

“An Oedipus for Our Time”

On the Un-Discipline of Historical Relations

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ON A LAZY SUMMER DAY IN JULY, a newspaper headline caught many Canadians by surprise. Splashed across the front pages of national and local newspapers were photographs of three teens urinating on the Ottawa War Memorial in the midst of Canada Day festivities. A war veteran, retired Major Michael Pilon, snapped the pictures. In the days following the incidents, the public temperature soared; outraged veterans, citizens, and Canada’s Prime Minister expressed their strong disapproval of the flagrant disrespect the actions represent.¹ In addition to calls for increased protection of the Memorial, the press and public evoked education. Questions were raised about why students do not know more about the past and how improved historical literacy might prevent crises of this sort in the future.² Whereas discussions in history education tend to focus on the adequacy of historical pedagogy to address the problem of learning (or not learning), there is still the question of how to make sense of the psychical complexities that crop up in encounters with historical representations, and specifically, when youth come into conflict with markers that gesture toward a time before their own. Keeping in mind the importance of improving students’ historical literacy, I wish to explore additional terms for understanding why dismissing the past, and toying with its destruction, may be a paradoxical form of engagement, especially where adolescents are concerned. Psychoanalytically, encounters with history’s material traces cannot be read as separate from internal traces of psychical conflict that make up the archive of the human mind.

Drawing on Sigmund Freud, I explore the first, and arguably most debated conflict of psychoanalytic theory—the Oedipus complex—to highlight both destructive and reparative impulses as central to inter-generational relationships and to the work of becoming a historical subject. The Oedipus complex is how Freud described the childhood wish to do away with one parent and to possess the (m)other all to oneself. These desires set into motion an opposing dynamic, or “incest taboo” that Freud (1905) defined as “a cultural requirement of society” that prohibits the enactment of what is forbidden (p. 202). The Oedipus complex is successfully resolved, Freud argued, when the child internalizes cultural prohibitions represented by the parents in the development of the super-ego, or conscience, and that are upheld by social

structures: moral proscriptions, morés and, more generally, the law. Although the Oedipus complex has been criticized for the way it privileges false notions of “natural” gendered behaviours or sexual attachments, a number of theorists have creatively re-read Freud’s use of the Oedipal narrative for meanings that stretch beyond these rigid beginnings (Anderegg, 2006; Britzman, 2006a, 2006b; Lear, 1998, 2005; Young, 2001). I, too, offer a re-reading of the Oedipus complex to highlight the ambivalent quality of relations between generations and within historical encounters. Reading the Ottawa incidents through this Oedipal lens highlights a return of aggressive feelings of rivalry towards one’s parents: now, in adolescence, directed against the culture, or the symbol of “fatherland” of which the parents are a part.

An Un-Easy Beginning: Killing off Oedipus

Freud made reference to Oedipal feelings as early as 1897 in the form of a letter to his friend Wilhem Fleiss. In the letter, Freud explains the “gripping power” of Sophocles’s play as evidence of our universal human psychology. (It is precisely this claim of universality that would soon become, for many critics, Freud’s own tragic flaw.) With reference to *Oedipus Rex*, Freud writes to his good friend:

I have found love of the mother and jealousy of the father in my own case too, and now believe it to be a general phenomenon of early childhood....If that is the case, the gripping power of *Oedipus Rex*...becomes intelligible...The Greek myth seizes on a compulsion which everyone recognizes because he has felt traces of it in himself. Every member of the audience was once a budding Oedipus in phantasy, and this dream-fulfillment played out in reality causes everyone to recoil in horror, with the full measure of repression which separates his infantile from his present state. (Freud, 1897, p. 223)

Freud reasoned that ancient *Oedipus Rex* compels modern audiences because it represents the fulfillment of a forbidden wish already contained “though suppressed” within the human mind (Freud, 1900, p. 365).³

