

3.3

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (1901)

from *Chapter 2. The Forgetting of Foreign Words*

Freud is so strongly identified with his famous creation—psychoanalysis—that we need to remind ourselves occasionally that things might have been very different. Freud’s medical training—in neurology—came at the end of a century that had witnessed, among other things, extraordinary advances in our understanding of the brain and of the rest of the nervous system. As a young neurologist, Freud was a philosophic and scientific descendant of the great 19th century German physiologists, and he began his career as a research scientist, investigating such things as the gonads of eels. By all accounts Freud’s work was excellent, and he would have been happy to stay with it. But the glass ceiling of Viennese anti-Semitism seemed to rule out that option, and in 1882 Freud, who desperately wanted to get married, reluctantly gave up research and went into practice. This led to his encounter with hysteria and his famous collaboration with Josef Breuer, the first step on the path to psychoanalysis.

Freud was, among other things, ambitious. In early letters to friends and colleagues his desire to leave his mark on the world is palpable. A century later, the mark is unmistakable. People still read Freud. Many Freudian concepts are part of everyday discourse, and *Freudian* itself is an everyday adjective. On the other hand, scientific psychology has largely abandoned Freud. But regardless of what anyone thinks about the value of Freud’s theory as a way of understanding minds and behavior and about the value of his methods for treating people with various symptoms, Freud’s place in the history of ideas is secure. Here it does not matter whether we think he was right or wrong, but only that his ideas left their mark on the intellectual landscape.

Source: Freud, S. (1965). *The psychopathology of everyday life* (Alan Tyson, Trans.). New York: Norton.

238 PART III OPENING THE BLACK BOX

Freud's immense influence arguably revolves around his basic claim that most of our behavior is a product of an unconscious but very active part of the mind. This unconscious is full of unacceptable urges, intolerable memories, conflicts, defense mechanisms, and so forth. Part of Freud's lasting significance in the history of ideas is that psychoanalysis was conceived as a means of opening the black box of the unconscious. As a psychologist, Freud wanted to know about the unconscious in general. What structures, forces, processes are found in every mind's unconscious part? As a psychiatrist, Freud wanted to know about a given patient's unconscious. What is in there that might account, in psychoanalytic theory, for that patient's symptoms? Freud believed that his method was at once a way to probe a given patient's unconscious and a way to investigate the unconscious generally.

An important premise of Freud's system is that psychopathology—a word that for Freud covered a much broader territory than its current meaning of *mental illness*—is not limited to neurotics, but manifests itself in seemingly innocent and meaningless everyday occurrences such as slips of the tongue, errors in reading and writing, and forgetting. In the present case, a young man quotes a line from Virgil's *Aeneid* but leaves out a word. In an analytic *tour de force*, Freud leads him through a series of associations that illuminate the unconscious motive for forgetting that word.

The current vocabulary of our own language, when it is confined to the range of normal usage, seems to be protected against being forgotten. With the vocabulary of a foreign language it is notoriously otherwise. The disposition to forget it extends to all parts of speech, and an early stage in functional disturbance is revealed by the fluctuations in the control we have over our stock of foreign words—according to the general condition of our health and to the degree of our tiredness. I shall give [an] analysis, . . . which . . . concerns the forgetting of a non-substantival word in a Latin quotation. Perhaps I may be allowed to present a full and clear account of this small incident.

Last summer—it was once again on a holiday trip—I renewed my acquaintance with a certain young man of academic background. I soon found that he was familiar with some of my psychological publications. We had fallen into conversation—how I have now forgotten—about the social status of the race to which we both belonged; and ambitious feelings prompted him to give vent to a regret that his generation was doomed (as he expressed it) to atrophy, and could not develop its talents or satisfy its needs.

He ended a speech of impassioned fervour with the well-known line of Virgil's in which the unhappy Dido commits to posterity her vengeance on Aeneas: '*Exoriare . . .*' Or rather, he wanted to end it in this way, for he could not get hold of the quotation and tried to conceal an obvious gap in what he remembered by changing the order of the words: '*Exoriar(e) ex nostris ossibus ultor.*' At last he said irritably: 'Please don't look so scornful: you seem as if you were gloating over my embarrassment. Why not help me? There's something missing in the line; how does the whole thing really go?'

