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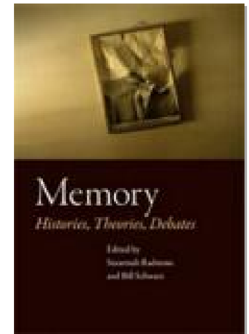

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6. Memory in Freud

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When Freud set out to understand how memory worked in the psyche, he wasn't thinking about whether his ideas harmonized with the historical and cultural complex we know as "modernity." But the theory of memory that Freud developed puts his conception of memory at modernity's heart.

In the modern period, memory seems caught in a distinctive form of crisis. We could think of modernity's "memory" as involving two contrary mismatches between recollection and its object. Memory is either frustrated by insufficiency, or it is cursed with exaggeration: *too little* memory, or *too much*. Modernity is either haunted by the near-impossibility of determining a reliable past, or it is burdened by the compulsion to repeat a past we cannot shake off. Freud's theory of memory lives in these twin, uncomfortable misfits between the recollecting faculty and the material it makes available to consciousness. This unhappy dialectic might be the dilemma upon whose horns modernity hangs us.

How does memory work in Freud? To begin with, it would be impossible to conceive the psyche if it did not incorporate a faculty for conserving and conceiving the past. From the beginning of his work Freud insisted that the therapy he theorized and the theory he practiced sought to understand memory. "A psychological theory deserving of any consideration," he wrote in 1895, early in his career, "must furnish an explanation of 'memory.'"[1] And he recognized that such an explanation had been missing in psychology: "If anyone should feel inclined to overestimate the state of our present knowledge of mental life, a reminder of the function of memory is all that would be needed to force him to be more modest. No psychological theory has yet succeeded in giving a connected account of the fundamental phenomenon of remembering and forgetting." (*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* [1901]; *SE* 6:134).

Freud's preoccupation with memory proliferated and pervaded his psychological theory, to the point where the individual almost seemed to have been reconceived as a cluster of memory operations and transformations. Freud represented *desire*, *instinct*, *dream*, *association*, *neurosis*, *repression*, *repetition*, *the unconscious*—all the central notions of psychoanalysis—as memory functions or dysfunctions. In his theory, the exercise of memory seeks to heal the same traumas whose capacity for disrupting our existence memory itself perversely sustains. This is memory's paradox in Freud, and it may be irresolvable.

So memory came to stand both as the problem Freud sought to crack and as the key to his solution to it. In his attempt to unravel memory's complications, he magnified its field, its centrality—and its ambivalence—more insistently and more powerfully than any other theorist in the modern period. In psychoanalysis the density and intensity of attention to the phenomena of memory, forgetting, false memories, and the like, are evidence of the power of the past. Memory names the mechanism by which our present is indentured to the past; or, to turn the structure around, by which a past we never chose dominates the present that seems to be the only place given us to live.

Yet the past is gone. It is always absent—this would seem its very definition. When we try to narrate our past, most often we either get it wrong or we lie. The past may determine the present. But the problem for cultural or psychological theory is to understand how in its absence and its impalpability it manages to do so. In Freudian terms, the constraints imposed upon us by the past seem "uncanny." Freud's objective could then be put this way: to discover how our past, despite being irretrievably absent, maintains the power of its presence; and, to the extent possible, to devise means for undoing this power.

Most of the time, the determinations of our past appear invisible. They constitute our reality while remaining mostly transparent. This can lead us to ignore them. But in those moments where some disturbance of this transparency becomes perceptible, then suddenly the past no longer "goes without saying." As he developed the theory of psychoanalysis, these were the moments Freud's attention detected and seized upon. In dreams, in "slips" or what he termed "parapraxes," in hysteria, and in the other transference neuroses, the present unexpectedly stopped making sense and became inexplicable. To explain such anomalies Freud discovered he could invoke a covert persistence of the past and the determinations of a memory whose extent and intensity no one before him had conceived as so ubiquitous or so imperious.

Where, then, is this past? How can we gain access to it? And how can its power be managed? Early in Freud's therapeutic work he decided to "start from the assumption that my patients knew everything that was of any pathogenic significance and that it was only a question of obliging them to communicate it" (*Studies on Hysteria* [1895]; *SE* 2:110). To achieve such communication, Freud's method based itself upon dialogue. Consequently in psychoanalysis, recollection is not just individual; it involves a system of *two* people working together. But why should a memory that everything suggests is *personal*

require the midwifery of a psychoanalytic interlocutor to bring it to light? The answer begins with Freud's assertion that forgetting is not a random result of erosion or entropy, but is purposeful conduct. But for Freud forgetting is a conduct performed without the knowledge of its actor. Freud conceives of forgetting as something we've *learned* to do in the service of some need. Thus it is a lived memory of a forgotten forgetting. Then the analyst's intervention is necessary in order to bring this forgetting back to light, and make such troubling recollections accessible again.

