Freud’s *Wissbegierde* and the Research Projects of Childhood: Revisiting ‘Little Hans’

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I overheard an exchange between two women on a coach recently, both of whom were grandmothers. One was telling the other of her grandchild’s musings on the imminent arrival of a baby sibling. The young child grew particularly concerned if her mother went to the toilet lest the baby arrive without warning. The second grandmother had similar anecdotes to recount. As delighted as they were by the creative and candid character of their progeny, they were also compelled to formulate their own imaginative identifications with the (now distant) site of childhood. Recognising that the infants’ theories were ‘perfectly reasonable’ and in actual fact ‘rather clever’, and speculating on the nature of the infants’ experiential realities, the grandmothers were framing their own desire to know something of their grandchildren’s investigative spirit within a discourse of hypothesis and logical conjecture. I mention this to illustrate how, on embarking on his most formative of investigations, the infant inevitably re-ignites the epistemophilic instincts of the adult onlooker. Perhaps this is as straightforward as observing that wonder begets wonder, but what I will try to show is that this formulation is itself a significant derivation of Freud’s thought that narcissism begets narcissism.¹ What strikes me most however, about this conversation that I was privy to, is the way in which a rudimentary (but etymologically correct) appreciation of research as that which entails care in the act of looking comes close to capturing the qualities of affection, inspiration, and diligent attention that the grandmothers were demonstrating in their analyses of their grandchildren.²

The central line of enquiry in this paper asks how care and research come to coalesce in the activity of psychoanalysis. I shall take as my orientation Freud’s contention that in the execution of psychoanalysis, research and treatment coincide (1912e: 114).³ Freud’s concept of *Wissbegierde*—as the drive to know, or the research instinct—will be central to our discussion.⁴ The drive towards knowledge—or the
passionate desire for knowledge—is undoubtedly given a primacy and an ontological significance in Freud's thought; it is also surely the motor-force of scientific enquiry. And yet Freud tells us that science, which is positioned as one of man's highest achievements, entails ‘the most complete renunciation of the pleasure principle of which our mental activity is capable’ (1910b: 165); moreover, science is to be extolled for its ‘passionless impartiality’ (1915b: 275). If there is a tension here, then it is one that seems to be discharged by the concept of sublimation; science can retain its libidinal investments—and the researcher his passion—once we recognise that scientific activity is a substitute satisfaction that can heighten the yield of pleasure available from the sublimation of the instincts. Perhaps then, the problem of reconciling the passionate desire for knowledge that Freud identifies as the hallmark of a great researcher (as in his Leonardo da Vinci study for example) with the idea that science must be passionless is not so problematic after all. But this understanding of research as the product of sublimation is unsatisfactory for many, and arguably fails to account for Freud's own intimation that Wissbegierde stands apart from the sexual and self-preservation instincts.

This is the argument that Rachel Blass (2006) pursues in her reading of Freud's Leonardo study. Blass is committed to rehabilitating Freud's concept of Wissbegierde in order to engender an epistemological stance for psychoanalysis that ‘focuses on the necessary involvement of passion rather than detachment’ (1259). She highlights the problems that core psychoanalytic concepts pose for a more expansive treatment of the research instinct; pointing in particular to Freud's theory of motivation as the principal barrier to an understanding of Wissbegierde that would accommodate desire as ‘both refined or sublimated and as qualitatively subjectively passionate’ (1268). The either/or that Freud's apparatus sets up is, ‘if passionate, then libidinal; if sublimated, then detached and neutral’ (1268). Acknowledging these structural difficulties, and the fact that Freud's explicit treatment of the research instinct is short-lived (appearing predominantly throughout his writings of 1908-1915), Blass is nonetheless clear that a passionate desire to know, existing independently of the self-serving satisfactions that knowledge can bring,
is one of the ‘foundational yet unarticulated’ ideas in Freud’s corpus (1272). Ultimately, in order to mobilise a Freudian Wissbegierde that is non-derivative, she aligns the research instinct with Eros. Her thesis is that, ‘we can desire truth passionately without it serving some need or wish and without it distorting our perception of reality because Eros is striving towards a unity that is universal and does not necessarily seek personal gratification’ (1272). By placing Wissbegierde under the sign of Eros, Blass can conclude that, ‘the act of researching itself, the act of seeking to know, like the act of love, is in itself a valuable state of being’ (1273).

