

4. PACIFIED AND UNPACIFIED FORGETTING

(FREUD)

It is not at all clear how to connect Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and psychoanalysis with forgetting.¹ The concept of forgetting is not among the 331 technical terms listed in Laplanche and Pontalis's *Language of Psychoanalysis*.² Even the concepts of remembrance and memory are missing. This terminological lacuna does not, however, allow us to conclude that Freud is simply not interested in such issues. So far as memory is concerned, Freud observes in himself "extraordinary feats of memory," and he clearly counts a scientific treatment of memory among the tasks of psychological research. He even takes an interest in mnemotechnics. Psychoanalytic practice cannot do without memory either; Freud takes special care to impress on the practicing physician the importance of not taking any notes while dealing with the patient. Only afterward should the course of the therapeutic dialogue between patient and analyst be written down from memory.³

Freud first takes up the phenomenon of forgetting in symptomatic connection with errors—that is, with what we now call "Freudian slips." He asks: What happens psychologically when someone mis-hears (*ver-hört*), mis-speaks (*ver-spricht*), mis-reads (*ver-liest*), mis-writes (*ver-schreibt*), or mis-lays (*ver-legt*), loses (*ver-liert*), forgets (*ver-gißt*) something? In the common prefix *ver-* Freud here already discerns "the inner similarity" and can therefore exclude the possibility that these errors are merely accidental. Obviously all these "slips" are underpinned by forgetting, and thus Freud soon concentrates on those cases in which forgetting "most astonishes" him. One of the most important of these is the phenomenon of forgetting names. Why does one forget proper names so quickly—as Freud also does? This is intriguing. Is there a reason why precisely the names of persons are particularly easily forgotten? Did Heine see this reason most clearly? In this connection Freud quotes Heine's verse: "his [name] shall not be thought!" (*Nicht gedacht soll seiner werden!*). This is the concept of *damnatio memoriae*, which goes back to Roman law and was further developed by Dante: forgetting as the most extreme punishment, worse than death (see above, chap. 2, sec. 5).⁴

To understand more precisely the relationship between memory and forgetting we must now also pay careful attention to the metaphors Freud uses to describe these psychic phenomena. We focus in particular on two metaphors that have been in circulation since antiquity and have in the meantime gathered whole fields of images around them. I refer to the metaphors of the "wax tablet" and of the "storehouse" of memory.⁵ Concerning the first of these metaphors, I would like to draw attention to a small and little-noticed meditation that Freud wrote down in 1924 under

the title "A Note upon the 'Mystic Writing-Pad'" (*Notiz über den Wunderblock*). The subject of this meditation is memory in its most important materialization, namely writing. According to Freud, we must distinguish between two kinds of written memory, depending on how long the written record lasts. Paper, on which one writes with ink, accepts a "long-lasting memory-trace." In contrast, a slate on which one writes with chalk can easily be erased. Thus one "memory system" favors long-lasting memory, while the other, suitable for short-term storage, is closer to forgetting.

Now, in Freud's day a new kind of writing tool and toy called the *Wunderblock* came on the market, and this device combined both memory systems. As Freud describes it, it is a slab of wax whose surface is covered with a sheet of transparent paper and a sheet of celluloid in such a way that one can write on it with a stylus and the writing that is copied in this way on the wax can be erased by simply lifting the two covering sheets. The writing-trace left on the slab of wax is still visible, however, if it is held at a certain angle, and it remains legible even after the writing-trace on the paper sheet has been erased in the prescribed manner. To this extent the "mystic writing-pad" is composed of both an enduring memory and an ephemeral memory. Freud sees this "enduring trace" as analogous to the Unconscious.

The metaphor of the "storehouse" of memory also has a privileged place in Freud's work, though it is given an upper-middle-class twist and divided in an interesting way into two spaces. Freud imagines a "drawing room" to which a large anteroom is attached. Everything unconscious flounders about in this anteroom, while consciousness finds its place in the drawing room. It is characteristic of Freud's psychoanalysis that on the threshold between these two rooms is posted a censor "who summons up the individual mental impulses, examines them, and does not allow them to enter the drawing-room if they do not meet with his approval." Mental impulses are in movement between the "anteroom of the Unconscious" and the drawing room as the space in which consciousness resides. The Unconscious wants to become conscious, but it is held back by the "resistance" of the censor on the threshold, and should the censor's inattention allow some unconscious impulse to get a foot through the door and thus become "pre-conscious," it is expelled (*verdrängt*, repressed) from the drawing room. One can see why Freud called repression (*Verdrängung*) a "topical" concept. This event in fact takes place between two "places" (*topoi, loci*).