How is this possible? Freud believed that such dialogic recollection could work because the therapist has a different memory and a different past from the patient's and hence is not bound to the reproduction of the patient's blockage, nor to the recollected forgetting that has determined it. Anamnesis, recollection, is dialogic because undoing the pattern of failure to remember, subverting the false stability of mnemonic blockage, requires the dynamism and the intervention of *somebody else*. Transference—to put the point in Freudian terms—can only make sense within a relation of *difference*.[2]

Freud's own memory was excellent. "I am not in general inclined to forget things," he wrote in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* (*SE* 6:135). Yet Freud's memory was subject to the same failures and mix-ups that everyone experiences. For example, the phenomenon he termed "cryptomnesia"—what we might translate as "forgetting with advantage." With his customary candor, Freud recounted his own commissions of this lapse. For example he described how he had been brought by his friend Fliess to realize that he had completely blotted out the memory that Fliess had introduced him to the theory of "original bisexuality," a theory that he then later played back to Fliess as if Freud had devised it himself.[3] For most of us, lapses such as these function only as annoyances or embarrassments. But Freud hypothesized that they could be made intelligible.

The first significant result of his inquiry into ordinary experiences of memory loss and degradation was his essay on "The Psychical Mechanism of Forgetfulness" (1898), which became the opening chapter of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. Freud took many of the analyses of mnemonic lapses in this study from his own experience, including the classic case of his inability to recall the name of the painter of the Orvieto Last Judgment frescoes.[4] The result of his investigations strengthened Freud's conviction that such mental errors are always *purposeful*. So when Freud interpreted experiences of "forgetting," he analyzed them not as simple memory drop-outs, but as blockages of recollection determined by the psyche's need to *not* remember something troubling. We could say that these blockages then became memory-substitutes for unwanted recollections.

Memory lapses like the ones Freud analyzed in his work around the turn of the century gave a microcosmic but crucial glimpse of the general mechanism by which memory, seemingly a benign and neutral "archive" of our experience (*SE* 3:296), could turn pathological. Freud was explicit: "The example elucidated here [he is talking about his own inability to recall Signorelli's name] receives an immensely added interest when we

learn that it may serve as nothing more or less than a model for the pathological processes to which the psychical symptoms of the psychoneuroses . . . owe their origin" (*SE* 3:295).

This hypothesis has proven remarkably productive. Through its varied manifestations, psychoanalysis, along with a series of diverse interpretive systems inspired by it, has been able to theorize entire areas of human phenomena that had seemed meaningless as *meaningful*. Elements of behavior previously thought to be random or negative (for example, the seemingly entropic disappearance of a memory trace) have been reconceived as motivated, hence as comprehensible. This doctrine transforms forgetting from a flat absence into a rich positivity—into a version of remembrance. And it insists on the intimate connection between the two, on their systematicity (see *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, *SE* 6:134). Before Freud, forgetting had seemed an event without a narrative, an inarticulate blank. But Freud insisted that in the psyche there could be no results without causes, hence no denouements without stories. If forgetting resulted, there was a tale behind it. At the same time, his theory offered an explanation of why the pertinent story about our forgetting hadn't been known to us all along—why it had, in effect, been forgotten.

To put his theory in motion, Freud projected a protagonist and a plot for the account he was generating about forgetting. In effect he created a new narrative genre about the process of the mind. The main protagonist in this narrative had emerged as early as 1895 in *Studies on Hysteria*, in Freud's discussion of the analytic technique he had developed in his work with hysterics. There, concerning the phenomenon of "pathogenic" forgetting, he wrote that such forgotten material "nevertheless in some fashion lies ready to hand and in correct and proper order. . . . The pathogenic psychical material appears to be the property of an intelligence which is not necessarily inferior to that of the normal ego" (*SE* 2:287).

This new character was the *unconscious*, and the new story it wrote was the result of what Freud termed *repression*. In the narrative of the psyche that Freud was composing, these new entities functioned to withdraw from the ego's possession important facts about its perceptions, recollections, and behavior. In this new conception, the process of recollection was crucially redefined, both in its necessity and its possibility. For while it now appeared absolutely indispensable to recover the memories that the unconscious had withdrawn from the accessible archive of memory, simultaneously and for the same reason, this task of recovery emerged as profoundly problematic. For once we have an unconscious, *where is our past*? The paradox of Freudian construction of memory is that it defined for this constitutive instance of our psyche—of our *self*—both an irreducible presence and an infinite distance.

This paradoxical—we might say paralogistic—combination of presence and absence frames a new situation for thinking. The modern world, many have argued, is constituted by the ever-increasing mobility of everything that makes it up—not only material objects,

but language itself. Indeed in modernity, language's lability comes to seem the most characteristic condition of our existence; the sign becomes the model of everything that occupies our attention and furnishes our world. But once signs begin to float and flow, things become hard to restabilize. Where *now* is the "real"? This semiotic puzzle—for example, the deceptive verisimilitude, the apparent *reality* of our reference to or memories of the nonexistent—had occupied Freud as early as the 1895 *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. There he asked how we can tell the difference between a *presence* and an *absence*. How can we tell a memory of the past from an experience in the present? He wrote that we need "an external criterion in order to distinguish between perception [*Wahrnehmung*] and idea [*Vorstellung*]" or between "perception and memory" (*SE* 1:325; translation modified).