While in 1908 Freud had referred to a “nuclear complex” in his *On the Sexual Theories of Children* (p. 192), the first published reference to the “Oedipus complex” came in 1910 in his essay, “A Special Object-Choice Made by Men.” With specific reference to the little boy child, Freud writes: “He begins to desire his mother herself in the [sexual] sense with which he as recently become acquainted, and to hate his father anew as a rival who stands in the way of this wish; he comes, as we say, under the dominance of the Oedipus complex” (1910a, p. 238).⁴ In this essay, Freud is describing the way in which the Oedipus complex persists in adulthood, and in particular, the lingering effect of this early complex in choices in love and in life. Freud also framed the Oedipus complex developmentally in his stage-theory of psychosexual growth. Within this framework, Freud argued that all humans begin with a primary narcissism and then pass through psychosexual stages (oral, anal, phallic and genital) in which desire finds satisfaction in different bodily sites or erogenous zones. Freud suggested that children, somewhere between three and a half and six years old, have unconscious sexual feelings toward one parent (in the classic model, this is the parent of the opposite sex) and must come to terms with the prohibition against acting on these feelings (here again is the “incest taboo”). The crisis of childhood—and later analysts would add infancy and adolescence—is what to do with Oedipal desires. Put simply, the challenge is to find socially acceptable ways to satisfy forbidden desires. Jonathan Lear (2005) describes this Oedipal challenge in the form of the question: “How

do I, as a psycho-sexual being, enter society?” (p. 181). The answer comes with a cost. We learn we must follow certain rules in the name of social decency or culture. These are the “discontents” of “civilization” (Freud, 1930).

Freud has been criticized for his choice of the Oedipus myth in making such grand claims about human experience. The main thrust of the critiques is that Freud misread his patients by describing their symptoms in terms of the (gendered/sexed) Oedipal plotline that he wanted and expected to find (Benzaquén, 1998; Boldt, 2002; Fletcher, 1989; Mitchell, 2000; Smith & Ferstman, 2005).⁵ Lear (1998) goes back even farther than this, claiming that Freud misread Sophocles from the beginning. Lear argues that the ancient tale suggests nothing of the unconscious motives Freud attributed to the plot’s unfolding:

Oedipus does kill his father, marry his mother, and have children with her. But none of this can be used to support Freud’s reading; these are facts his account is supposed to explain. Freud needs to show that these events occur because Oedipus has oedipal wishes. Not only does Freud make no effort to do so—he simply points to the Oedipus myth—there are in the text no hints of oedipal wishes. (p. 40)

For Lear, the Oedipus myth reveals less about a child’s wishes (which was Freud’s claim) and more about Freud himself as a child of modernity. Freud’s coming of age in this historical context may have had something to do with his decision to re-direct the external forces (such as the two oracles) that dominate the myth to *internal* forces that dominated the scientific discourse of his time. In light of this and other critiques, Lear wonders whether we can even continue to read Oedipus in Freud’s sense of the term. In fact, he suggests that any future inquiry of Oedipus must begin in “true Oedipal fashion:” by killing off Freud’s Oedipus (Lear, 1998, p. 33).

Taken literally, killing off Freud’s Oedipus would most likely mean eliminating it entirely from the field of psychoanalytic interpretation. But Lear’s suggestion is not as drastic as the literal translation would imply. Lear is calling for a symbolic murder of Oedipus: a re-interpretation of the narrative that draws out meanings that Freud himself could not see. For instance, Lear (1998) re-reads Sophocles’s text as a parable, a cautionary tale, which highlights a tragic flaw of “knowingness” in contemporary political life. The flaw refers to the human tendency to buy into notions of truth and certainty that turn a blind eye on the more difficult and contradictory qualities of psychical life, qualities such as aggression, or fear, or narcissism, or helplessness. Drawing on Oedipus, Lear offers a theory of knowledge that challenges us to acknowledge these qualities of psychical life that “we” would rather attribute to “others” or “them.” Thinking with Lear on the tragic flaw of “knowingness” and what it forgets, it is important to remember that Oedipus sought to find the murderer of King Laius even as he resisted the many clues that would connect him with the murder. To persist in “knowingness” blinds us to our implication in the world and in the lives of others, much like Oedipus himself.

