

Discontents

At the beginning of Chuck Palahniuk's Fight Club, the (nameless) narrator is tortured by narcoleptic insomnia: "Everything is so far away, a copy of a copy of a copy. The insomnia distance of everything, you can't touch anything and nothing can touch you" (Palahniuk 21). It is no great stretch of the imagination to view in this passage the frustration of the narrator's more immediate, tangible desires. However, this explanation, while valid, is far too simple to account for the complexity of the solution that the narrator and, eventually, hundreds of other men like him seek in addressing the common cause of their afflictions: "The goal was to teach each man in the project that he had the power to control history. We, each of us, can take control of the world" (Palahniuk 122). In order to supplant the societal control exerted on the individual, the members of "Fight club" and, later, "Project Mayhem" revive their most aggressive instincts, suppressed by the same forces that account for Sigmund Freud's hyperbolic relation of "the use of soap as an actual yardstick of civilization" (Gay 739). The disgruntled members of Fight Club answer order with chaos, compulsion with disregard and neighborly love with free expressions of violence. While Palahniuk's dark, dramatic satire is hardly a match for Freud's academic sobriety, Fight Club has tremendous appeal to the reader of Freud left wondering whether "cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of...communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction" (Gay 772).

In "Civilization and Its Discontents," Freud relates the macrocosm of civilization to the psychoanalytic structure of the mind. He accounts for the twists and turns of social development as it leads from the most fundamental pleasure principle to the elaborate,

controlling forces that impose restrictions upon even the individual's mental deviance from social patterns. Freud begins the essay with a description of what he calls the "oceanic feeling," a sentiment usually associated with religion "in which the boundary lines between the ego and the external world become uncertain..." (Gay 724). This feeling is traced back to a stage in infantile development known as primary narcissism. Primary narcissism occurs before any divisions have been made between self and other, subject and object, child and mother. In this state, the concept of desire does not exist in its common form, as there is no distinction between the desired object and the self; any kind of gratification is experienced instantaneously so that there is no context in which desire, which requires the need for pleasure and the lack of the pleasurable object, can exist.¹ Freud uses this example as a means of elucidating the process by which a social institution (as with religion) may serve the needs of an adult whose desires (as for the oceanic feeling) have their origin in the most basic stages of psychical development. While the issue of primary narcissism is notably absent from the rest of "Civilization and Its Discontents," we will return to the subject of narcissism as it relates to Fight Club later in this essay.

In the following section of his essay, Freud explains what he calls the "pleasure principle," the drive towards happiness existent in every human being: "It aims, on the one hand, at an absence of pain and unpleasure, and, on the other, at the experiencing of strong feelings of pleasure" (Gay 729). This division splits the methods of attaining happiness into positive and negative categories; within the psychical structure of the individual, the negative and positive instincts are handled by the super-ego and the ego,

¹ Just to avoid any confusion, this description and a later one describing secondary narcissism are cited almost verbatim from my previous paper, "*Wild Strawberries* and Freud's Theory of Depression"

respectively. The super-ego, the collection of the individual's ideals and the body that regulates the ego according to these ideals, is the authoritative indicator of what constitutes "unpleasure," particularly as a consequence of the ego's desires. It is the origin of such feelings as premonition and guilt. The ego, on the other hand, is the body that aims more directly at feelings of pleasure, regulating the primal desires of the subconscious id and coping with the frustration of these desires.

In the social realm, the super-ego, whose origin Freud traces to the internalization of the father's authoritative voice during the Oedipal stage, can be understood as any methods of control that act in the interest of society at large. This social force seeks to negate "the superior power of nature, the feebleness of our own bodies and the inadequacy of...the mutual relationships of human beings in the family, the state and society" (Gay 735). These negations, while in one sense liberating to members of civilized society, can be highly restrictive. There is a fine line between the beneficial domination of nature and the extraneous social drive towards beauty, cleanliness and order. Freud asserts that these three elements, though they have no utility in some of their applications, are understood as prerequisites for any kind of civilization: "We do not think highly of the cultural level of an English country town in Shakespeare's time when we read that there was a big dung-heap in front of his father's house in Stratford..." (Gay 739). Freud goes on to apply this requirement to the body, stressing the ways in which individuals must conform to common ideals of personal cleanliness and a regularity in their habits that contain more aesthetic value than real utility. This requirement for order serves as the social manifestation of the individual's anal erotism.