Freud might have solved the problem of how we distinguish these two types of experiences by collapsing objective and subjective reality into each other in some version of Idealism. Then all psychic representations would become equivalent to all others, and the materiality of the real object of perception—present in perception, absent in memory—would have been bleached out. But Freud was an uncompromising materialist—something that more recent Freudians, particularly of Lacanian stripe, have themselves sometimes repressed. In the face of his encounter with the mind-body problem, Freud concluded that *not* everything can be absorbed into the subjective paradigms of the psyche. Entities crucial for psychology nonetheless exist *external* to the psyche itself. These entities are *things*.

The consequences of Freud's epistemological choice are considerable. "What we call things," he wrote, "are externalities which resist thought" (*Project for a Scientific Psychology*; *SE* 1:334; translation mine) [*Was wir Dinge nennen, sind Reste, die sich der Beurteilung entziehen*]. The concept of such resistance is striking. As I suggested just above, it contrasts with familiar positions in our own period, characterized by the relative dominance of linguistic and semiotic paradigms, and—in the absence of extra-semiotic *hors-texte*—by the idea that the world somehow collapses into such paradigms. Freud's stance is different. For him, ideas, memory traces, word- and thing-presentations, the imagined objects of instinctual drives, fantasies, hallucinations—such psychic phenomena can imitate, stand for, refer to, represent, even deny the world external to the self and independent of its mental presentations. But unlike what would be the case in some of the most familiar semiotic models of postmodernity, Freud was *not* willing to equate these representations with the world outside the psyche. He insisted upon confirming the irreducibility of the material objects that the psyche's desires could evoke or react to, but not replace or control. This "resistance" of things is critical in unexpected regions of Freudian theory, as I will argue below.

But Freud's refusal to blot the problem out by collapsing reality into the neurological presentations available within the psyche only deepened the psychological puzzle he was

setting for himself and for us. For in our experience—and particularly in the experience of the hysteric and neurasthenic patients Freud was working with throughout this period—the power of psychical presentations seemed to sweep away the reality of the material world. Neurotics *do* behave as if their memories were real, as if material reality were just an appearance and the mind's phantoms and phantasms entirely determinant.

How could the difference between psychical and material reality be conceived in a way that granted each of these registers its requisite independence while still managing to leave conceptual room for the interactions and substitutions by which their distinction seemed constantly subverted? And in particular, how could we understand—and how alter—the spectral power of certain memory traces within the psyche, traces so powerful that they appear so fully to displace the products of immediate perception that, as we say, people under their influence "lose touch with reality"?

We could restate Freud's perplexity this way: *Where does the "reality" of our memory stop?* When does recollection end and experience begin? In these questions lurks the problem of memory's strange power. Psychoanalysis depends upon the subject's memory for the cure. But as Freud's therapeutic experiences began to suggest, subjects' memories most often *subjected them*. The pertinence of this reversal of agency had arisen dramatically in Freud and Breuer's early attempts to treat hysteria. Their diagnosis in the "Preliminary Communication" (1893) of the *Studies on Hysteria* concerning the etiology of this illness is justly celebrated: "*Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences*" (emphasis theirs; *SE* 2:7). Memory *was* their illness.[5]

In this construction, the seemingly secure materiality of a world of the here-and-now has been replaced by memory symbols whose power seems ineradicable and able to supplant even the most intense experiences in the present. The memory of what cannot be spoken *still speaks*, and it does so irresistibly. It imposes somatic avowal; the mind writes it upon the body.[6] The idea here, that "truth will out," may be familiar. Freud's originality was to specify the source and the mechanism by which such involuntary re-materializations of the hidden occur. This source was the unconscious; the mechanism, the return of the repressed. In order to understand the extraordinary expansion of the memory function in psychoanalysis, we need to understand how, for Freud, these psychic agencies preserve and, at crucial moments, "betray" the past.

Conceptualizing this process and the consequences of this conservation and re-materialization of the past drove the mature theory of psychoanalysis toward a reconception of the nature of psychological "evidence" and of the paradigms necessary for its interpretation. Freud had to credit the seeming sovereignty of representations such as those which involuntarily "ooze out" in neuroses or are acted out in hysteria—and he had to credit these behaviors not as unintelligible aberrations, but as products of the regular functioning of psychic processes. "*What is suppressed continues to exist in normal people as well as abnormal, and remains capable of psychical functioning*" (Freud's emphasis; *Interpretation of Dreams* [1900]; *SE* 5:608).