Writing in the context of education, Alice J. Pitt and Deborah Britzman (2003) draw on Oedipus to explore the ways in which knowledge about the world is intimately tied up in the learner’s internal world of conflict, where “the means of knowing cannot be separated from one’s own libidinal history of learning” (p. 756). The implication here is that efforts to make meaning from knowledge cannot be determined by pedagogy alone because they are also effects of a libidinal history (i.e., the Oedipal conflict) that exceeds conscious effort or cognitive ability. Framed Oedipally, learning is made from a dual desire to know and not to know, simultaneously. Discussions of Oedipus in education, then, uncover the conflicts and contradictory meanings at

work in efforts to know. What becomes possible is a study of the uncertainties and ambiguities of human responses that complicate any simple formulation of learning as a linear, one-way street” (Ellsworth, 1997, p. 50). Lear, Britzman, and Pitt share in common the creative use of Freud’s Oedipus, a “killing off” that paradoxically enlivens the narrative and so our capacity to notice unconscious dynamics which, while “written in invisible ink,” nonetheless colour our perceptions of and responses to the outside world (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 761).

Following these theorists before me, I offer a re-reading of Oedipus as it is enacted in Freud’s late paper, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis” (1936). This paper offers a way of thinking about Oedipus not only as a narrative of internal conflict but also as a narrative of inter-generational conflict that has implications for understanding the crises of authority and resistance implied in encounters with historical representation. In this view, historical symbols, and especially *monumental* forms, may be viewed as a “stage” upon which competing generational claims are acted out. On the one hand, there is the Oedipal wish to defeat the law (and land) of father and on the other hand, there is the moral demand *not* to defeat him, to preserve and to repeat traditions that are passed down to us. If the Oedipal narrative is relevant for “our time,” it is because it offers a way of thinking about the psychological conflicts of inter-generational relations as a significant feature of historical learning. This psychoanalytic insight offers a provocation for history education. Here, the problem of learning is less about cognition and more about how one comes to tolerate the difficult and yet ubiquitous trauma of having to inherit a world before one’s own and that is not of one’s own making.

Disturbing Acropolis

Freud’s paper, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis” is an open letter to his good friend Romain Rolland. The letter details the emotional events of a voyage Freud took to the Acropolis with his younger brother twenty years earlier. After a series of interruptions, Freud and brother Alexander finally arrived at the base of the enormous artifact. Once there, Freud (1936) recalls feeling a strange sensation of “de-realization,” a paradoxical feeling of disbelief in the face of reality: “By evidence of my senses I am now standing on the Acropolis, but I cannot believe it” (p. 452). Something was blocking Freud’s full apprehension of the artifact before his eyes. Freud is puzzled by all this, so puzzled that it continues to pre-occupy him for at least twenty years. In the end, Freud (1936) comes to the view that de-realization, the feeling of unreality, was a defense against not only the reality of the Acropolis but also against his realization of his fantasy to travel there: “It seemed to me beyond the realms of possibility that I should travel so far—that I should ‘go such a long way’” (p. 455). In other words, Freud (1936) surmises that in realizing his wish to travel he had fulfilled some aspect of the forbidden Oedipal fantasy:

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 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. (p. 455)

In traveling further than his father, Freud was shaken by feelings of Oedipal triumph. Freud (1936) elaborates this point with a personal anecdote that highlights how social context affects the manifestation of the Oedipus conflict:

The very theme of Athens and the Acropolis itself contained evidence of the sons' superiority. Our father had been in business, and he had no secondary education, and Athens could not have meant that much to him. Thus, what interfered with our enjoyment of the journey to Athens was a feeling of piety. (p. 456)

Both the voyage and the artifact itself embodied elements of Oedipal conflict: The unconscious wish to surpass the father (the "sons' superiority") and the opposite impulse to *not* surpass him. Freud's identification with Oedipus on the Acropolis was, it seems, quite clear.