However, Freud seems more concerned with similar regulations not between the individual and nature but between individuals themselves. He emphasizes this area of regulation as warranting the greatest concern because of the idealized expectations of social relationships that are fostered in general society:

...we cannot see why the regulations made by ourselves should not, on the contrary (contrary to regulations of nature, that is), be a protection and a benefit for every one of us. And yet, when we consider how unsuccessful we have been in precisely this field of prevention of suffering, a suspicion dawns on us that here, too, a piece of unconquerable nature may lie behind – this time a piece of our own psychical constitution. (Gay 735)

While it seems at first that this is a pessimistic expression, Freud brilliantly points out that the inevitability of death is called not pessimistic but realistic. As complete human harmony is equally as likely as the possibility of immortality, any general critique of Freud's pessimism exposes precisely the idealistic naiveté with which interpersonal relationships are regarded. One important result of these unrealistic expectations is the disproportionate value that we place upon interpersonal desires, holding their fulfillment above the fulfillment of any other desires and their frustration as more disastrous.

To minimize the possibility of this devastating frustration, humans have created a system of morality that emphasizes the common love of all humans:

...they protect themselves against the loss of the object by directing their love, not to single objects but to all men alike; and they avoid the uncertainties and disappointments of genital love by turning away from its sexual aims and transforming the instinct into an impulse with an *inhibited aim*. (Gay 744)

While this method of social control is useful, Freud argues that it neglects the needs of the individual. He believes that not all humans are deserving of love and, furthermore, that those deserving of love are so different from each other that one single rule as the

basis for interpersonal interaction is damaging. Freud carries this concern over into the realm of sexual interaction, as well:

The requirement, demonstrated in these prohibitions, that there shall be a single kind of sexual life for everyone, disregards the dissimilarities, whether innate or acquired, in the sexual constitution of human beings; it cuts off a fair number of them from sexual enjoyment, and so becomes the source of serious injustice. (Gay 746)

These particular standards of human interaction are based at once in the ego and the super-ego. Any social mandate that is internalized in the mind of the individual as a restrictive regulation or an ideal method of behaving can be associated with the obsessive character of the super-ego. Particularly in the case of the command to “love thy neighbor,” however, the narcissistic character of the ego surfaces. The only ethical basis for this rule with regards to the individual (excepting its social utility) is the idea that all humans, or all who are like me, deserve my love. It is no coincidence that the religious command to love one’s neighbor is related to the similarly narcissistic oceanic feeling described earlier. However, as Freud makes plain in his essay, humans are naturally aggressive.

Freud’s exploration of aggression begins with his assertion that violence is an “indestructible feature of human nature...” (Gay 751). Freud calls the origin of aggression “Thanatos,” the drive towards death and the antithesis of Eros. His evidence for this claim is based much more in social than psychoanalytic observation, citing the necessity of an aggressive other in fostering positive relations within any society, as with nationalism. It is in the context of natural, human aggression that one of Freud’s earlier claims holds most profoundly: “...it is impossible to overlook the extent to which civilization is built up upon a renunciation of instinct...” (Gay 742). For obvious reasons,

outward displays of unregulated aggression are the most harshly punished of any of the renounced instincts. Freud is less worried with the social manifestations of aggression than with the personal transformation of the aggressive instincts into a hostility taken on by the super-ego and directed towards the ego:

This constitutes a great economic disadvantage in the erection of a super-ego, or, as we may put it, in the formation of a conscience. Instinctual renunciation now no longer has a completely liberating effect; virtuous continence is no longer rewarded with the assurance of love. A threatened external unhappiness – loss of love and punishment on the part of the external authority – has been exchanged for a permanent internal unhappiness, for the tension of the sense of guilt. (Gay 759)

In the situation that Freud describes, he who allows an outlet to his aggressive instincts will be punished by the social super-ego and he who subdues his instincts, by his own super-ego. At this point, we are finally ready to understand the nature of the narrator's insomnia in Fight Club.