To the naïve observer, the memories that irrupt from we know not where to overturn our present seem intolerable. Their re-materializations violate the canons by which our world is supposed to be ordered and call out for normalization. Indeed, the psychoanalytic patient has entered treatment precisely to eliminate them. But Freud made it a principle to forestall taking the perspective of the treatment's *end*—the suppression of pathological recurrence of these memory contents—in conceiving its material and its course. Epistemologically speaking, it was as if achieving control over these archaic contents required abandoning our everyday realist bias, and adopting the point of view of memory itself.

But what was the character of this "memory"? To understand Freud's perspective, it is essential to abandon any "realist" notion of the memory that we can access as some form of reliable "storage"—memory as checked baggage which could be reclaimed at any time.[7] Such a notion carries the implication that what went into the brain is stored someplace specific within it, and can be retrieved unchanged. Freud's vision was contrary to such a notion. As he put it early in his career, "There is in general no guarantee of the data produced by our memory" ("Screen Memories" [1899]; *SE* 3:315).[8]

For Freud the stakes in the tension between what we might term on the one hand *literalist* and on the other *interpretive* representations of the past were critical. And they arose at a crucial moment in the development of his paradigm—one that evokes a controversy still burning within Freudianism: the problem of "seduction theory." Early in his career, in one of his most startling hypotheses, Freud speculated that what he was then calling "neurasthenia" (neurosis) resulted from an experience of childhood sexual molestation. In the course of therapy, his patients had regularly produced recollections of such experiences.

But in 1897 he began to be convinced that these accounts were likely to have arisen instead from what he termed "phantasies"—imaginary constructions, into whose formation the proportions of projection, invention, recollection, misrecollection, and retroflexive reconstruction were simply undecidable. But if this was true, there was no master memory. In the revision of the theory entailed by Freud's renunciation of belief in his patients' remembrance of early molestation, the entire field of the diagnostic data of psychoanalysis was sweepingly reinterpreted; the very notion of "data" was radically transformed.[9] The transformation that disbelieved the reality of early seduction of the child but credited the effect of the patient's conviction concerning it unlinked the mnemonic representations elicited in treatment from literal reproduction of past experiences.

This move created the interpretive field in which mature psychoanalysis functions. Such reconception of the status of the issues and the evidence to which the analyst must attend—now no longer concerned with establishing the factual accuracy of the memories produced by his patients, but rather seeking interpretation of the representations they offered—is crucial to the vision of psychoanalysis that underlies Freud's radical resituation of the memory problem.

We can't remember the future. Only our past can be invoked in recollection. But if we can't represent the directionality of memory's determinations, there can be no possibility of understanding how the past it carries forward with it has come to dominate our present. Making sense of memory requires that this directionality be central within any representation of memory's activity. But then the theory of psychoanalysis runs into a serious difficulty. When we come to psychology from the side of memory, it is memory's *persistence*, the seeming inertia of its traces, that calls out for explanation.

The locus of memory in Freud's topography of the psyche attempts to understand this refractory fixity. He conceived the unconscious as the timeless and immutable portion of the psyche. For psychoanalysis, the unconscious is memory's fundamental repository.[10] The memories to which psychoanalysis attends, the memories that define its theoretical originality, are those that reside in this archive but have been subjected to repression. Hence we have no direct access to them. They are recorded in the unconscious, but only their derivatives, the "screen memories" and so on, are available to consciousness as part of the tactics by which repression protects itself. So functionally, what psychoanalysis means by memory—the traces of the past determinant for the pathologies that psychoanalytic therapy seeks to alleviate—is *unconscious* memory strictly defined, the memory of the mysterious, timeless system *Ucs*.[11] And despite the paradoxical counterintuitiveness of the position, Freud was undeviating in his doctrine that system *Ucs.* conserves the past *literally*, *timelessly*, and *permanently*.

There can be no doubt that Freud believed firmly in these characteristics of the unconscious, however difficult it may be for us to imagine how such a position could make sense. He asserted his credo on the timelessness and permanence of the unconscious and its memories from one end of his career to the other. From his essay "The Unconscious" (1915): "The processes of the system *Ucs*. are *timeless*; i.e. they are not ordered temporally, are not altered by the passage of time; they have no reference to time at all" (*SE* 14:187).[12] The repressed contents whose traces occupy system *Ucs.* then appear as the source of the pathologies that preoccupy psychoanalysis. The memories that are crucial for understanding Freud's conception of pathology become available *only* when they somehow pierce through the boundary surrounding system *Ucs*., where their ineradicable traces are located. He understood their frustrating persistence in consciousness and in behavior as a direct result of their permanence in the psyche. That is why it is so hard to change the behaviors that they determine, why the psychoanalytic cure is so protracted.

This brings us to a fundamental and perhaps intractable problem in Freudian theory. It arises in his unprecedented and counterintuitive insistence on the permanence and ineradicability of memories in the unconscious. Many have argued that Freud's conception of psychic contents turns from a model based upon the literalism of *data* to one deploying the more supple practices of *interpretation*. But the timeless and immutable inscriptions of the unconscious, the unchanging memory registrations of system *Ucs*., create a tension within this understanding of Freud. How can we reconcile the paradigm

of protean *interpretive* mobility that is usually thought to define Freudian psychoanalysis with the quasi-positivist concept of the unconscious's unchangeable register of every fact that has ever occurred in an individual's experience?