But there is more, for Freud's paper ends on a note that opens up the Oedipal narrative to something more than a theory of conflict of internal conquest and guilt. In the last line of the paper, Freud (1936) switches his identification to take on the position of the father, who is now vulnerable to his sons. He writes: "...I myself have grown old and stand in need of forbearance and can travel no more" (p. 456). Now occupying the position of the father, Freud turns Oedipus on its head, highlighting the dynamics of vulnerability and forbearance that constitute the other side of the conflict. David Anderegg (2006) imagines his way into Freud's mind to highlight precisely these dynamics:

I, the great Sigmund Freud, who once triumphed so decisively over my ignorant father, am now that ignorant father. And, by implication, I can no longer understand my sons. And, again by implication: I hope they do not utterly discard me, the way I did not utterly discard my father. (p. 414)

With this subtle but significant change of identification, the Oedipal conflict not only refers to an internal complex but also to the conflicted quality of inter-generational relations. The specific content of generational conflict may change depending, of course, on the historical and cultural context in which they are located (Strenger, 2004). But whatever the period of time and the content of its preoccupations, the point here is that knowledge is mediated through a loop of competing generational claims, where the demand to preserve what is given inspires youthful resistance and where that resistance fuels the demand to preserve what is given (Anderegg, 2006; see also Gollard, 2005).

Thinking with both Freud (1936) and Anderegg (2006), I think the Acropolis paper is remarkable for the way it brings inter-generational conflict to the fore of historical encounters, whether at the Acropolis or on Parliament Hill. Through the lens of Oedipus, we might ask new questions about the status of conflict at play in that now infamous encounter: Why might youth be so dismissive of the past? What is the anxiety or taboo surrounding markers of national history? Are the Ottawa incidents "unrepresentative" of Canadian youth (as prime minister Stephen Harper alleges)⁶ or might they reveal the rather ubiquitous emotional conflicts that bind generations? Could it be that the events in Ottawa touched a nerve, in part, because they resonated at the level of the Oedipal? With these questions, I would like to return to the incidents at the Ottawa War Memorial as offering a present-day example of the Oedipus myth, what Lear (1998) calls, "an Oedipus for our time" (p. 33). From an Oedipal perspective, historical representation is not an immovable edifice, nor a set of facts to be acquired; it is rather a relational concept animated by and radically vulnerable to conflicts between identity and generation, self and elder, and past and future. And it is these conflicts that disturb the clean edges of monumental forms of historical representation.

Uncanny Returns: Oedipus in Adolescence, Oedipus in Ottawa

Before contemporary re-workings of the Oedipus narrative (such as those offered by Lear and Britzman), the child analysts had already enacted their own movement of “killing off” Freud’s classical use of the tale. They located the conflict both earlier in life (for Melanie Klein, in infancy) and later (for Anna Freud and D.W. Winnicott, in adolescence). Anna Freud (1958) argued that through emotional extremes—between wanting to belong and wanting to be autonomous, for instance—the adolescent tried to resolve, sometimes quite messily, the Oedipal problem of how to how to enter society as a psycho-sexual being. In “Adolescent Immaturity,” D.W. Winnicott (1968) reminds us that the adolescent experiences her or his Oedipal entrance as inherently aggressive, for it means, at the level of the unconscious, taking the place of the parent:

Even when growth at the period of puberty goes ahead without major crisis, one may need to deal with problems of management because growing up means taking the parent’s place. *It really does*. In the unconscious fantasy, growing up is inherently an aggressive act. And the child is now no longer child-size. (p. 144, original emphasis)

“No longer child-size,” the adolescent now has the capacity to act out and not simply imagine these destructive fantasies. These destructive fantasies are not only a menace to others but also to the developing ego, for they bring one into close proximity with one’s own capacity for disintegration (this is Freud’s (1920) controversial “death drive”). Under the threat of disintegration, the ego splits the outside world into “good” and “bad” parts (or parents). The threat of ego-disintegration (the “badness” within) now belongs to the outside world that one rails against (Freud, 1920; see also Lear, 2005).