Drawing on this and other similar evidence, I do not hesitate to pursue our theme further by equating the Freudian Unconscious with forgetting (or more precisely, with the *forgotten*). These two concepts are to be distinguished only insofar as Freud speaks chiefly of the "Unconscious" and only secondarily, but by no means seldom, of "forgetting" or "the forgotten." A certain lack of clarity in the concept of the Unconscious must in

any case be accepted since Freud does not always make a sharp distinction between the Unconscious and the preconscious. Here his detested student C. G. Jung later found a starting point for clarifying Freud's terminology in his own way, namely by distinguishing between a personal and a collective Unconscious.⁶ Freud, however, focuses his attention on the Unconscious of a person motivated by his life history. And this Unconscious is something forgotten. For Freud, the Unconscious is in no sense something that is merely unknown. Street names in Vladivostok, which are presumably unknown to most Europeans, do not constitute an Unconscious. The Unconscious is consequently an ex-known, something previously known that has been forgotten but has not thereby disappeared from the world. It continues to represent a "latent" level in the mind, for—and this is a fundamental theorem of psychoanalysis—nothing in mental life gets lost. Hence there is always a reason for forgetting something.

This idea is a landmark in the cultural history of forgetting. With Freud, forgetting loses its innocence. From then on, anyone who has forgotten something or wants to forget something has had to defend himself and face the possibly painful and embarrassing question *Why?* The more firmly he is convinced that his forgetting requires no justification and that he has simply forgotten, the more insistently this question arises.

Specifically, Freud is suspicious of the reasons for forgetting. The universal motive that he thinks is behind all individual cases of forgetting, the "hidden meaning of the forgotten" that psychoanalytic treatment must patiently search out and bring to light, is the principle of displeasure. Whatever I find unpleasant, annoying, embarrassing, anything that bothers my conscience, I willingly and easily forget and in this way realize my psychic goal: "the avoidance of displeasure." It is well known that it is precisely this effect of the principle of displeasure, so favorable to forgetting, that Freud describes as repression. Thus he writes, "the Unconscious, that is, the repressed."

Freud's brilliant discovery consists in assuming that this repressed-forgotten is not simply gone and done with but rather continues to function in the form of the Unconscious, continues to work and to protest and to disturb the mind. This unpleasant forgotten is pathogenic and produces various mental diseases. "Hysteria . . . is usually characterized by very extraordinary forms of amnesia," Freud writes, and he sees in this a fundamental observation that the psychoanalyst's medical art must take as its starting point. In the event that psychoanalytic therapy does not take place or is ineffective, the patient is forced ceaselessly to repeat, in the form of symptoms, the repressed-forgotten: a Sisyphean task.

If we can associate this discovery of Freud's with his art of dealing with forgetting, then we are perhaps also justified in comparing and explaining it with a central idea of ancient mnemotechnics, and therefore I ask the

reader to allow me to recapitulate briefly here what was said in preceding chapters. Ancient mnemotechnics was an art of the concrete and graphic. Its rules required that all abstractions be made concrete and everything concrete or concretized be translated into pictorial form. To this extent mnemotechnics is a thoroughly pictorial art; in other words, from this point of view imagination and memory are only two aspects of one and the same thing.⁷