In the past few decades, with Lacan particularly, structuralist and semiotic models have increasingly dominated conceptions of Freudian psychoanalysis. But Freud's conception of an immutable unconscious memory, the refractory registrations of system *Ucs.* upon which he insisted, create a problem for such models. The almost effortless and mobile transfers of meaning that characterize semiotic systems don't fit comfortably within the logic of memory as Freud conceived it, don't cohere with Freud's timeless and unchanging unconscious. For at the heart of a paradigm of luxuriant and seemingly boundless interpretation, the unconscious is a realm of *facts*. This projection of psychic *fixity* discomfits semiotic theories of the mind and memory.

So despite Lacan's resonant assertion, the Freudian unconscious *isn't* structured precisely like a language. Indeed, it rather functions as something like language's contrary. For in the memory registrations of the timeless unconscious as Freud hypothesizes it, *no* content ever stands for any other. Instead, each stands uniquely and immutably for itself. This produces a puzzling result. In the unconscious, because there can be no change, *there can be no signs*. How can we make sense of this?

The tension here lies between two irreconcilable modes of being. Language and semiotics model the first of these modes. In it, existence is characterized by the mutability with which language accommodates transformations of the meaning-system in which it is embedded. Language can stand indifferently for whatever you like. And this compliance of the linguistic material, this *unfixity* defines the sign: it can be anything, and substitute for anything. But this description of the wanton lability of the semiotic—"compliance of the linguistic material"—is in fact Freud's own characterization for the contents of *consciousness* (*Psychopathology of Everyday Life*; *SE* 6:222). And it invites confrontation with his directly contrasting evocation of the thought-resistant materiality of *things* (*SE* 1:334) that I mentioned earlier.

Here then is the principle that defines the tension in the Freudian model of memory and interpretation: *Language* is compliant; but *things* are resistant. By his own unvarying account, the contents of the Freudian unconscious resist change as if they were "things." In the face of modernist and postmodern constructions of reality as a projection of language, Freud asserts a different understanding. At the heart of his model, the timeless unconscious hides a resistant materialist foundation that nothing seems able to alter. The contents of the unconscious cannot have the character of a sign because they do not have its mobility. It is not that the traces that occupy the unimaginable space of Freud's system *Ucs*. can replace nothing else. It is rather that *nothing can replace them*. They cannot be signified; they are a memory that never forgets and thus is never altered. The past they carry is not past at all. This is what makes the issue of the *cure* so arduous for psychoanalysis.

The unconscious conserves everything. The problem lies in what happens to those ineradicable contents. In his essay "The Unconscious" (1915), Freud asked what occurs when an unconscious memory becomes conscious (see *SE* 14:174 and n. 29). The question is, how are unconscious traces transmuted into conscious signs? This metamorphosis is crucial. For clearly the remainder of the psyche manipulates its contents as if they were indeed semiotic elements. But this means that the contents of consciousness exist in a different ontological mode from those of the unconscious. If we can't understand this passage from one mode of memory to another, the role and character of the unconscious becomes unfathomable. Then system *Ucs.*, which Freud considered the "true psychical reality" (*Interpretation of Dreams*, *SE* 5:613), the heart of his model of the psyche and his most original contribution to our understanding of it, risks absolute incomprehensibility.

The split in the psyche is a chasm between the semiotic and its other. The question of this border is the question of psychotherapy itself. Freud himself was deeply troubled by it. Early in his career he evoked it thus: "It is . . . as though we were standing before a wall which shuts out every prospect and prevents us from having any idea whether there is anything behind it, and if so, what" ("Psychotherapy of Hysteria" [1895], *SE* 2:293). This is only an early member of a long series of images through whose figures Freud sought to describe what the mind was like behind this wall, to understand the unimaginable parallel universe of the unconscious, and to discover how this "internal foreign territory" of which he spoke in 1933 in the *New Introductory Lectures* could be understood (*SE* 22:57).

The paradox of the psychoanalytic cure now becomes apparent. The power of unconscious memories arises in the fact that we are not free *not* to live them. Clearly the unconscious memory traces at the source of a neurotic symptom produce "output" to the rest of the psyche. The problem is that they may produce *only* this. In the state in which they were laid down, they may be inaccessible to input, moderation, modulation, or diminution. Or if not, *how* could these modifications of unconscious contents happen? How can the unconscious be both changeless and changeable? To cure neurosis necessarily means acting upon the archaic registrations lying at its source, which the unconscious has integrally conserved. The problem is to imagine how this could occur. For if the unconscious is timeless and immutable, if memories are inexorably fixed, it would seem difficult to conceive how *any* activity taking place outside it could interrupt or modify them.

