Psychopathology of Everyday Life Sigmund Freud (1901)

Translation by A. A. Brill (1914)

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INTRODUCTION

Professor Freud developed his system of psychoanalysis while studying the so-called borderline cases of mental diseases, such as hysteria and compulsionneurosis. By discarding the old methods of treatment and strictly applying himself to a study of the patient's life he discovered that the hitherto puzzling symptoms had a definite meaning, and that there was nothing arbitrary in any morbid manifestation. Psychoanalysis always showed

that they referred to some definite problem or conflict of the person concerned. It was while tracing back the abnormal to the normal state that Professor Freud found how faint the line of demarcation was between the normal and neurotic person,and that the psychopathologic mechanisms so glaringly observed in the psychoneuroses and psychoses could usually be demonstrated in a lesser degree in normal persons. This led to a study of the faulty actions of everyday life and later to the publication of the *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, a book which passed through four editions in Germany and is considered the author's most popular work. With great ingenuity and penetration the author throws much light on the complex problems of human behavior, and clearly demonstrates that the hitherto considered impassable gap between normal and abnormal mental states is more apparent than real.

This translation is made of the fourth German edition, and

while the original text was strictly followed, linguistic difficulties often made it necessary to modify or substitute some of the author's cases by examples comprehensible to the English-speaking reader.

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A. A. Brill.

Psychopathology of Everyday Life

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CHAPTER 1 Forgetting of Proper Names

During the year 1898 I published a short essay *On the Psychic Mechanism of Forgetfulness*.[1] I shall now repeat its contents and take it as a starting-point for further discussion. I have there undertaken a psychologic analysis of a common case of temporary forgetfulness of proper names, and from a pregnant example of my own observation I have reached the conclusion that this

frequent and practically unimportant occurrence of a failure of a psychic function -- of memory -- admits an explanation which goes beyond the customary utilization of this phenomenon.

If an average psychologist should be asked to explain how it happens that we often fail to recall a name which we are sure we know, he would probably content himself with the answer that proper names are mre apt to be forgotten than any other content of mery. He might give plausible reasons for this "forgetting pre- [p. 4] ference" for proper names, but he would not assume any deep determinant for the process.

I was led to examine exhaustively the phenomenon of temporary forgetfulness through the observation of certain peculiarities, which, although not general, can, nevertheless, be seen clearly in some cases. In these there is not only *forgetfulness*, but also false *recollection*: he

who strives for the escaped name brings to consciousness others -- substitutive names -- which, although immediately recognized as false, nevertheless obtrude themselves with great tenacity. The process which should lead to the reproduction of the lost name is, as it were, displaced, and thus brings one to an incorrect substitute.

Now it is my assumption that the displacement is not left to psychic arbitrariness, but that it follows lawful and rational paths. In other words, I assume that the substitutive name (or names) stands in direct relation to the lost name, and I hope, if I succeed in demonstrating this connection, to throw light on the origin of the forgetting of names.

In the example which I selected for analysis in 1898 I vainly strove to recall the name of the master who made the imposing frescoes of the "Last Judgment" in the dome of *Orvieto*. Instead of the lost name -- *Signorelli* -- two

other names of artists -- *Botticelli* and *Boltraffio* -- obtruded themselves, names which my judg- [p. 5] ment immediately and definitely rejected as being incorrect. When the correct name was imparted to me by an outsider I recognized it at once without any hesitation. The examination of the influence and association paths which caused the displacement from *Signorelli* to *Botticelli* and *Boltraffio* led to the following results:--

(*a*) The reason for the escape of the name *Signorelli* is neither to be sought in the strangeness in itself of this name nor in the psychologic character of the connection in which it was inserted. The forgotten name was just as familiar to me as one of the substitutive names -- Botticelli -- and somewhat more familiar than the other substitute -- Boltraffio -- of the possessor of which I could hardly say more than that he belonged to the Milanese School. The connection, too, in which the forgetting of the name took place appeared to me harmless, and led to no

further explanation. I journeyed by carriage with a stranger from Ragusa, Dalmatia, to a station in Herzegovina. Our conversation drifted to travelling in Italy, and I asked my companion whether he had been in Orvieto and had seen there the famous frescoes of --

(*b*) The forgetting of the name could not be explained until after I had recalled the theme discussed immediately before this conversation. This forgetting then made itself known *as a* [p. 6] *disturbance of the newly emerging theme caused by the theme preceding it*. In brief, before I asked my travelling companion if he had been in Orvieto we had been discussing the customs of the Turks living in *Bosnia* and *Herzegovina*. I had related what I heard from a colleague who was practising medicine among them, namely, that they show full confidence in the physician and complete submission to fate. When one is compelled to inform them that there is no help for the patient, they answer: "*Sir* (Herr), what can I say? I know that if he

could be saved you would save him." In these sentences alone we can find the words and names: *Bosnia*, *Herzegovina*, and *Herr* (sir), which may be inserted in an association series between *Signorelli*, *Botticelli*, and *Boltraffio*.