The risk with this conception of the research instinct, as I see it, is that its necessary emphasis on striving for unity under Eros may derail Freud’s stringent advice to the analyst-as-researcher. A clear example of Freud’s expectations in this area can be seen in his paper ‘Psycho-Analysis and Telepathy’ (1941 [1921]) where he draws a stark distinction between a sort of anti-Wissbegierde of the occultist who looks only for confirmation of his faith, and the Wissbegierde of the analyst. Here is Freud on the latter point:

Moved by an extreme distrust of the power of human wishes and of the temptations of the pleasure principle, they [analysts] are ready, for the sake of attaining some fragment of objective certainty, to sacrifice everything—the dazzling brilliance of a flawless theory, the exalted consciousness of having achieved a comprehensive view of the universe, and the mental calm brought about by the possession of extensive grounds for expedient and ethical action. In place of all these, they are content with fragmentary pieces of knowledge and with basic hypotheses lacking preciseness and ever open to revision (Freud, 1941 [1921]: 178-179).

Leaving aside the thought that the analyst, thus conceived, is the researcher of Freud’s fantasies, the point to raise here is that the unifying drive of Eros appears at odds with the analyst’s commitment to the resolutely provisional character of that which can be achieved through
analytic research (and analytic treatment). Which raises the question, is Freud’s exaltation of the fragment (‘fragmentary pieces of knowledge’) undermined once the research instinct is aligned with Eros’ drive for unity? We shall come to see how this vital tension, which inheres in the structure of research itself, can be illuminated through the figure of the narcissistic child.

John Farrell (2007) puts forward a more critical exploration of what he takes to be Freud’s problematic opposition between, ‘the repressive, detached outlook of the scientist and the passionate interest of the artist’ (245). Like Blass, Farrell identifies the figure of Leonardo da Vinci as Freud’s scientific hero for whom enquiry takes the form of passion (245), and more broadly, points up the centrality of Eros in Freud’s hope for a ‘passionate science’ (250). Farrell identifies narcissism as the integral theoretical construct that grounds the work of the intellect under the aegis of Eros. He observes that in the narcissistic stage of psychic development, ‘thought has not separated itself from fantasy’ (which is to say that the pleasure principle has not given way to the reality principle). Thus, by highlighting the narcissistic root of intellectual activity, Freud ‘endowed all of humanity with a state of being, located in the infantile past, in which thought and desire are one’ (249). I should add that, in my view, it is not simply that this narcissistic stage is a necessary developmental hurdle to be transcended by the achievement of object-love, but rather that the narcissistic formation of early infancy continues to haunt the possibilities of intellectual organisation. Farrell’s pointing to the importance of narcissism for an understanding of the relation between Eros and the work of the intellect will prove productive to our discussion, particularly when we come to focus on Freud’s theorising of infantile sexuality below. The problem that Wissbegierde poses for the order of the instincts—can there be a desire to know that exists independently of the sexual instincts? — is implicitly challenged by the theory of narcissism. Yet crucially, the theory of narcissism was not fully established throughout the period in which Freud’s thought on the research instinct was most pronounced (1908-1915). One of the many significant contributions which Freud’s theory of narcissism makes to the metapsychological project is that, ‘it reveals
the roots of Logos in Eros without reducing the one to the other’ (Alford, 1998). Thus I am suggesting that, although the theoretical infrastructure was not yet in place, Freud’s treatment of *Wissbegierde* anticipates a reading of the integration of Eros and Logos that is introduced more explicitly in his Narcissism paper of 1914.

