaire [*le famillionnaire*]’” (Lacan 2017, p. 35). Lacan then makes great play of *le famillionnaire*. He transforms the substantive into its homonymic and untranslatable (French) equivalent: *le fat-millionnaire* (the smug millionaire). And then, circling back to Freud’s text, he points to Freud’s second example, which is another Heine witticism derived from the word *Millionär*. “[C]opying from himself”, says Freud, Heine creates another word, one “which is an obvious combination of ‘*Millionär* [millionaire]’ and ‘*Narr* [fool]’” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 20); and that word—a substantive, this time, just like Lacan’s *famillionnaire*—is *Millionarr* (the silly millionaire). The million-dollar question, of course—for both Freud and Lacan—is why Heine’s jokes should be so “marked by ‘millionarity’” (Lacan 2017, p. 46) in the first place.

Ultimately, Freud’s analysis of Heine’s “famillionaire” joke brings us back to the family and, even beyond the family, to a scene “at the family dinner-table [*an der Familientafel*]” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 141; [1905] 1940, p. 158). The family is of course the psychoanalytic scene *par excellence*, but here we must also remember that *familiär*—the first word of the joke, the word that disappears, as it were, when the term *famillionär* comes on the scene—also means “belonging to the family” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 17n1). To do things *aus familiären Gründen* is to do them “for family reasons.” Thus, if there is something about *familiär* that gets repressed, it is, as always—and in this case *literally*—a “family” conflict.

To be clear: when the question is family, we are no longer talking about Hirsch-Hyacinth, but about his creator, Heinrich Heine. As we will see from Freud’s analysis, Hirsch-Hyacinth’s witticism is, genetically, a product of Heine’s “subjective emotion” (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 142). Behind Heine’s fiction is his family, behind his parody a “self-parody”:

There are not a few passages in which the poet himself seems to be speaking, under a thin disguise, through the mouth of Hirsch-Hyacinth, and it soon becomes a certainty that this character is only a self-parody [*Selbstparodie*]. Hirsch explains his reasons for having given up his former name and why he now calls himself “Hyacinth.” He goes on: “There’s the further advantage that I already have an “H” on my signet, so that I don’t need to have a new one cut.” But Heine himself effected the same economy when, at his baptism [at the age of 27, baptism being,

in Heine's own words, "the entrance ticket to European culture" (Sammons 1979, p. 109)] he changed his first name from "Harry" to "Heinrich." Everyone, too, who is familiar with the poet's biography, will recall that Heine had an uncle of the same name in Hamburg (a place which provides another connection with the figure of Hirsch-Hyacinth) who, as the rich man of the family, played a large part in his life. This uncle was also called "Salomon", just like the old Rothschild who treated Heine so famillionairely. What seemed in Hirsch-Hyacinth's mouth no more than a jest soon reveals a background of serious bitterness if we ascribe it to the nephew, Harry-Heinrich. After all, he was one of the family, and we know that he had a burning wish to marry a daughter of this uncle's; but his cousin rejected him, and his uncle always treated him a little famillionairely, as a poor relation. His rich cousins in Hamburg never took him seriously. (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 141; [1905] 1940, p. 157)

Having been rejected for the essentially famillionaire reason that he is not a millionaire, the poet is filled with bitterness—"serious bitterness", "unmistakable bitterness", (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 141, p. 17). And the moneybags responsible is Salomon, not Salomon Rothschild, but Uncle Salomon: Salomon Heine. If you look up "Salomon Heine" on Wikipedia, you will find this sentence, which is almost too good to be true: "[b]ecause of his wealth—by the time of his death his estate was estimated at €110 million, [Salomon Heine] was called [the] 'Rothschild of Hamburg.'" ⁵ Indeed, the city itself became the butt of Heine's satire and scorn, as a result of the association with Salomon Heine; "Vile Macbeth does not rule here in Hamburg: the ruler here is *Banko*" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 36).

But Freud does not end his psychobiographical analysis with the bad behavior of the rich cousins. He goes on to describe the bad behavior of his old aunt.