(*c*) I assume that the stream of thoughts concerning the customs of the Turks in Bosnia, etc., was able to disturb the next thought, because I withdrew my attention from it before it came to an end. For I recalled that I wished to relate a second anecdote which was next to the first in my memory. These Turks value the sexual pleasure above all else, and at sexual disturbances merge into an utter despair which strangely contrasts with their resignation at the peril of losing their lives. One of my colleague's patients once told him: "For you know, sir (Herr), if that ceases, life no longer has any charm."

[p. 7] I refrained from imparting this characteristic feature

because I did not wish to touch upon such a delicate theme in conversation with a stranger. But I went still further; I also deflected my attention from the continuation of the thought which might have associated itself in me with the theme "Death and Sexuality." I was at that time under the after-effects of a message which I had received a few weeks before, during a brief sojourn in *Trafoi*. A patient on whom I had spent much effort had ended his life on account of an incurable sexual disturbance. I know positively that this sad event, and everything connected with it, did not come to my conscious recollection on that trip in Herzegovina. However, the agreement between *Trafoi* and *Boltraffio* forces me to assume that this reminiscence was at that time brought to activity despite all the intentional deviation of my attention.

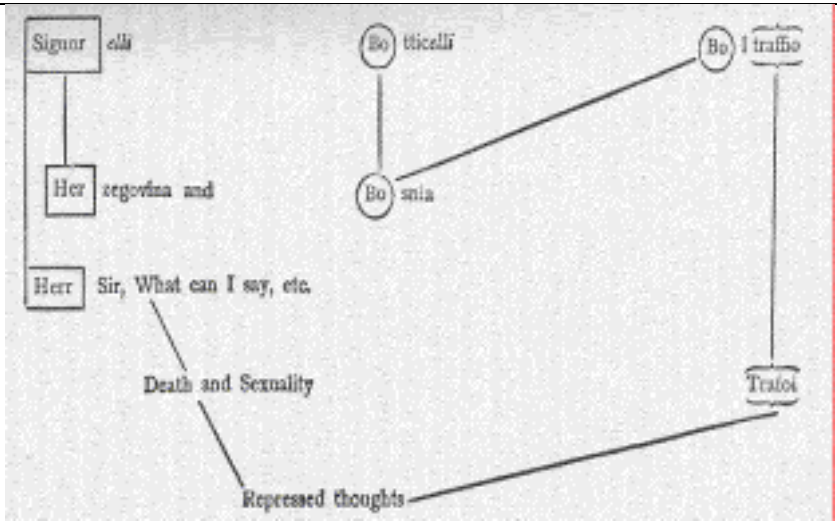
(*d*) I can no longer conceive the forgetting of the name Signorelli as an accidental occurrence. I must recognize in this process the influence of a *motive*. There were motives

which actuated the interruption in the communication of my thoughts (concerning the customs of the Turks, etc.), and which later influenced me to exclude from my consciousness the thought connected with them, and which might have led to the message concerning the incident in [p. 8] Trafoi -- that is, I wanted to forget something, I *repressed* something. To be sure, I wished to forget something other than the name of the master of Orvieto; but this other thought brought about an associative connection between itself and this name, so that my act of volition missed the aim, and I *forgot the one against my will*, while I *intentionally* wished to forget the other. The disinclination to recall directed itself against the one content; the inability to remember appeared in another. The case would have been obviously simpler if this disinclination and the inability to remember had concerned the same content. The substitutive names no longer seem so thoroughly justified as they were before

this explanation. They remind me (after the form of a compromis) as much of what I wished to forget as of what I wished to remember, and show me that my object to forget something was neither a perfect success nor a failure.

(*e*) The nature of the association formed between the lost name and the repressed theme (death and sexuality, etc.), containing the names of Bosnia, Herzegovina, and Trafoi, is also very strange. In the scheme inserted here, which originally appeared in 1898, an attempt is made to graphically represent these associations.

The name Signorelli was thus divided into two parts. One pair of syllables (*elli*) returned [p. 9]



[p. 10] unchanged in one of the substitutions, while the other had gained, through the translation of *signor* (sir, Herr), many and diverse relations to the name contained in the repressed theme, but was lost through it in the reproduction. Its substitution was formed in a way to suggest that a displacement took place along the same associations -- "Herzegovina and Bosnia" -- regardless of the sense and acoustic demarcation. The names were therefore treated in this process like the written pictures of

a sentence which is to be transformed into a picture-puzzle (rebus). No information was given to consciousness concerning the whole process, which, instead of the name Signorelli, was thus changed to the substitutive names. At first sight no relation is apparent between the theme that contained the name Signorelli and the repressed one which immediately preceded it.

Perhaps it is not superfluous to remark that the given explanation does not contradict the conditions of mery reproduction and forgetting assumed by other psychologists, which they seek in certain relations and dispositions. Only in certain cases have we added another *motive* to the factors long recognized as causative in forgetting names, and have thus laid bare the mechanism of faulty memory. The assumed dispositions are indispensable also in our case, in order to make it possible for the repressed [p. 11] element to associatively gain control over the desired name and take it along into the