I have made a précis of Blass’s and Farrell’s accounts of Freud’s integral positioning of passion in the field of scientific investigation for two reasons. Firstly, they highlight a crucial qualification to the idea that Freud’s most significant cultural legacy has been to democratise artistic genius. It is widely regarded that by illuminating the extraordinary operations of the unconscious, Freud has gifted a poetic faculty to the ordinary man. The attraction of this ‘psychoanalytic gift to culture’ cannot be overstated. Through positioning as central to Freud’s cultural legacy the figure of the researcher alongside the more familiar and culturally approved figure of the artist, Blass and Farrell remind us that Freud embeds within his model of the mind the activity of research alongside the creativity of art. Whether via the primary and passionate placement of *Wissbegierde* as an independent instinct (Blass), or via the permanent trace of the narcissistic unity of thought and desire (Farrell), an alliance between imagination and enquiry is forged which restores to the figure of the researcher a status which might ultimately challenge the culturally upheld distinction between science and art. The second reason for referring to these two accounts is to open the way for my own thoughts on the notion of *Wissbegierde*, which will look to the hermeneutic work of analysis itself to suggest an alternative way in which care and research might coalesce in the activity of psychoanalysis. As suggested, research for Freud is not exclusively the activity of the scientist. Freud is equally assured in speaking of the researches of historical man, the analyst, and of course the child. Indeed, in their readings of the Leonardo study both Blass and Farrell demonstrate how the genealogy of genius—artistic or scientific—is located by Freud in the proto-typical researches of childhood. Bearing in mind the time period in which *Wissbegierde* was a key term in Freud’s writings (1908-1915), we may expect his contemporary work on the subject of childhood and child-analysis to prove instructive to this
In the remainder of this paper then, I shall take as my focus Freud’s case-history of Little Hans (1909b) in order to consider the interplay between the research projects of the child and those of the analyst(s), and I should state upfront that I will be as concerned with the structure of the analysis as the detail of the case. My presentation of Little Hans’s interest to the concept of *Wissbegierde* will also draw from Freud’s open letter of 1907 ‘The Sexual Enlightenment of Children’; his paper of 1908 ‘On the Sexual Theories of Children’; and an amendment made to his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1915. Taken together, Freud’s writings on infantile sexuality of this period (i.e. the *Wissbegierde* period) demonstrate both how the site of childhood was gaining stature as an object of scientific research, and how the figure of the child was itself being situated as a paradigmatic researcher. Moreover, these complementary papers reveal something of Freud’s ethical recommendations on childhood as a cultural problem (i.e. childhood as a phenomenon that poses questions for the subjects of parenting, education, reform, therapeutics, and so on).

*Little Hans’s Wissbegierde and the Wiwimacher*

Herbert Graf, (the real name of ‘Little Hans’), made his debut on the psychoanalytic stage two years prior to Freud’s publication of his full case history in 1909. In his open letter to a Hamburg Physician (Dr. M. Fürst), Freud deploys Little Hans (then Herbert) evidentially to support his thesis that ‘sexuality should be treated like anything else that is worth knowing about’ (1907c: 138). He argues that the attitude of myth-making that adults adopt in front of their children with regard to sexual matters countervails the intellectual interest and desire for sexual knowledge that the child displays from an early age. Throughout this short piece, Freud shows open disdain for the failure of the so-called enlighteners (i.e. parents and educators) to respond in kind to the *sapere aude* spirit of the child. Freud is clear in his letter of 1907 that Little Hans and his fellow amateur sexual theorists (i.e. other children) are neither unusually sensual nor pathologically disposed, rather their spirit
of enquiry is the natural stance of the unintimidated infant who has not been oppressed by a sense of guilt (135). At this time in his own research, Freud’s purpose is to highlight the dangers of ‘customary prudishness’ in concealing or withholding sexual enlightenment. However, as we would expect, what becomes clear in the full case history is that the source of the child’s ‘oppression by a sense of guilt’ cannot be fully ascribed to the empirical reality of the parenting environment.

Freud tells us that one of the three guiding sexual theories that children develop consists in attributing to everyone, including females, the possession of a penis; ‘the boy’s estimate of its value is logically reflected in his inability to imagine a person like himself who is without this essential constituent’ (1908c: 215-216). In the case of Little Hans, Freud notes the infant’s lively interest in the part of his body which he calls his ‘widdler’ (Wiwimacher) and recounts his examinations of the material of his everyday life, (a life which prior to 1908 was not marked by phobic anxiety). The widdler motif is ubiquitous: Hans observes milk coming out of the cow’s, water coming out of an engine’s; he is fascinated by the widdlers of his mother and his younger sister (who feature prominently in the full case history); and he takes great interest in the widdlers of the animals that he encounters at the zoo and elsewhere (e.g. lions, giraffes, horses). Freud explains that the openness with which animals display their genitals and sexual function is clearly connected to Hans’s sexual curiosity (1909b: 9). Describing Hans’s excitement at seeing a lion’s widdler at the zoo, Freud gestures towards a distinction between the component parts of the infant’s Wissbegierde: sexual curiosity is held in tandem with a distinct ‘spirit of enquiry’ (1909b: 9).