Though perhaps unwittingly, Palahniuk's novel represents a brilliant fictional application of Freud's theories and concerns to the contemporary United States. The narrator, a thirty-something bachelor working in the compliance and liability department of a faceless automobile manufacturer, finds relief from his affliction in a support group for testicular cancer: "Walking home after a support group, I felt more alive than I'd ever felt. I wasn't host to cancer or blood parasites; I was the little warm center that the life of the world crowded around. And I slept. Babies don't sleep this well" (Palahniuk 22). A life confined to his cubicle, his chic but sterile yuppie apartment and a steady diet of single-serving airline food has subdued any of the narrator's aggression. It is the temporary release of his instincts towards self-destruction, the Thanatos suppressed by his super-ego, that finally allows the narrator to sleep. However, as soon as the narrator

becomes aware of another “faker,” Marla Singer, attending the support groups, the remedy loses its effect and he seeks another solution.

This new solution is Fight club. The narrator meets Tyler Durden alone on a nude beach where Tyler is lodging five pieces of driftwood at various angles in the sand. The narrator learns that Tyler has positioned the wood so that exactly at 4:30 the shadow of the wood will form the perfect outline of a human hand: “One minute was enough, Tyler said, a person had to work hard for it, but a minute of perfection was worth the effort. A moment was the most you could ever expect from perfection” (Palahniuk 33). Tyler’s scoff at any kind of lasting perfection, a notion extremely similar to the ego-ideal of the super-ego, subtly foreshadows his legendary status as the embodiment of aggressive disorder. After the narrator’s apartment has been anonymously blown up while he is away on a business trip (the first connection between material ownership and suppression of the death-instinct), he and Tyler go out to a bar and, in the parking lot, find themselves inventing Fight club. Seemingly out of sheer curiosity, Tyler asks the narrator to hit Tyler as hard as he can:

Instead of Tyler, I felt finally I could get my hands on everything in the world that didn’t work, my cleaning that came back with the collar buttons broken, the bank that says I’m hundreds of dollars overdrawn. My job where my boss got on my computer and fiddled with my DOS execute commands. And Marla Singer, who stole the support groups from me. (Palahniuk 53)

Although this list of frustrated desires seems trivial, the absence of any daring deviation from social expectations on the part of the narrator indicates that he has no real outlet for his more basic desires. This first fight with Tyler is a perfect example of the everyday instances in which the narrator must suppress his aggressive instincts, although they are intensified and finally released rather than destroyed, obeying the same principles as

Freud's description of the oceanic feeling. Fight club catches on and soon it has hundreds of members itching to fight each other: "Fight club gets to be your reason for going to the gym and keeping your hair cut short and cutting your nails. The gyms you go to are crowded with guys trying to look like men, as if being a man means looking the way a sculptor or an art director says" (Palahniuk 50). Again, counter to Freud's description of the aesthetically driven manifestations of the super-ego, the utility of these acts that are commonly used for cosmetic purposes represents a step away from beauty, cleanliness and order. This rebellion rises to a new level when Fight club becomes Project Mayhem.