Winnicott (1968) takes this argument further and argues that the adolescent cannot see beyond the immediacy of the present, much like Oedipus himself:

[I]t takes years for the development in an individual of a capacity to discover in the self the balance of the good and the bad, the hate and the destruction that go with love, within the self. In this sense, maturity belongs to later life, and the adolescent cannot be expected to see beyond the next stage, which belongs to the early twenties. (p. 164)

The adolescent cannot “see beyond the next stage” and so is mired in a childhood conflict still without the resources—such as balance or perspective—that Winnicott associates with “later life.” But part of what distinguishes childhood and adolescence is that adolescent Oedipal dynamics find expression in the social realm, not solely in the context of the immediate family. Donald Meltzer (1989) makes precisely this point in suggesting that teenage rebellion (whether in the form of violence or fashion) poses a twofold challenge: “Not only...a rebellion against or criticism of their original families in particular, but against the culture of which their parents were exemplary” (p. 566). At stake in this second layer of aggression is not only the authority of the family but also the very ideas of culture and history. From this vantage, desecrating the War Monument in Ottawa may indeed have been a flagrant sign of disrespect for the nation’s veterans (as the newspapers charged), but it may also be read as a form of rebellion against the authority of the father (and the “culture” in which they are exemplary) that marks growing up.⁷

To this point, Winnicott (1968) adds a curious statement about why, under the condition of Oedipal return, historical knowledge may not enjoy an important “place” in the adolescent’s

mind. And in so doing, Winnicott articulates what seems to be the history teacher's worst nightmare:

[I]t cannot be expected that, at the age of adolescence, the average boy or girl has more than an inkling of man's cultural heritage, for one must work hard at this even to know about it. At sixty years old, these who are boys and girls now will be breathlessly making up for lost time in the pursuit of riches that belong to civilization and its accumulated by-products. (p. 165)

At a basic level, Winnicott lends support to the theory that the incidents in Ottawa represented a glaring lack of knowledge on the part of Canadian youth. According to Winnicott, to expect otherwise is a projection of the adult's anxieties and hopes. But Winnicott is also saying something about the relation between the destructive wishes of adolescence and the ego's developing awareness of objects (and others) as existing in historical time. Here I am reminded of a Juliet Mitchell's (1986) puzzling statement: "...because of the Oedipus and castration complexes, only humans have yesterdays" (p. 26). Psychically speaking, it is the Oedipal destruction of an object and its survival that inaugurates the idea of that object's continuity of existence in history. And in this regard, I think it is important to remember that the Ottawa War Memorial *did* indeed survive.

But if the boys in Ottawa got carried away with Oedipal aggression, you will recall that Freud (1936) found something quite other—what he calls "filial piety"—in fulfilling his fantasy to travel to the Acropolis (p. 456). On this basis, we might say that the three boys in question *lacked* what Freud had found. That is, the boys seemed not to display the guilty feelings needed to interrupt the Oedipal wish to unseat the father.⁸ And in this way, I think the disturbance of public memory in Ottawa comes too dangerously close to Oedipal triumph. Even more, in their disturbance of public memory, the three young men may have achieved the ultimate narcissism: to make *themselves* unforgettable. As Phillips (1998) writes: "To humiliate someone is to make oneself unforgettable, a malign way of keeping a place in someone's mind" (p. 100). But if the boys in Ottawa swayed too far on the side of Oedipal victory, then it was the public—the veterans, police, and citizens—who took up the position of super-ego. Whether suggesting in jest that the boys clean all the public toilets in Ottawa or in a more serious tone that they be sent to the front lines in Afghanistan, the public responded with a collective demand to reprimand the culprits and restore order to this site of national history and identity.