Freud was to reiterate the ambiguity of this position in a passage added to his *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* in 1915. Here, and in a way which affirms Blass’s argument noted above, he offers a conception of Wissbegierde as both independent of and connected to the sexual instincts:

At about the same time as the sexual life of children reaches its first peak, between the ages of three and five, they also begin to
show signs of the activity which may be ascribed to the instinct for knowledge or research. *This instinct cannot be counted among the elementary instinctual components, nor can it be classed as exclusively belonging to sexuality.* Its activity corresponds on the one hand to a sublimated manner of obtaining mastery, while on the other hand it makes use of the energy of scopophilia. Its relations to sexual life, however, are of particular importance, since we have learnt from psycho-analysis that the instinct for knowledge in children is attracted unexpectedly early and intensively to sexual problems and is in fact possibly first aroused by them (Freud, 1905d [added in 1915]: 193) [my emphasis].

In what is Freud’s most explicit statement on the research instinct in children, it seems that the problems regarding the position of *Wissbegierde* in the order of the instincts are unresolved (i.e. the instinct for research is neither simply primary nor simply derivative). This apparent ambiguity can be usefully inflected once we note that this passage was added in 1915 and rests therefore upon the presence of Freud’s theory of narcissism. Once narcissism is set as the formative state from which modes of loving derive, the question of *Wissbegierde’s* autonomy from the sexual instincts can be re-framed.

Freud respectfully declares that at the age of three and three quarters Little Hans was on his way to ‘making an independent discovery of correct categories by means of his observation’ (1907c: 133-134). In due course, this discovery would encompass a knowledge of the differences between the sexes. Before such knowledge is realised however, Hans progresses towards it with the working hypothesis that, ‘a dog and a horse have widdlers, a table and a chair haven’t’ (1909b: 9). We might say that Hans’s commitment to organising the contents of his world according to the distinction between the widdler-haves and the widdler-have-nots is, for Freud, testament to the drive of the researcher. On one level, Hans’s categorising impulse only confirms his narcissistic self-investments; there is clearly an appropriative and sexually driven meaning to the fact that Hans won’t admit lack within this environment of care—i.e. he cannot
allow that his mother is not a replica of himself. However, as Freud’s theory of narcissism makes clear, the state of infant narcissism is always more than ignorant self-investment. If we are prepared to read the investments of narcissism as primitive modes of self-reflection, we can see how it is precisely Hans’s researches—his attempts to acquire knowledge in order to consolidate his identity and to valorise himself—which expose him to his potential lack. Hence, Little Hans’s research, though related to the sexual instincts—to master his environment and support his illusions of self-sufficiency—is not simply identical to these instincts. It is this non-identity that accounts for Freud’s commendation of Hans, but which also precipitates the child’s breakdown. In fact, as we shall come to see, it is Hans’s breakdown which demonstrates his integrity as a researcher.

When Freud later comes to consider why it is that Hans would insist on the presence of his mother’s and sister’s widdlers, when in fact there were none for him to observe, he returns to the basic categorisation between the widdler-haves and the have-nots. He describes how, by ‘a process of careful induction’, Hans had arrived at the general proposition that, ‘every animate object, in contradistinction to inanimate ones, possesses a widdler’ (1909b: 11). This proposition, which is corroborated by his mother, acquires the status of a belief and Little Hans becomes utterly unable to surrender it on the strength of the single observation made at bath-time of his little sister’s non-possession of a widdler. This is where the limits of Hans’s investigative maturity, and the boundaries of his narcissistic investments, are tested, as he falsifies his observations to give support to a hard-won article of belief. In other words he insists that his sister’s widdler—which is not there to be perceived—is in fact just very small.

Freud is greatly impressed by Hans’s efforts to apprehend the ‘grand problems of life’ and, conceding that every investigator runs the risk of falling into occasional errors, he uses the infant’s example here to reproach his own contemporaries.

...he [Hans] was behaving no worse than a philosopher of the school of Wundt. In the view of that school, consciousness is the
invaluable characteristic of what is mental, just as in the view of little Hans a widdler is the indispensable criterion of what is animate. If now the philosopher comes across mental processes whose existence cannot but be inferred but about which there is not a trace of consciousness to be detected … then, instead of saying that they are unconscious mental processes, he calls them semi-conscious. The widdler’s still very small! (Freud, 1909b: 11).