I recall a story told by an old aunt of my own, who had married into the Heine family, how one day, when she was an attractive young woman, she found sitting next to her at the family dinner-table a person who struck her as uninviting and whom the rest of the company treated contemptuously. She herself felt no reason to be any more affable towards him. It was only many years later that she realized that this negligent and neglected cousin had been the poet Heinrich Heine. There is not a little evidence to show how much Heine suffered both in his youth and later from this rejection by his rich relations. It was from this soil [*auf dem Boden*] of the subjective emotion that the "famillionairely" joke sprang. (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 141–42; [1905] 1940, pp. 157–58)

By all accounts, it is an ugly scene, one that is made all the uglier by the collusion of a pretty young thing. That such a scene should have taken place at the family dinner table, at what could have/should have been a place of friendliness and intimacy, seems only to add insult to injury. Unless, that is, it is Heine who, by producing a joke, ingenuously, playfully, humorously, turns the table(s) on his family. According to such a reading, Heine's "famillionaire" joke would be a kind of poetic justice, one in which Uncle Salomon gets his just deserts. Although Heine does not venture to declare aloud and openly that "[a] rich man's condescension... always involves something not quite pleasant for whoever experiences it", the strength of the joke lies in the fact that nonetheless—in a roundabout, self-parodying way—he *does* declare it. In short, the *rich* soil of Heine's bitterness will have prepared the ground for the marvelous quip that blossoms in Hyacinth's mouth.

With this *bon mot* from Hyacinth—the comic character who changes his name because "Hirsch is a Jewish word" and reminds him too much of his "old Jewish faith" (Heine 2008, p. 127)—Christian Johann Heinrich Heine, born Harry Heine, evinces the strongest *distaste* for his Jewish family.

4. Jews and Jokes

But Heine's joke, we must remember, is the exception. Since most jokes are circulated anonymously, it is almost never possible to establish the motive force for the production of an individual joke: "We can only succeed here and there in advancing from an under-

standing of a particular joke to a knowledge of the subjective determinants in the mind of the person who made it" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 140). And this is true even in context of Heine's jokes. Freud tells us that the "famillionaire" joke is itself unique in this way: "The presence of similar subjective determinants may be suspected in some other of the great scoffer's jokes: but I know of no other in which the case can be demonstrated so convincingly" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 142). Only in the case of the "famillionaire" joke can such complicated, personal determinants be established with any certainty.

And yet, immediately following his analysis of the "famillionaire" joke, Freud makes what, to my mind, is an amazing association. Having just concluded that it is "not easy" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 142) to say anything more precise about the personal determinants involved in the production of jokes—the jury is out, for example, as to whether one must be "a disunited personality" or have "a psychoneurotic constitution" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 142) in order to be funny—Freud points to what seems to be, I think we could call it, a "family resemblance." Heine's "famillionaire" joke calls to mind not another joke, but a whole category of jokes, not a witty person, but a witty *people*. I mean, of course, the Jewish people. Freud may have been disinclined in general to specify the "subjective condition for the construction of jokes" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 142), but when it comes to the Jews, the Father of psychoanalysis throws caution to the wind:

A more transparent case [of the subjective factors favoring the production of jokes] is offered. . . by the Jewish jokes [*Judenwitze*], which, as I have already mentioned, are ordinarily made by Jews themselves [*von Juden selbst gemacht*]. . . What determines their participating in the jokes themselves seems to be the same as in the case of Heine's "famillionairely" joke [the German *Selbstbeteiligung* is a little hard to translate here: it is a kind of "self-staging"; the Jews are party to, participants in, implicated in, their own jokes]; and its significance seems to lie in the fact that the person concerned finds criticism or aggressiveness difficult so long as they are direct, and possible only along circuitous paths. (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 142; [1905] 1940, p. 159)

Jewish jokes are like Heine's "famillionaire" joke. Like Heine's self-parody (*Selbstparodie*), Jewish self-staging (*Selbstbeteiligung*) would serve the purpose of indirect criticism or aggressiveness.

But if Jews are so funny—"I do not know whether there are many other instances of a people making fun to such a degree of its own character" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 112)—and if so many of the most excellent jokes have "grown up on the soil [*auf dem Boden*] of Jewish. . . life" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 111; [1905] 1940, p. 123), it is not only because of their "manifold and hopeless miseries" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 114). It is also because, once again, their aggressive drive has failed to conform to the Gospels (Matthew 5: 39 and Luke 6: 29 this time); Jews "have not yet got so far as to be able to love [their] enemies or to offer [their] left cheek after being struck on the right" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 102). In what is yet another "remarkable coincidence", Freud invokes these all-too-Christian commands in the lead-up to his discussion of cynical—which, for the most part, are Jewish—jokes, indeed the last of which is Heine's "death bed" joke.