After the narrator beats another man very severely in Fight club, Tyler decides to create Project Mayhem as an even more direct outlet for the suppressed aggression of its members. Project Mayhem is "the bureaucracy of anarchy" (Palahniuk 119), an organization aimed at "the complete and right-away destruction of civilization" (Palahniuk 125). "Discontent" is putting it mildly. Project Mayhem's activities include the sabotage of corporate ventures, vandalism of any aesthetic manifestation of the super-ego (luxury cars, corporate art, etc.), the general fostering of instinctual realization within society at large (usually with the threat of death) and, ironically, the production and sale of outrageously expensive soap, made with the decomposed fat of the same rich Americans that it is sold to. At the heart of Project Mayhem's doctrine is the de-emphasis of materialism: "...you're not how much money you've got in the bank. You're not your job. You're not your family...You're not your age" (Palahniuk 143). These speeches express perhaps the most interesting critique that Palahniuk can offer of Freud's model of civilization. The elements listed comprise the modern obsessive ideal

offered by Freud's social super-ego. However, Freud overlooks the extent to which the individual is forced to identify personally with all of these superficial objects and, consequently, their attachment to the individual's ego in a state of secondary narcissism.

In secondary narcissism, the subject, frustrated by a desire for the other (the mother in the case of the Oedipal complex), incorporates the desired object into his own ego, thereby turning his desire onto himself and transforming object-libido into ego-libido. While the presence of primary narcissism in the adult represents an actual regression to the pre-Oedipal state, secondary narcissism, though it is related to an incomplete resolution of the Oedipal complex, is a reaction to loss that occurs during and/or after the Oedipal stage.

It is not then surprising to learn that another one of Tyler's favorite speeches is related to this very issue: "...your father was your model for God. And if you never know your father, if your father bails out or dies or is never at home, what do you believe about God?" (Palahniuk 141). The frustration of the desire for one's father, the original authority upon which the super-ego is modeled and Freud's initial source for "the superior power of Fate" (Gay 727) present in the same religious convictions that characterize the oceanic feeling, represents a logical cause for the frustration with the obsessive ideals that the members of Project Mayhem rebel against. However, they must not only fight against the imposing super-ego but deflate the swollen social ego that is a result of the vast conformity with social ideals.

To stress that "you are not your job" is only necessary when you have incorporated your job into your self. This incorporation represents the expansion of the

ego-libido, which Freud overlooks, as essential to the process of civilization. To counter this process, Tyler offers yet more verbal fodder for the fight against the social ego:

“You are not a beautiful and unique snowflake. You are the same decaying organic matter as everyone else, and we are all part of the same compost pile...Our culture has made us all the same. No one is truly white or black or rich, anymore. We all want the same. Individually, we are nothing.” (Palahniuk 134)

This rhetoric at once de-emphasizes the importance of the individual ego and the dictated desires of the social ego. While the social super-ego dictates the negative steps to self-fulfillment, as with the restriction of the instinctual drives, the social ego designates those objects that are to be positively cathected in the narcissistic drive towards incorporation. Furthermore, it is the social ego that is responsible for the command to love one's neighbor, facilitated by the conformity to one social ideal, representing yet another suppression of the death-instinct. While the social super-ego restricts our aggressive instincts, it is the social ego that places even our erotic instincts within the common social mold.

One of Freud's closing insights in “Civilization and Its Discontents” strikes remarkably close to Palahniuk's novel:

I too think it quite certain that a real change in the relations of human beings to possessions would be of more help in this direction than any ethical commands; but the recognition of this fact among socialists has been obscured and made useless for practical purposes by a fresh idealistic misconception of human nature (Gay 771).

Palahniuk's Project Mayhem stresses this change in the relation to material possessions, certainly without idealizing human nature. Ultimately, however, Freud's analysis is too grounded in rational observation to offer any imaginative solution and Palahniuk's novel is too wildly imaginative to rival Freud's methodical analysis. As expected, Palahniuk's

closing chapter is just as inconclusive as Freud's: "We are not special. We are not crap or trash, either. We just are. We just are, and what happens just happens. And God says, 'No, that's not right.' Yeah. Well. Whatever. You can't teach God anything" (Palahniuk 207).

Works Cited

Gay, Peter, ed. The Freud Reader. New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1989.

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