With chastising wit, Freud is again demarcating the ground for analytic research in distinction to the researches of certain philosophers, children, or occultists who, as we saw above, prefer the ‘dazzling brilliance of a flawless theory’ to the ‘fragmentary pieces of [analytic] knowledge’. The error in all cases is legitimated and further compounded by the inductive reasoning that follows it; ‘faulty perceptions’ are generated to support the originary premise. Since science (and hence psychoanalytic research) is not in the business of providing a secure knowledge system or supporting a particular Weltanschauung (whether it be derived from the premise that all animate objects possess a widdler, or that all mental processes belong to consciousness), it is less susceptible to disavowing what, for Freud, would be the evidence of analytic observation. It is in this vein that Freud insists that psychoanalysis has but a ‘few apodeictic propositions in its catechism’, and can thus find satisfaction in ‘pursuing approximations to certainty in spite of the absence of final confirmation’ (1916-17: 51). Predictably, Freud is more forgiving of the child’s struggle to relinquish his catechism than of the infantile failures of his fellow philosophers to relinquish theirs. It is precisely the task of childhood after all to begin to recognise, via the doubting and brooding prompted by the riddles of sexuality, the extent of one’s own castration (i.e. to discover not that the widdler’s still very small, but that on some register it is lacking altogether).

Parenting the Breakdown

In Freud’s open letter of 1907, Hans was upheld as a commendable
example of unadulterated childhood: his natural curiosity had not been
oppressed, and he was able to give expression to his fantasies in an open
and ingenious manner seemingly free from phobic anxiety; all of which,
broadly speaking, was heralded as the achievement of good parenting.
In the full case-history of 1909, Freud is equally as complimentary of
the Grafs’ parenting approach; he insists that their experiment of letting
Hans grow up and express himself without being intimidated went on
satisfactorily (6). Yet Hans is now affected by an anxious phobia. The
thought I wish to pursue is that Hans’s breakdown does not signal the
failure of his research career, but may be one indicator of its success.

When Max Graf informed Freud that his son’s behaviour had
regrettably become worthy material for a case history, it was Hans’s growing
distress and resistance to the prospect of going for a walk that provoked
his judgement, and in doing so supplied Freud with material for his only
child-analysis. I am not going to spend time detailing the intricacies of
what is perhaps the most famous case in the history of child analysis. All
I want to underline here is the principal psychoanalytic coordinates that
configure Freud’s intervention in the case, namely the threat of castration
which lies within the Oedipus complex. Hans’s ‘street anxiety’, as Freud
terms it, revolved around a fear of being bitten by horses, and the desire
to ‘coax’ (to caress and to be caressed) with Mummy. Freud informs us
that:

When he was three and a half his mother found him with his hand
on his penis. She threatened him in these words: ‘If you do that, I
shall send for Dr. A. to cut off your widdler. And then what’ll you
widdle with?’
Hans: ‘With my bottom.’ He made this reply without having any
sense of guilt as yet. But this was the occasion of his acquiring the
‘castration complex’ (1909b: 7-8).

As Hans’s subsequent development of the castration complex evolves, so
too do the difficulties of his position within his ‘family romance’. Freud
surmises that, ‘Hans really was a little Oedipus who wanted to have his
father ‘out of the way’, … so that he might be alone with his beautiful mother and sleep with her’ (1909b: 111). Much of the case history is spent articulating the various ways in which Hans vacillates from candidly confessing his fantasies in a way that demonstrates his open enjoyment of them (e.g. I shall widdle with my bottom instead), to his deeply felt ambivalences of the Oedipal situation, most conspicuously his desire to usurp his father.