A related response came from Cliff Chadderton (2006), the Chairman of the National Council of Veteran Associations. In addition to the call for punishment, he requested protection and the intervention of public pedagogy. Specifically, Chadderton asked for the appointment of four representatives of the military to stand guard during the summer months, the construction of a chain fence around the threatened area, and the installation of information plaques to inform the public of the meaning of the Monument and nearby Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. In his public statement, Chadderton is quite clear that these suggestions are not only reasonable but also a matter of governmental obligation. And to this end, he cites three examples that illustrate, on an international scale, governmental commitment to the protection of military heritage and remains. These include the first unknown soldier of the British military in Westminster Abbey, the U.S. National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, and a tomb standing in Red Square in Moscow (once bearing the remains of Josef Stalin and later, other "heroes" of war) (Chadderton, 2006). New security measures address some of Chadderton's concerns including the installation

of surveillance cameras, a fully clad Queen's guard who stands at the base of the Monument, and tourism guides to educate tourists as they walk about the site.

The call for increased protection of the monument is indeed important. The narrative of Oedipus simply highlights the unconscious conflict that may fuel the urgency of this request. Re-reading Chadderton from an Oedipal perspective, I hear echoes of a mature Freud looking back on his Acropolis encounter. As you will recall, Freud (1936) ends the paper on a note that suggests a change in perspective from over-zealous Oedipus to the one now "in need of forbearance" (p. 456). In this late work, Freud's identifications seem to reside with the crumbling artifact—and indeed, his father—as he implicitly asks to be handled with restraint, with respect, and with care. A similar identification is implied in the veterans' call for protection of the memorial. They express a hope that youth not utterly discard their efforts the way they (and Freud) chose not to discard those before them. Ancient Oedipus not only makes an encore performance in youthful acts of aggression that challenge the law, but also in the opposing push to sustain society's most rigorously defended traditions and taboos. Sometimes, as was the case for Freud on the Acropolis, the "law of the Father" is triumphant, and youth can be stopped in one's tracks, feel guilty for going too far with their desires or for breaking with authority and tradition. Sometimes, as was the case for some of Canada's veterans, the "sons" come too close to Oedipal victory, and one can feel utterly vulnerable to the uncertain future of historical meaning. It is a vulnerability that can set into motion an opposing force, a "fever" for historical preservation (Derrida, 1995).

Oedipus Education

The Oedipus complex does not refer to a literal childhood experience. Nor should it be considered a psychological universal. Not all boys play out the drama as Sophocles wrote for the stage. Not all forms of the Oedipal conflict are expressed in the same way. Even more, not all boys will take historical symbols as their objects of love and hate. And the absence of girls in this complex does glare. But read metaphorically, Oedipus offers a language for thinking about some of the combustive tensions that arise when youth meet markers of history, before and in spite of pedagogical efforts. Oedipus, who killed his father and wed his mother, invites us to reflect on the difficult qualities of psychical life that we might prefer to forget or school away: aggression, fear, narcissism and helplessness. From an Oedipal perspective, we can expect that history will invoke destructive fantasies just as those fantasies will ignite the opposite force of preservation, hence the demands for protection and pedagogy in Ottawa. Psychoanalytically, the Ottawa incidents point not only to a glaring lack of knowledge about history but also the conflicts through which historical markers must pass and survive, if they are to be passed on.

In his study of the relationship between Freud and the discipline of history, Peter Gay (1985) situates Oedipus in the context of education when he describes the complex as a kind of school:

The Oedipus complex has been finely called a school for love; it may be called, with equal pertinence, a school for hatred. Both formulations appropriately stress its pedagogic function: the Oedipus complex is at best a *school*, a developmental phase that serves not merely to generate neurosis, but also to tame emotions and channel them into legitimate forms. It at once exposes the child to its passions and teaches it to cope with them. And it ramifies through the range of mental life from the childhood years on, leaving its traces in ambition and resignation, and in culture's most energetically defended taboos. (p. 95, original emphasis)

Oedipus “ramifies” in adolescent experiments with symbols of history as well as in our culture’s energetic defense of those symbols. Traces of Oedipus, its crisis, can be found in student responses—at times brash and other times un-assuming—to representations of a world before their own. Aligning the Oedipus complex with the concept of “school” does not mean we can do away with these and other conflicts with the right kind of knowledge or pedagogy. Rather, Oedipus asks us to re-think historical learning as itself a conflict: a continually negotiated tension between the childhood desire to make one’s mark on the world *and* the obligation to remember others who have done so already. To be sure, history education needs still to concern itself with questions of knowledge, pedagogy, and representation. Psychoanalysis dares us to notice how historical representation, such as the Ottawa War Memorial, is tangled up in unconscious conflicts that are both older than the headline news and more familiar than its rapt audience can bear to know.