The old masters of the *ars memoriae* also taught us that among the contents of the memory, images that arouse emotional reactions are retained longer and more surely. In manuals of the art of memory these images are called *imagines agentes*, "active images" or "operative images."⁸ We recall that Dante is a brilliant adept of this art of images. As we have already seen, in hell Dante the pilgrim encounters the troubadour Bertrand de Born, who is eternally condemned to wander about carrying his severed head in his hand, swinging it from the hair like a lantern. This is a genuine Dantian *imago agens*.⁹ There is a precise counterpart to this image in Freud's notion of "operative forgetting-images" (if I may so call them). Operative images of this kind, especially when they are relevant to the individual's life history, do not allow themselves to be driven out of the psyche by even the strongest displeasure and repression but rather continue to produce effects, and precisely because they are not admitted by the ego or super-ego they are pathogenic. An example of a genuinely Freudian *imago agens* is Leonardo da Vinci's childhood memory of a vulture that opened his [Leonardo's] mouth with his tail and then struck him repeatedly on the lips with his tail. One can imagine why in his theory of forgetting Freud deals with different parts of the body than does Dante in his theory of memory.

In Freud's work the *imagines agentes* have in addition their own signal-language, by which they make themselves perceptible to the properly trained psychiatrist, even if not to the untrained patient himself. More precisely, there are two signal-languages to which Freud directs his special attention: the language of the previously mentioned "slips" and the speech of dreams. For example, a repressed-forgotten embarrassment may come to light through a slip of the tongue. As for the operative images of "dream forgetting" (this is also Freud's term), it may suffice to recall the countless Oedipal dreams, castration dreams, or death-wish dreams that Freud describes and analyzes.

I turn now to psychoanalytic therapy, which is of great interest not only for physicians but also for linguistic researchers because it is entirely based on language.¹⁰ The psychoanalyst strives sedulously to get the patient to talk, and for the most part to narrate. The analyst speaks as little as possible but nevertheless reserves for himself a certain competence in persuasive rhetoric through which he leads the patient to certain interpretations

in accord with theoretical models of behavior and motivation. Here forgetting is definitely supposed to be undone, cancelled. This aspect of psychoanalysis can no longer be seen as a version of the art of forgetting but must be attributed expressly to an art of memory. Narrating and letting oneself be narrated can in fact be seen as a highly successful strategy of memory, as is shown in particular by Walter Benjamin's essay "The Storyteller" (*Der Erzähler*).¹¹

What therapeutic goal is served when with the help of the outlined, primarily narrative mnemotechnics the repressed-unconscious is brought back into consciousness, when the forgotten is once again made the not-forgotten? Freud more than once uses judicial metaphors to describe this goal ("the allegory of judge and accused"). A conflict is supposed to be reconsidered, a case retried, proceedings carried out anew before a second tribunal, with the goal "of reviewing a trial that was completed earlier." Perhaps in this way, Freud hopes, a not-guilty verdict may be obtained, or at least mitigating circumstances taken into consideration that will allow the formerly unpleasant events that have been forgotten to be cured in the mode of not-forgetting.

Here psychoanalytic reflection usually ends—as in a novel that continues up to the happy conclusion and no further. Not, however, in the work of the Freudian Pierre Bertrand, who has written a book on forgetting in which he discusses in detail Freud's art of forgetting.¹² He asks what actually happens, according to Freud, after the moment of the cure. Must the cured patient (if he is cured) permanently retain in his consciousness the forgotten event that has been revived? Or does such an activation of consciousness, if continued for a long time, ultimately produce other kinds of psychic damage that can be healed only if the cured patient is also able to definitively forget what he has, with the help of the therapist, so happily dealt with? Hence Pierre Bertrand distinguishes a negative or bad kind of forgetting from a positive or good one. Adhering somewhat more closely to Freud's judicial metaphors, I should prefer to call these "unpacified" forgetting and "pacified" forgetting. The former is forgetting *before* psychoanalytic treatment; the latter is forgetting *after* it. If this conception is correct, and it seems to me to be implicit in Freudian theory, then Freud's art of forgetting is essentially based on this distinction between an unpacified forgetting and a pacified forgetting as well as on the far-reaching recognition that there is no direct path, involving for instance mere weakening of the *imagines agentes*, that leads from unpacified forgetting to pacified forgetting. The detour by way of consciousness cannot be avoided, whence a certain paradox in the Freudian art of forgetting: if this detour is to be successfully gotten through, the art of memory must be relied on, so that the latter turns out to be an auxiliary to the art of forgetting (*ancilla oblivionis*).