Whilst Freud is clearly committed to identifying the forces that incite Hans’s phobia as the universal forces to which all children are vulnerable, he is also quite explicitly linking these structures (i.e. the castration threat within the Oedipus complex) to what we might term the child’s epistemological deficit. Ultimately for Freud, Hans’s phobia results from the litany of confusions and unsatisfied curiosities that are the exclusive and often painful province of children. Thus the case history illustrates how Hans both enjoys and endures the full gamut of the research projects of childhood. In addition to the obvious anxieties relating to the castration complex, there are questions about where babies come from; curiosities regarding the differences between the sexes; confusion surrounding the ‘enigma’ of female genitalia; and ambivalent feelings with respect to the excretory functions. What is critical in determining Freud’s intervention (and his thinking more generally on the topic of sexual enlightenment at this time) is that he positions these causes for perplexity and pain as gaps in the child’s knowledge. Freud remarks that, ‘So long as the child is in ignorance of the female genitals, there is naturally a vital gap in his comprehension of sexual matters’ (1909b: 87). And, as Freud has left us in no doubt, the comprehension of sexual matters is intimately related to the infant’s Wissbegierde. The difficult questions with which children are preoccupied are, says Freud, ‘like all research, the product of a vital exigency, as though thinking were entrusted with the task of preventing the recurrence of such dreaded events’ [the event in this case being the arrival of Hans’s baby sister and her challenge to Hans’s omnipotence] (1908c: 213).

Freud’s focus on the child’s knowledge deficit is tied up with a possible contradiction between his open letter of 1907 (and to a lesser
extent the full case history of 1909) in which Freud voices a cultural criticism regarding the withholding of sexual enlightenment from children, and the more obviously ‘Freudian’ position whereby the child’s illness is brought about by the sense of conflict that comes from his own conscious and unconscious fantasies. There is a temptation to offer a dichotomous reading of the difference between Freud’s two positions here; one might suggest that in Freud’s writings on infantile sexuality during the *Wissbegierde* period (1908-1915) he straightforwardly regards the withholding of sexual enlightenment due to ‘customary prudishness’ to be the catalyst for a child’s psychological illness, whereas he would later come to recognise that the child cannot be moved by knowledge or enlightenment alone. To a certain extent, this is the type of evaluation that Strachey offers us when he assigns this shift in emphasis—from the causality of the parenting environment to that of the infant’s unconscious conflict—to Freud’s sophistication. Strachey is clearly right to point out that Freud’s letter of 1907 to the Hamburg physician stands some distance apart from his comments thirty years later in which he states explicitly that children are not inclined to renounce their home-grown sexual theories for the new enlightenments that they may receive from their parents and educators. We should note that Freud does not turn his back on the call for sexual enlightenment expressed so forcefully in his early work, but he does insist that ‘the prophylactic effects of [this] liberal measure has been greatly overestimated’ (1937c: 234). In other words, in much the same way as the analyst would not expect the mere communication of information about the patient’s unconscious to effect a change in the patient’s condition, neither would the provision of an environment in which the ‘truths’ of sex are didactically articulated correct (or cure) the child of his epistemological errors. And yet, it seems to me that the Little Hans case shows very clearly that Freud’s ‘sophistication’ is already in place in 1909; repeatedly Freud demonstrates that Hans’s anxieties come about from his psychic conflict *in spite of* the commendable performance of the parenting environment. What we might suggest then, is that it becomes more certain for Freud (via the case of Little Hans) that, precisely because of the pleasure derived from the narcissistic research instinct, the
infant’s phobia cannot be cured through the establishment of extrinsic conditions alone. Rather, the phobia, as an intrinsic part of the infant’s research activity, will only be resolved through the continuation of the research process.

‘The Child is Father of the Man’

Although it is Little Hans’s appetite for knowledge that provides the focus for Freud’s scientific study, there is obviously more than one Wissbegierde at play in the case-history as it is recorded. Indeed, Freud’s only child-analysis tells the story of a three-way research project in which Freud, Hans’s father, and Little Hans himself work harmoniously towards the eradication of Hans’s phobia. Freud adduced that the success of Little Hans’s treatment lay to a great extent in the combination of ‘affectionate care and scientific interest’ which was consolidated in a single figure: The combined authority of a father and a physician was for Freud integral to the mediation of Hans’s researches (1909b: 5). It is the character of this mediation to which I shall finally turn.