NOTES

1. Public and press responses to the Ottawa events tend to include both a condemning and a correcting of this moral lack. A search for the men began as soon as the newspapers published the pictures. Almost as quickly, the Ottawa Police posted the newspaper mugs on their website along with the expressed intention to identify and arrest the young men pictured. A number of Canadians wrote letters to newspapers and telephoned in their opinions to radio stations, offering ideas about what, for them, would constitute just punishment in light of these crimes. Ideas ranged from ordering the accused to clean all the public toilets in Ottawa to sending the boys to the front lines in Iraq. The Legion representing Canada’s War Veterans is different in tone. Posted on their website is a call for both improved pedagogy and protection in the hope to prevent future misdeeds.

2. Veterans have stated publicly that, “a lack of education on what Canadian Veterans have contributed to the country is largely to blame” (CTV Television Network, 2007) and they have asked for a guard to stand on duty with the view to explain the significance of the monument.

3. Just three years later, Freud (1900) reiterated this hypothesis in *The Interpretation of Dreams* to describe the latent content of dreams. Freud (1900) writes:

King Oedipus, who slew his father Laius and married his mother Jocasta, merely shows us the fulfillment of our own childhood wishes....Here is one in whom these primaevial wishes of our childhood have been fulfilled, and we shrink back from him with the whole force of the repression by which those wishes have since that time been held down within us. While the poet, as he unravels the past, brings to light the guilt of Oedipus, he is at the same time compelling us to recognize our own inner minds, in which those same impulses, though suppressed, are still to be found. (pp. 364–365)

4. In Whiteside’s (2006) recent translation of this essay, there is the curious addition of the word “again” that suggests the Oedipus complex is already a *return* of infantile feelings for the boy-child to whom Freud refers: “The boy begins to desire his mother in a new way, and begins to hate his father *again*, as a rival standing in the way of his desire; he comes, as we say, under the control of the Oedipus complex (Freud, 1910b, p. 246). The significant point here is that the Oedipus complex is not something to be resolved once and for all (whether as an infant or toddler) but is rather a complex that we repeatedly find and resolve in new contexts.

5. Notable among these are theorists who take issue with Freud’s emphasis on the phallus and the “Law of the Father.” Some theorists have emphasized the structuring role of the mother, including her role in laying down the “Law” as an essential feature of early object-relations (Mitchell, 2000; Pitt, 2006; Smith & Ferstman, 2005). Others theorists have taken issue with the hetero-normative terms on which the Oedipus complex is based, and in particular, the prohibition against same-sex love which suggests, “You cannot *be* what you desire, you cannot *desire* what you wish to be” (Fletcher, 1989, p. 114, original emphasis). Another line of critique challenges Freud’s claim that the Oedipus complex is a biological inheritance. In commenting on the case of “Little Hans,” Adriana Silvia Benzaquén (1998) insists that Freud’s theoretical interests affected his interpretations and even superseded his treatment of his little patient:

...when Freud contends that children’s utterances are meaningful and trustworthy, what he is indeed referring to, and reclaiming, are not those utterances themselves, but the interpretations of them he is proposing. What he defends is [neither] Little Hans, nor children in general, but his interpretations of them he is proposing. (p. 49)

6. The challenge is that Freud read, and indeed used, the case material, here Little Hans, to defend his theoretical interpretations. The main thrust of the critique is that Freud mapped his own interpretations, of which the Oedipal complex is just one, *onto* Hans, rather than the interpretations emerging from the material.

7. Prime Minister Stephen Harper expressed this opinion along with his strong disapproval in an interview on CFRA, an Ottawa radio station: “As you know often, people who get carried away do thoughtless things...Obviously it was a terrible thing to do...Certainly my impression is it doesn’t represent in any way the views of any segment of Canadian society...I think we all strongly honour our vets” (CTV Television Network, 2006).