Once again, it would seem, the Jewish "family" has the last word. Whether we are talking about the family of Uncle Salomon and the rich Hamburg cousins, Freud's own extended family, or the "family" constituted by the "Jews themselves", the joke remains solidly rooted in the Jewish "family." If this were a Netflix series, the final episode would have to be called "All in the Family", and it would end with Sigismund Freud putting Harry Heine on the couch. I say this not in order to make you laugh (although "Sigismund" seems to have been the name of "a stereotypic Jewish character in anti-Jewish Viennese jokes" [Oring 1984, p. 24]). I say this because there is something rich about a joke that, predicated on the repression of *familiär* ("family"), culminates in a historic, Jewish family reunion. It is as if the "old Jewish faith", the very thing that Hyacinth "wouldn't wish. . . on [his] worst enemy" (Heine 2008, p. 127) had, by some remarkable coincidence, come back to bite Hirsch-Harry in the heinie. As if the joke were on the joke.

And yet, it is not only the relation of jokes to Jewishness that is at issue here; at issue is also the relation of Jewishness to jokes. For it would seem that the very question of Jewishness emerges, in Freud's texts, as a joke. That is to say, Jewishness enters psychoanalytic theory (whether it is the theory of the death drive or the theory of jokes) by way of the joke. Is Jewishness a joke, then (and please let us not confuse Jewishness with Judaism, with Moses and monotheism)? I certainly do not mean to be facetious here; there is nothing more serious than a joke; nothing tells us more about our internal inhibitions than the jokes we (re)tell, or the jokes that make us laugh: "every joke calls for a public of its own and laughing at the same jokes is evidence of far-reaching psychical conformity" (Freud [1905] 1960, p. 151). If Freud finds the "famillionaire" joke so hilarious—as he certainly seems to have done—it is because Sigismund shares with Harry something of the same repression.

Now, I am not going to put the Father of psychoanalysis on the couch. Instead, I am going to suggest that we complete the "family" portrait. For, in the context of conflict and the repression of drives, we must not forget the Oedipal "family", that is to say, the "family" that is forever associated with the father of psychoanalysis. But you certainly do not need to take my word for it. Here is Heine's biographer: "[W]ithout wishing to tread too bravely on psychoanalytic ground, I do think it reasonable to conclude that Heine was spared a critical confrontation with his own father because his father's authority and dignity were displaced by the sheer force of Uncle Salomon" (Sammons 1979, p. 30). In short, the Jewish family is also an Oedipal family (which, I suppose, makes it "Jewgreek" or "Greekjew"). In a way, of course, the Oedipus complex brings us back to the theory; it brings us back to the science of psychoanalysis. At the same time, it reminds us that, with the "the Jewish poet Heine" (Freud [1939] 1964, p. 30n2), Freud can have it all: his science of psychoanalysis and his Jewish jokes too.

And speaking of "having it all", I would like to end with a funny story about translation. It is a story about James Strachey's desire to inoculate the science of psychoanalysis against "the thousand-year-old family disease", to quote Heine's dysphemism for Jewishness (Sammons 1979, p. 25). What happened was this: On 9 October 1924, James Strachey and Ernest Jones, the Englishman and the Welshman (which is already the beginning of a joke), got into an argument—they had a bit of a dustup—over the translation of Freud's *Das Ich und das Es*. Later that day, James Strachey memorialized the dispute in a letter. From this letter, we learn not only how infuriating Strachey found Jones to be; we also learn how "discreet" he remained about the fundamental translation decisions involving the Standard Edition "once these decisions had been made" (Ornston 1992, p. 108). Discreet, that is, except in this letter to his wife and fellow translator, Alix Strachey. I should also mention that, were it not for this letter, the decision to translate *das Es* as "the id" would almost certainly have been pinned on Strachey—along with the decision to translate *Trieb* as "instinct" and *Besetzung* as "cathexis."