This puzzlement—indeed, this apparent contradiction in the model of unconscious memory that Freud devised and remained committed to—is at the origin of the growing pessimism he expressed toward the end of his career concerning the therapeutic ambitions of psychoanalysis itself. His theory itself entailed this reserve. It is particularly visible in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937). The editors of the *Standard Edition* take note of the gloom Freud expressed in the essay concerning the possibility of the cure (see *SE* 23:211). What is striking in the analysis offered in the essay is a convergence between the sources of Freud's hesitations concerning its possibility, and an unconscious whose

difference from the other portions of the psyche is so radical that its contents exist in an alternate ontological mode.

Analysis can only cure by some form of memory displacement or substitution. Pathological memory determinations must be replaced by healthy ones. The formula in which Freud made this point is famous: "Where id was," he wrote, "there ego shall be" (*New Introductory Lectures* [1933]; *SE* 22:80) [*Wo Es war, soll Ich werden*]. But when I asked earlier whether the contents of the unconscious (or the "id") could be the object of replacement, could be *substituted for* and thus fulfill the function of signs, the response from within Freud's system was disconcerting. Such a substitution appeared impossible if the timeless character of unconscious contents upon which Freud never ceased insisting was not to be fatally compromised.

The origin of neurosis in the changeless unconscious then appeared hermetically sealed off from any access to or treatment by the talking cure. In its struggle to overcome the source of pathology, psychoanalysis in effect attempts to oppose the force of *matter* with *words*, to set signs against materiality. It is not surprising that in the face of such a mismatch, in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" Freud substantially lowered the ambitions of the cure. In particular, with regard to the source of the symptom (what he called the "instinctual demand"), he made it clear that there was little prospect of the treatment's eliminating it. "This," he wrote, "is in general impossible." Rather, he continued, "we mean something else, something which may be roughly described as a 'taming' [*Bändigung*] of the instinct. That is to say, the instinct is brought completely into the harmony of the ego" (*SE* 23:225).

But despite this substitute version of how the talking cure might *cure*, the problem may remain irreducible within Freud's structure of the psyche. The cure projects something that psychoanalysis suggests may be impossible: replacement or extinction of an unconscious trace. The theoretical energy Freud devoted, from one end of his career to the other, to establishing the timelessness and the stability of the memories in the unconscious then rebounded at the moment of the cure to subvert any coherent account of its possibility.

In this way, the photographic, "eidetic" memory that Freud attributed to the unconscious and by which it achieves total preservation of the past mutates into memory's nightmare. For what is repressed in the unconscious, what is denied entry into consciousness and cut off from development, nonetheless remains banefully active. In the unconscious, such memories become exempt from extinction. The unconscious is the unerring repository of our past; but its disheartening privilege is to conserve those contents most harmful to us (or at least to our conscious selves) in a place where their toxicity cannot diminish.

Such a conundrum embraces the extremes of Freud's construction of memory, which span a range unprecedented in modernity. The conflict between memory as the *absolute*

reproduction of unchanging contents and memory as the *mobile representation of contents transformed* stresses and might really be said to construct Freudian analytic theory. On the one hand Freud's insistence upon the absence of loss in the mnemonic world of the unconscious can be interpreted as a paroxysm of the reproductive model of memory—*too much memory*, to reproduce the first side of the modernist memory dialectic that I evoked at the opening of this essay. The totalizing retention and recovery of the past has never been conceived more radically than Freud did in his conception of the unconscious. On the other hand, we can't recall these memories—*too little memory*, the other side of the dialectic with which I began.

To put this in the terms that Freud's model constructs for us, Freud interprets the vertiginously changing manifestations and transformations of psychic contents as a form of continuous and uninterrupted recollection. This theory provides us with the most sophisticated paradigm of mnemonic representation yet devised. But we never get back to the real registration of our past. The extremes to which Freud felt it necessary to go in order to embrace the protean diversity and power of memory's presence in our lives seem to have led him to a structure so internally stressed that it appears capable of no resolution at all. If so, psychoanalysis preserves the enigma of memory as tenaciously as any trace in the timeless and immutable unconscious that it conceives as the repository of memory to begin with.

In Freud memory thus lives in a contradiction framed by psychoanalytic topography. In "The Unconscious" (1915), he sought to understand how a relation between the two memory systems he had projected might be modeled (see particularly *SE* 14:188–89). The problem is not that such a relationship across the border between the unconscious and consciousness is impossible, since such passages *must* happen—they are the experience of every minute of our lives. The problem is that Freud was unable to give a coherent account of how this relationship occurs.

Existence does not depend upon our ability to theorize it in order to happen. But for Freud's *theory* the difficulty remains. Whatever the eerie fixity of the registrations preserved in *unconscious* memory, in *consciousness* recollection exhibits a positively wanton disjunction from the veridical. There seems no seduction before which its representations will not yield. If the unconscious theorized by Freud contains an absolute, uncannily inert and stable record of the past, on its side consciousness exhibits a vertiginous representational mobility in the memories of which we are permitted awareness. The problem of characterizing memory mutates from fixity to fluidity, from absolute and inaccessible fact to ever-shifting fiction. I want to conclude this essay by examining these uncontainable and unpredictable remembrances of a memory we cannot remember.