Hans’s capacity for pleasure is smiled upon throughout the case history of 1909; but whilst there is no doubting Freud’s affection for and enchantment with his ‘positive paragon of all the vices’ (1909b: 15), ultimately the case history is not explicitly concerned to celebrate Hans’s ‘condition’—either the phobia specifically, or childhood more generally. Having identified as critical to Hans’s symptomatology the ‘vital gap’ in his epistemological landscape, Freud simultaneously locates this gap as the source from which Hans’s idiosyncratic vocabulary evolves; e.g. his language of biting horses and crumpled giraffes, the irresistible widdlers, the faecal ‘lumf’ and his imaginary children, ‘coaxing’ with Mummy, and so on. This vocabulary is both the expression of Hans’s researches (for example, in accordance with the cloacal theory of birth, Hans speaks of ‘lumf’ and ‘my children’ proximately) and an obvious reflection of his ambivalent fantasies. In an alternative nineteenth century neo-romantic discourse of childhood, Freud might have designated such fantastical language as a source of ‘truth’, and identified Hans’s creativity as pointing
the way to an aesthetic and/or ethical ideal. However, overwhelmingly for Freud, such vocabulary points the way to neurosis.

There is little doubt that the dialogue throughout the case-history between the co-analysts (Freud and Little Hans’s father) reflects a commitment to answering the riddles of sexuality in accordance with the pragmatic demands of the reality principle. Freud choreographs Hans’s ‘enlightenment’ and advises the father on how to administer it to best effect. A two-stage strategy is followed: Hans is to be enlightened regarding the link between his anxiety and his attempts to break his masturbatory habits, and he is to be enlightened in the matter of sexual knowledge, especially regarding the differences between the sexes. Not only is it the father who makes possible the entire enterprise by providing access to the analytic material, but it is also the father who, in bearing his adult responsibilities towards his child with diligence and intellectual honesty, displays the resolve required to adhere to Freud’s counsel on matters of childrearing. Thus, Hans is, at least in part, able to conduct his investigations precisely because the father expresses the same audacious desire for knowledge as his son (i.e. the father is able to respond in kind to Hans’s *sapere aude*). This in turn positions the father as a representative of science who has succeeded in his own education to reality and who is therefore equipped to fulfil the task of mediating his son’s researches.

Significantly though, in his correspondence, Hans’s father informs Freud that, ‘The remission after he [Hans] had been given his first piece of enlightenment was not so complete as I may have represented it’ (1909b: 99). As well as revealing the rather literal way in which Freud and the father were medicating Hans with knowledge—i.e. trying to make up the epistemological deficit—this observation also indicates Hans’s resistance to the experience of demystification that enlightenment necessarily entails. It is this resistance that impresses on the analysts the limitations of a simplistic research model in which ‘filling in the knowledge gaps’ would be a sufficient mode of enlightenment. It is also this resistance which confirms that the locus of the research endeavour can never reside simply with Freud or with Little Hans’s father. We might accept that Freud’s recommendations are a necessary part of Hans’s enlightenment (and his
liberation from neurosis); yet we can also see how it is precisely the play of resistance that makes this enlightenment all the more profound. Instead of Little Hans’s research project being demeaned by the greater research project of Freud and the father—its errors summarily corrected and its ambitions redirected—we see a reflective structure emerge where error is admitted into the analytic process. In other words, we can recognise how Hans’s resistances to the enlightenments of his analysis (from Freud and the father) are not to be read as the child’s rejection of knowledge or research per se, but instead as a reassertion of his own research project. Hans has to be sustained as an active researcher rather than passively subjected to the researches of others.

By focussing on the research projects of childhood through the lens of the Little Hans case, I hope to have suggested how the passionate desire to know can be situated in a compound relation to the sexual instincts. Anticipating the still-to-be-formalised theory of narcissism, there is a productive ambiguity throughout Freud’s work of 1908-1915 in which Wissbegierde which is often indistinguishable from sexual curiosity, nonetheless cannot be wholly given over to the sexual instincts. In his theorising of infantile sexuality, Freud shows that a child’s researches are the products of vital exigencies. For example, Little Hans gave support to Freud’s contention that the general question ‘where do babies come from?’ arises from the crisis of epistemological significance prompted by the specific question ‘where did this particular, intruding baby come from?’ (1908c: 213). This is a clear admission of the child’s self-interest in his research activities; but what is of further note is the relation between his self-interest and research per se. In other words, how, given his narcissistic investments, can the child be positioned as the prototypical researcher where the standards of disinterest and objectivity prevail? We have begun to answer this question by identifying what it is that Freud commends in the research projects of childhood: he admires the (narcissistic) self-belief of the child because it underpins the child’s desire to know; indeed the child attests to the principle that the desire to know must be based on the belief that one can know. But, the paradox of the child’s narcissism is such that this same self-belief which originally propels his curiosity, directs him
towards the very encounters which potentially undermine it. So we can see in the case of Little Hans how the virtues of research may have attended upon his breakdown; after all, it was Hans’s emboldened and confident research enterprise which exposed him to a world which exceeded him. This suggestion runs somewhat counter to the idea that his breakdown was the inevitable conclusion of a naive world-view which could not be sustained beyond the narcissistic phase. Hans’s subsequent resistance to the enlightenment cure is especially significant then, because it instigates the dynamism of the analytic process. By resisting Freud’s administration of knowledge, Hans is reviving the audacious self-belief that Freud so commended in him as a researcher. If Hans is to be exemplary and not simply naive, it is vital that he puts up a resistance to the administrations of Freud; and that Freud has to find a way of recognising this ensures the integrity of the ongoing research project of psychoanalysis.