8. While aggression is a condition of growing up, it is also important to point out that not all forms of aggression are equal. In this regard, Winnicott (1967) makes a distinction between spontaneous and calculated acts of aggression that is helpful in thinking about the Ottawa incidents. He articulates this distinction through a hypothetical tale about a boy and some apples:

The apple stolen from the orchard...can be ripe and can taste nice and it can be fun to be chased by the farmer. On the other hand, the apple may be green and, if eaten, may give the boy a stomach-ache, and it may be that already the boy is not eating what he has stolen but is giving the apples away, or perhaps he organizes the theft without running the risk of climbing to wall himself. In this sequence we see the transition from the normal prank to the antisocial act. (p. 93)

9. Crimes that fulfill basic needs, such as reaching out to steal a tasty, ripe apple are different from organized crime, where need is confused with entitlement and so turned sour. In organized crime, one intends to destroy outside objects and mis-use others in the process, whereas the spontaneous act takes one by surprise: “[In the] compulsive act...the child does not know why he or she does it. Often the child feels mad because of having a compulsion to do something without knowing why” (Winnicott, 1967, p. 93). Of course, compulsive stealing is not the same as public urination, nor is it the same as desecrating monuments in a general sense. Even more, the aggressive posturing captured on film on Canada Day shatters any illusions of “innocent” fun or spontaneity. There is, after all, *intention* in smiling for a camera.

But listen to the “fury” in the press statement released by Stephen, one of the three young men caught on the Monument: “Needless to say, I was furious...I was furious that people would think I’m here to insult my country, people that fought for our country” (Ditchburn, 2006). That Stephen could be “furious” suggests to me a kind of surprise, not because of the disapproving responses of the veterans specifically and the public generally (perhaps this was expected) but rather because of his own capacity for destructiveness. Returning to Winnicott, this surprise suggests a crime of a different quality than, for instance, the use of monuments on which to inscribe ideologies of hate. The use of the monument may be viewed, from a Winnicottian perspective, as part of the painful work of integration, where aggressive impulses and the capacity to harm others, can be felt alongside the constructive impulse to repair the harm done. Perhaps Stephen’s “fury” at his aggressive actions represents the beginning of this work.

10. When people get into groups, however, the question of guilt—and personal responsibility—becomes a little slippery. Freud (1927), too, explored the question of “mass psychology” or group mind. The core of the work centres on examples of the church and the army. Freud wanted to understand individuals’ susceptibility to others (especially leaders) or, put differently, the tendency for an individual to lose one’s critical faculties and to perform acts and defend beliefs that might be unthinkable alone. Freud argues that belonging to the group is paid for by a renunciation of individuality. The kernel of this idea can also be found as early as 1883 in a letter he wrote to his then fiancé Martha Bernays: “The *people* judge, think, hope, and work in a manner utterly different from *ourselves* [when alone]” (as cited in Rose, 2004, p. ix, emphasis added).

The hysterical quality of “mass psychology” is perhaps nowhere clearer than in Ottawa, where there was a loss of personal responsibility, replaced by the attention and protection of the jeering crowd. D.W. Winnicott (1963) adds to this that adolescents are particularly susceptible to the logic of the group and to the military in particular. In a lecture given to doctors on difficulties of adolescence and rehabilitation, Winnicott suggested why the military could be an attractive option for some adolescents. He argued that the military attracted youth because it could provide a legal (that is, state-sanctioned) outlet for internal aggression. Close to 50 years later and in a Canadian context where debates abound about Canada’s presence in Afghanistan, we can still wonder about the relevance of Winnicott’s statement. But I would like to make a small addition. Perhaps “outlets” for teen aggression include not only military service (although this may still be the case), but also anti-war sentiments, whether in the form of political opinion, sheer indifference, or public displays of aggression. Fraternity may be as quickly built around the idea of *not* going to war and, perhaps, even around the collective guilt for not having to go either.

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