In its protean volatility, conscious memory proliferates and diffuses extravagantly. The theory of memory thus reaches a critical pass. The psychic life we experience or can observe directly is a perpetual movement of transformations and substitutions—ordered, determined perhaps, but potentially interminable. As Freud put it in "The Dynamics of

Transference" (1912), "Unconscious impulses do not want to be remembered in the way the treatment desires them to be, but endeavor to reproduce themselves in accordance with the timelessness of the unconscious and its capacity for hallucination" (*SE* 12:108). But once we are willing to allow *hallucination* as a mode of *meaning*, then psychoanalysis has committed itself to resolving heroic problems in interpretation.

The untrammeled play of exchanges and transformations of meaning that psychoanalysis projects as the business of conscious memory subverts the coherence through time and the reality-check that memory was long supposed to provide. Recollection instead appears as a hypocritical counterfeiter. Henceforth, in a vision that has had great influence since Freud's own period, *remembering* means *changing*. "Like the physical, the psychical is not necessarily in reality what it appears to us to be" ("The Unconscious"; *SE* 14:171). Thus in the psyche, everything moves. Derrida emphasized this point: "The substitution of signifiers seems to be the essential activity of psychoanalytic interpretation."[13] In psychic material, things keep changing into other things. A readiness to perceive this constitutive lability and plasticity, to consider it as the zero-degree reality in the psyche, is fundamental to Freudian hermeneutics, to the scheme of psychoanalytic interpretation.

As I already suggested in mentioning Lacan above, reinterpretations of Freud along semiotic or Saussurian lines have preoccupied important strands of critical theory for decades.[14] We have become familiar with the notion that the Freudian model of a seemingly uncontainable displacement of significations bears a persuasive similarity to the structures of sign generation and interpretation as they became conceptualized in the period when Freud's own theory was being systematized (Saussure's celebrated lectures took place between 1906 and 1911). It almost seems as if semiotics was dreaming up psychoanalysis at the same time as Freud himself.

The investigation of memory in Freud thus seems to swerve away from the character and practices of *memory* itself toward an account of the nature of Freudian *interpretation*. But this apparent inflection from the realm of memory to the realm of interpretation is not an inflection at all. The problems of memory and of interpretation in Freud are inseparable. Indeed, this coincidence may well be one of the most important characteristics of conceptions of memory in modernity, in which the subjective character of recollection underlines and foregrounds the subjectivity of all human beings and doings.

Still, how do these two registers—the mnemonic and the hermeneutic—unfold and intertwine in Freud's theory? Freudian interpretation is fundamentally *genealogical*. It means excavating the successive strata of the psyche. And it believes that the contents thus brought to light can be made sense of. However arduous in practice, Freud thus conceives interpretation as a *realist* act. It then becomes simple to say how the problem of memory relates to the problem of interpretation. *We need hermeneutics when memory in the mode of faithful reproduction fails*: when the transparency of our access to the

meanings transmitted to us from the past (“memory as checked baggage”) is troubled or interrupted.

Psychoanalysis then must reconstruct the meaning of an entity, the psyche, whose meanings are not given on the surface of its own recollection. But as Freud made clear in “Constructions in Analysis,” psychoanalysis can only do this as a *re*construction. It performs the interpretive equivalent of “reverse engineering”: given a product (the symptom), it seeks to understand how the product came to be, how it was made. It walks back up the chain of memories, of relations and transformations that in their accumulated effects produced the psyche it strives to understand.

The axiom of the interpretive system deployed in psychoanalysis is that some content is always remembered—retained, transferred, disguised—across even the most vertiginous mutations undergone by representations within the psyche. These transfers inevitably center in memory, instantiate its processes, and convey its materials. As for the interpretive activity of psychoanalysis, of course it has no other content than memories to work with. “We have to do our therapeutic work on [the present state of the patient’s illness], which consists in large measure in tracing it back to the past” (“Remembering, Repeating, and Working-Through” [1914], *SE* 12:152). This hermeneutic exercise is a fundamental process of anamnesis, of recollection.