In this paper I have tried to develop my position in three ways. Firstly, I have suggested that Freud’s concept of Wissbegierde can be retroactively supported by his theory of narcissism. We have seen in particular how the child’s narcissistic investments in the illusions of omnipotence are not dissociable from the broader investments of research. By aligning Wissbegierde with the theory of narcissism in this way, I hope to have suggested that Freud is not simply concerned with rescuing the child from his narcissism, but also with recovering in the child’s narcissism the grounds of the research instinct. Secondly, I have underlined the importance of the analytic mediation of the errors of Little Hans’s research. Hans’s enlightenment is not directly gifted from Freud or the father; not even from the compound figure that emerges from ‘the affectionate care and scientific interest’ that they represent. What the three-way analytic structure supports is the experience of breakdown itself, which ultimately testifies to Hans’s research strength. Hans’s breakdown—his capacity for self-fragmentation—is proof of an instinct for research that moves beyond the sexual and conservative instincts. Thirdly, I have suggested that psychoanalysis supports this robust research instinct in the patient. Just as the researcher finds his prototype in the narcissistic infant whose enquiries are aided by narratives of self-sufficiency and mastery, so it goes...
for the case of psychoanalysis where enquiry is aided by the provisional and apparent integration of the patient’s memoir. But ultimately, as the case of little Hans demonstrates, the analytic commitment to the research instinct cannot disavow the possibility of fragmentation.

Notes

1) That Freud appreciated the circular logic of narcissism is clearly expressed in his paper of 1914 where he describes the way in which the baby’s state of primary narcissism is echoed by a reawakening of the narcissism of the parents.
2) The OED lays out the etymology of the verb research as follows: ‘after Middle French recercher… to look for with care, to look into carefully, to examine, investigate, to seek to obtain (16th cent.), to seek in marriage (1550). Compare post-classical Latin recercare… Italian ricercare (a1337)’.
3) Freud’s statement is rather ambiguous; he notes that ‘One of the claims of psycho-analysis to distinction is, no doubt, that in its execution research and treatment coincide; nevertheless, after a certain point, the technique required for the one opposes that required for the other’ (1912e:114). Throughout this piece and with a particular focus on the Little Hans case history, I shall be asking how we are to inflect this statement; for example, are we allowing the child’s research instinct to be tamed by the pragmatic framework of treatment, or are we recommending that treatment be conducted with the vigour of a child’s curiosity?
4) I shall follow Blass (2006) in using the terms research instinct, drive for knowledge, passionate desire to know as interchangeable with Wissbegierde, and support her observation that translations of the term Wissbegierde tend to undermine its status in Freud’s thought.
5) Harold Bloom, Lionel Trilling, Philip Rieff, Richard Rorty, Adam Phillips are among those whose different investments in this reading of Freud’s cultural legacy are particularly strong.
6) An example of Freud’s admiration for the narcissist can be seen in his references to the ‘charm’ of the narcissistic infant (e.g. Freud, 1914c:...
7) This commentary is given by Strachey with reference to the difference between Freud’s open letter of 1907 and his later reflections on the sexual enlightenment of children made in *Analysis Terminable and Interminable* (1937c).

References


—— (1907c) The Sexual Enlightenment of Children. S.E., IX: 129-140.


—— (1909b) *Analysis of a Phobia in a Five-Year-Old Boy*. S.E., X: 1-150.


—— (1912e) Recommendations to Physicians Practising Psycho-Analysis. S.E., XII: 109-120.


—— (1915b) Thoughts for the Times on War and Death. S.E., XIV: 273-300.
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