'I'll help you with pleasure,' I replied, and gave the quotation in its correct form: '*Exoriar(e) ALIQUIS nostris ex ossibus ultor.*'

protected: We are often temporarily unable to produce a word. Freud is presumably saying that we do not permanently lose the vocabulary of our native language.

functional disturbance: Freud is suggesting that an early symptom of unconscious conflict is the forgetting of foreign words.

non-substantival word: roughly, something other than a noun or verb; the word in question (see below) is an indefinite pronoun.

familiar: By this time Freud had published *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) and, with Breuer, *Studies on Hysteria* (1895).

the race: The young man is, like Freud, a Jew.

atrophy: to wither, waste. At the turn of the century the position of Jews in Austria was already precarious, and many social and professional opportunities were closed to them, as Freud knew only too well.

commits to posterity: passes along to future generations. In Roman mythology Dido, queen of Carthage, has fallen in love with the Trojan refugee Aeneas. When, at Jupiter's command, Aeneas leaves for Italy (where his descendants will found Rome), Dido throws herself on a pyre, but not before giving vent to her queenly anger in a speech that includes the line: *Exoriare aliquis nostris ex ossibus ultor*, "Let someone rise up from my bones as an avenger" (Virgil, *Aeneid*, IV/625).

240 PART III OPENING THE BLACK BOX

'How stupid to forget a word like that! By the way, you claim that one never forgets a thing without some reason. I should be very curious to learn how I came to forget the indefinite pronoun *'aliquis'* in this case.'

I took up this challenge most readily, for I was hoping for a contribution to my collection. So I said: 'That should not take us long. I must only ask you to tell me, *candidly* and *uncritically*, whatever comes into your mind if you direct your attention to the forgotten word without any definite aim.'¹

'Good. There springs to my mind, then, the ridiculous notion of dividing up the word like this: *a* and *liquis*.'

reliquien: relics, such as bits of bone or hair, alleged to be the remains of saints

accusation: For many centuries Jews have been periodically accused of using Christian blood in their rituals.

Rudolf Kleinpaul (1845–1918), a contemporary art historian. The book in question is Kleinpaul (1892).

the subject: anti-semitism

'I am waiting.'

'And now comes something that is quite clearly unconnected with our subject.'

The name *Benedict* means blessed, as in *benediction*.

Freud is referring to his method of free association, which he used in his practice as a way into a patient's unconscious. Ideational elements are thoughts, memories, motives, and other unconscious lumber.

'What does that mean?' 'I don't know.' 'And what occurs to you next?' 'What comes next is *Reliquien*, *liquefying*, *fluidity*, *fluid*. Have you discovered anything so far?'

'No. Not by any means yet. But go on.'

'I am thinking,' he went on with a scornful laugh, 'of *Simon of Trent*, whose relics I saw two years ago in a church at Trent. I am thinking of the accusation of ritual blood-sacrifice which is being brought against the Jews again just now, and of Kleinpaul's book in which he regards all these supposed victims as incarnations, one might say new editions, of the Saviour.'

'The notion is not entirely unrelated to the subject we were discussing before the Latin word slipped your memory.'

'True. My next thoughts are about an article that I read lately in an Italian newspaper. Its title, I think, was "What St. Augustine says about Women." What do you make of that?'

'Please refrain from any criticism and—'

'Yes, I understand. I am thinking of a fine old gentleman I met on my travels last week. He was a real original, with all the appearance of a huge bird of prey. His name was Benedict, if it's of interest to you.'

¹ This is the general method [margin note here] of introducing concealed ideational elements to consciousness. Cf. my *Interpretation of Dreams* (1900), Chapter II.

'Anyhow, here are a row of saints and Fathers of the Church: St. Simon, St. Augustine, St. Benedict. There was, I think, a Church Father called Origen. Moreover, three of these names are also first names, like Paul in Kleinpaul.'

'Now it's St. Januarius and the miracle of his blood that comes into my mind—my thoughts seem to me to be running on mechanically.'

'Just a moment: St. Januarius and St. Augustine both have to do with the calendar. But won't you remind me about the miracle of his blood?'

'Surely you must have heard of that? They keep the blood of St. Januarius in a vial inside a church at Naples, and on a particular holy day it miraculously liquefies. The people attach great importance to this miracle and get very excited if it's delayed, as happened once at a time when the French were occupying the town. So the general in command—or have I got it wrong? was it Garibaldi?—took the reverend gentleman aside and gave him to understand, with an unmistakable gesture towards the soldiers posted outside, that he hoped the miracle would take place very soon. And in fact it did take place . . .'

'Well, go on. Why do you pause?'

'Well, something has come into my mind . . . but it's too intimate to pass on . . . Besides, I don't see any connection, or any necessity for saying it.'

'You can leave the connection to me. Of course I can't force you to talk about something that you find distasteful; but then you mustn't insist on learning from me how you came to forget your *aliquis*.'

'Really? Is that what you think? Well then, I've suddenly thought of a lady from whom I might easily hear a piece of news that would be very awkward for both of us.'