In this sense Freud’s attitude lies at the heart of modernity’s vision of the world as a deeply coded message awaiting decipherment. The disciplines that have arisen since the nineteenth century for understanding human behavior in its multiform aspects (among them sociology, anthropology, and—most consequential for us here—psychology) have all sought interpretation of mysteries in modern existence that refuse to give up their meanings to naïve inspection. These emergent disciplines speculated upon hidden barriers to understanding. In effect each projected the same second-guessing of subjectivity or dethroning of consciousness that Freudian psychoanalysis practices.[15]

But here a problem arises. For once the rewriting of the object of interpretation begins, once transfer, transposition, what Freud termed *Umsetzung* (*New Introductory Lectures* [1933], *SE* 22:100–101) are accepted as legitimate for understanding the object’s *real* meaning, then it becomes difficult to see how to *limit* such revisions. The hermeneutics of suspicion maintains that things do not mean what they say. But then the difficulty becomes knowing whether they might not mean anything at all. The problem is that once you say that some meaning is transformed into some other meaning, the question arises of how you know where to stop.[16]

This problem underlies reflection throughout Freud’s career. He acknowledged it in a forthright and crucial passage in *The Interpretation of Dreams*: “The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought” (*SE* 5:525). In one of his last essays, the difficulty that this boundlessness poses appears in the form of a deceptively simple question. Freud asked how we

could know when an analysis is finished. From the point of view of the theory and practice of psychoanalytic interpretation, the puzzlement implicit in the title of this celebrated paper—"Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937, *SE* 23:216–53) [*Die endliche und die unendliche Analyse*]—identifies a problem that may be incapable of solution within the hermeneutic system Freud devised. Indeed, no hermeneutics of suspicion may be able to resolve it.

Psychoanalysis combats the anguish of memory's fallibility by offering the security of interpretation. Interpretation settles the seeming limitlessness of association; it claims to make sense of memories and make memory sensible. The uncontrollable exchange of *everything* that comes up in recollection finds its antidote in the projection of some *specific* thing that arrests the vertigo and aims to reestablish the present as a site of memory-stability. But what founds such restabilization itself? The chain of logic underlying the Freudian interpretive enterprise rests upon two principles whose function is to insure intelligibility and interpretive boundedness: that chance is not to be credited in psychic life, and that the unconscious memory is eternal. The first of these principles warrants the interpretive chain offered by the analyst; the second provides the ground legitimizing such chains. The past is thus recaptured for the present. And it is managed in such a way that its impenetrability for this present is resolved or at least diminished.

The problem is to find a foundation that could limit the slippage of significations in order to locate a point where meaning *stabilizes*, instead of simply repeating its protean referral to yet another substitute signifier in the chain of interpretive rewritings. If it is not to risk incoherence, every interpretive system must appeal to such a foundation. Freud concentrated upon three touchstones that might stabilize the profusion of memories-turning-into-other-memories that the patient's associations present in psychoanalytic treatment: (1) the projection of an ultimate ground upon which all interpretations must be based; (2) the hypothesis of a general lexicon of psychic symbolism that could potentially make interpretation a version of "translation," and provide an objective control upon it; (3) the hypothesis that interpretation can be verified by the patient's reaction to it. Each of these principles or heuristics poses problems of its own, and Freud never settled on one to the exclusion of the others.[17]

This fundamental uncertainty concerning how to *end* interpretation—how to decide which memory in the seemingly endless chain of transformed recollections from the patient's past is to be privileged above the others in determining that past's *meaning*—turns the question of psychoanalytic interpretation into an endless argument. "Is there such a thing as a natural end to an analysis—is there any possibility at all of bringing an analysis to such an end?" Freud framed the question in "Analysis Terminable and Interminable" (1937; *SE* 23:219). His investigation found analysis stressed between postulates of absolute meaningfulness on the one hand, and absolute mobility of meaning on the other. Stated thus, the problem seems to take the form of a logical antinomy. Freud is forthright in declaring that the theoretical ideal of complete understanding cannot be achieved.[18]

The problem of memory might appear to have been forgotten in this discussion. But here it resurfaces strategically. Why does psychoanalysis take so long? This protraction in time is one of the aspects of Freudian psychology that everyone knows about. How can we—how does Freud—explain why this laborious process of analysis can last over many years? It is *memory* that foregrounds the crucial factor of time that might seem to have gone missing in this last portion of my discussion.

Memory is how the mind *knows* time and registers change. In a tantalizing note in "On Narcissism" (1914) Freud speculated that the two faculties—*remembering the past* and *perceiving time*—developed together in the psyche. He considered the faculty of self-observation that arises in consciousness as their common source: "I should like to add to this . . . , that the developing and strengthening of this observing agency might contain within it the subsequent genesis of (subjective) memory and the time-factor" (*SE* 14:96 n. 1). *Memory is why psychoanalysis takes time.*

Yet for all this apparent centering of psychoanalytic meaning in memory, memory's contradiction subsists. Indeed it has only grown more anxious as psychoanalysis has forced our understanding of the presence of the past further and deeper than ever before. In psychoanalysis memory, while everywhere, is lost forever in an unconscious we can neither access nor change. And understanding, whose ambiguous but intimate links to the contents of the past conserved in memory this essay has sought to suggest, has become the most persistent puzzle of modernity. In Freud, memory has entirely filled the psyche. Yet it has disappeared within us. Psychoanalysis then seems a catastrophization of the mnemonic anxieties that preoccupy our age, a paroxysm of the crisis we experience in our vexed and unsettled relationship with the past.