But Strachey, both Stracheys in fact,⁶ took exception to the translation of *Es* as "id." And they were not the only ones. It turns out that John Rickman and Leonard Woolf—who was publishing the Standard Edition at the Hogarth Press at the time—also "favored 'The I and the It' instead of Ernest Jones's... 'The Ego and the Id'" (Ornston 1992, p. 108). In short, Ernest Jones (and Joan Riviere) were responsible for the translation we know and have come to accept. Writing to Alix on 9 October 1924, however, Strachey had not yet reconciled himself to "the id" and lashes out at Jones:

Dearest Alix. You won't get this till your return from Würzburg. . . .

I had a very tiresome hour with Jones & Mrs Riviere from 2 to 3 today. The little beast (if I may venture so to describe him) is really most irritating. However, I hope I preserved my suavity. . . .

They want to call "das Es" "the Id." I said I thought everyone would say "the Yidd [sic]" [it follows, I suppose, that Freud's book would have been called not *The Ego and the Id* but *The Ego and the Yid*]. So Jones said there was no such word

in English: “There’s ‘Yiddish,’ you know. And in German ‘Jude.’ But there is no such word as ‘Yidd.’” –“Pardon me, doctor, Yidd is a current slang for the word for a Jew [in 2023, I think we can say that it is not only slang, it also very derogatory slang, except of course if you are a Tottenham Hotspurs fan!]-“Ah! A slang expression. It cannot be in very widespread use then.” –Simply because that l.b. [little beast] hasn’t ever heard it. (Strachey and Strachey 1985, p. 83)

I don’t mean to shock you with Strachey’s language (since I am myself short and Jewish, I think I can get away with quoting these lines). Instead, I would like to suggest that, however questionable Strachey’s motives may have been, his “joke” could not be more apt. Not in a million years could one ever hope to find a more literal enactment of the relationship between Jewishness and jokes in Freud’s work. Strachey may not have intended his jeer to be a joke—his intention may simply have been to cut the little beast down to size. And yet, unconsciously, unwittingly, his linguistic play allows Jewishness to enter into the very terminology—the structural theory—of psychoanalysis almost literally as a joke. We cannot *not* marvel at such a quip, one that says “Jewishness in Freud’s theory is a joke” and, at the same time, provokes our laughter, leaving us to wonder whether it is not the “Jewish science” that has the last laugh.

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Notes

- ¹ In his “Contribution to a Questionnaire on Reading”, Freud also names two “favorite books”: “Milton’s *Paradise Lost* and Heine’s *Lazarus*” (Freud [1907] 1959, p. 245).
- ² See, for example, the wonderfully cynical joke with which Michael Levine opens his *Writing Through Repression*: “When the German governments responded to the revolutions of 1848 by rescinding the censorship laws, the exiled poet Heinrich Heine exclaimed: ‘Ach! I can’t write anymore. How can I write when there’s no longer any censorship? How should a man who’s always lived with censorship suddenly be able to write without it? All style will cease, the whole grammar, the good habits!’” (Levine 1994, p. 1). Amusingly, Derrida says very similar—Heine-like!—things when speaking of the ordeal of his training in “*Bâtons rompus*”: “[T]he liberties that I take, and everything that I allow myself to do to language presupposes a superego and a purism. . . that I have never lost. *I am in favor of spelling* [*Je suis pour l’orthographe*]. . . In a way, I think the difficulties we are having today . . . come from the loss of this superego, of these exigencies, of what I am calling, by metonymy, ‘spelling’. . . I am against licentiousness. I am for austerity. And for severity” (Derrida and Cixous 2009, pp. 197–99). Is there not something incredibly funny about the philosopher of impurity expressing a hyperbolic taste for purity, austerity, severity (spelling!) and railing against (orthographic?) licentiousness?
- ³ Mark 12: 31.
- ⁴ Matthew 5: 44; Luke 6: 27.
- ⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Salomon_Heine, accessed on 22 December 2022.
- ⁶ Alix and James Strachey were clearly in agreement on this point. In her letter of 19 January 1925 to James, Alix returns to the translation question: “By the way, I hope to God the *Es* isn’t really going to be the *Id*?” (Strachey and Strachey 1985, p. 176).

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