'That her periods have stopped?'

'How could you guess that?'

'That's not difficult any longer; you've prepared the way sufficiently. Think of the calendar saints, the blood that starts to flow on a particular day, the disturbance when the event fails to take place, the open threats that the miracle must be vouchsafed, or else . . . In fact you've made use of the miracle of St. Januarius to manufacture a brilliant allusion to women's periods.'

Without being aware of it. And you really mean to say that it was this anxious expectation that made me unable to produce an unimportant word like *aliquis*?

St. Januarius, or San Gennaro, is the patron saint of Naples.

It is unlikely that Freud needs to be reminded.

St. Januarius's blood in a vial is an example of a relic.

The miracle can be duplicated in various ways, for example, with a mixture of olive oil, beeswax, and iron oxide (rust); see Nickell & Fischer (1992).

the reverend gentleman: the priest

The ellipses (. . .) here are Freud's, and represent pauses in the conversation.

Lack of awareness is central to Freud's ideas. The anxiety about a possible pregnancy causes the recall failure via a complex set of associations that the subject is unaware of.

242 PART III OPENING THE BLACK BOX

sacrificed as a child: Freud sees St. Simon representing a possible solution to the object of the young man's anxiety: abortion.

'It seems to me undeniable. You need only recall the division you made into a-liquis, and your associations: relics, liquefying, fluid. St. Simon was sacrificed as a child—shall I go on and show how he comes in? You were led on to him by the subject of relics.'

'No, I'd much rather you didn't. I hope you don't take these thoughts of mine too seriously, if indeed I really had them. In return I will confess to you that the lady is Italian and that I went to Naples with her. But mayn't all this just be a matter of chance?'

'I must leave it to your own judgement to decide whether you can explain all these connections by the assumption that they are matters of chance. I can however tell you that every case like this that you care to analyse will lead you to "matters of chance" that are just as striking.'²

I have several reasons for valuing this brief analysis; and my thanks are due to my former travelling-companion who presented me with it. In the first place, this is because I was in this

This case substantiates Freud's view that there is psychopathology in everyday life, in mentally healthy people as well as in neurotics, and that no behavior is random.

instance allowed to draw on a source that is ordinarily denied to me. For the examples collected here of disturbances of a psychical function in daily life I have to fall back mainly on self-observation. I am anxious to steer clear of the much richer material provided by my neurotic patients, since it might otherwise be objected that the phenomena in

question are merely consequences and manifestations of neurosis. My purpose is therefore particularly well served when a person other than myself, not suffering from nervous illness, offers himself as the object of such an investigation.

...

disturbance in reproduction: any misremembering of verbal material; here, the omission of *aliquis*

The disturbance in reproduction occurred in this instance from the very nature of the topic hit upon in the quotation, since opposition unconsciously arose to the wishful idea expressed in it. The circumstances must be construed as follows. The speaker had been deploring the fact that the

Eugen Bleuler (1857–1939) was a Swiss psychiatrist, best known for his extensive studies of schizophrenia, a word he coined.

² This short analysis has received much attention in the literature of the subject and has provoked lively discussion. Basing himself directly on it, Bleuler (1919) has attempted to determine mathematically the credibility of psycho-analytic interpretations, and has come to the conclusion that it has a higher probability value than thousands of medical 'truths' which have gone unchallenged, and that it owes its exceptional position only to the fact that we are not yet accustomed to take psychological probabilities into consideration in science.

This footnote was added in 1924, by which time Freud had become quite famous and his ideas had aroused some opposition.

present generation of his people was deprived of its full rights; a new generation, he prophesied like Dido, would inflict vengeance on the oppressors. He had in this way expressed his wish for descendants. At this moment a contrary thought intruded. 'Have you really so keen a wish for descendants? That is not so. How embarrassed you would be if you were to get news just now that you were to expect descendants from the quarter you know of. No: no descendants—however much we need them for vengeance.' This contradiction then asserts itself by . . . setting up an external association between one of its ideational elements and an element in the wish that has been repudiated; this time, indeed, it does so in a most arbitrary fashion by making use of a roundabout associative path which has every appearance of artificiality.

...

wishful idea: the young man's wish, like that expressed by Dido, that his descendants will avenge him

This contradiction: between the young man's abstract wish for descendants who will avenge his generation of Jews on their gentile oppressors and his personal wish to avoid the complications of marriage and fatherhood

FOR DISCUSSION

1. Freud's interpretation of the young man's slip seems to him "undeniable." Why? What alternative explanations are there?
2. Compare Freud's method of free association with Titchener's introspection. What would Titchener have to say about Freud's method?