Freudian Slips
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Borrowing Another’s Words

FAUST: Is someone there?
WORRY: The question calls for Yes.
FAUST: Ist jemand hier?
SORGE: Die Frage fordert Ja!

—Faust, part 2, act 5, scene 5

Freud got the motto for The Psychopathology of Everyday Life from his friend Wilhelm Fliess. In his letter of 14 October 1900 he told Fliess:

For the “Psychology of Everyday Life” I would like to borrow from you the nice motto, Nun ist die Welt von diesem Spuk so voll.....Otherwise I am reading Greek archaeology and reveling in journeys I shall never make and treasures I shall never possess.¹

In light of what will become The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, two things about this citation are significant. First is the evolution of Psychology to Psychopathology, a change that occurs by 1 January 1901.² The new name is more congruent with Freud’s belief that the difference between normal and neurotic mental life is a matter of degree, and not of kind; that the investigation of parapraxes—which are known now, in everyday parlance, as Freudian slips—shows “that the borderline between the normal and the abnormal in nervous matters is a fluid one, and that we are all a little neurotic.”³ The slip, for Freud, is relentless proof of the existence of the unconscious and of its operations everyday, in everyone. It is a way of legitimizing his claims for the unconscious on a universal level.

Freud, in 1900, was still very much in need of such legitimization. His work was often under attack or wholly misunderstood. He was conscious of and sensitive to the critical climate in general and in particular when he was contemplating the appearance of the first version of the book on parapraxes. His 9 June 1901 letter to Fliess says that
“Everyday Life” will appear in the July issue of the Monatsschrift.
If I were to abstain from forming an opinion of my works, only your favorable opinion would be left.4

Insisting upon the neuroses of the general populace won Freud few allies, at least at the beginning of his career, and he needed to know that there was a friendly reader for his work. Unfortunately, Fliess was not entirely reliable in this respect. His marital problems in the summer of 1901 led him to implicate Freud in the difficulties he was having with his wife and to impugn Freud’s analytic method with the bruising accusation that “the reader of thoughts merely reads his own thoughts into other people,” a statement that Freud said “renders all my efforts valueless.” “If that is what you think of me,” he continued, just throw my “Everyday Life” unread into the wastepaper basket. It is full of references to you—manifest ones, for which you supplied the material, and concealed ones, for which the motivation goes back to you. The motto, too, was a gift from you. Apart from anything that might remain of the content, you can take it as a testimonial to the role you have played for me up to now. Having announced it in this way, I feel I can send you the essay when it comes into my hands without further words.5

Personal and professional jealousy and intellectual disagreements undid the friendship between Freud and Fliess.6 First, Ernst Kris, in his introduction to The Origins of Psycho-Analysis,7 and, more recently, Jeffrey Masson, in his notes to the Freud-Fliess correspondence, have theorized about the causes and effects of the disintegration of the relationship on Freud personally and on psychoanalysis. But in terms of the function of the slip itself in writing, and its consequences for reading and writing, the utility of this biographical information is to highlight the notion of borrowing, the making the words of the other one’s own.

In order to explain, I would like to return to the question of the motto “borrowed” from Fliess. The second significant point in the letter of 14 October 1900 is not that Freud got the quotation from Fliess, but that he got it wrong. The actual quotation from Faust runs,
Nun ist die Luft von solchem Spuk so voll,

[Now is the air so full of such haunting,]

not "Nun ist die Welt von diesem Spuk so voll... [Now is the world so full of this haunting...]." 8 Freud's letter, when it combines the slip with the use of ellipsis, creates a fragmented misquotation from Faust, which it proposes to use as the first words of the text of what will become The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. In that book two full chapters and numerous other examples are devoted to the examination of a specific form of parapraxis, that of the misquotation of famous pieces of literature by people who should know better, so it is striking that the motto—that is, the concentrated rhetorical essence of the book, its nuclear summary—should itself appear, however surreptitiously, by way of a slip. On one level the misquotation shows a variation on Harold Bloom's idea of the "anxiety of influence," since it indicates a need for legitimization based on conflicting desires to derive intellectual lineage from a great man and to claim absolute originality. Or the slip could be seen to make manifest a desire to be in Goethe's company, to speak not with the voice and paradoxical authority of Faust but, rather, with that of Faust's creator (a fantasy that may have been realized when Freud was awarded the Goethe Prize in 1930). Also, the error itself avoids or displaces the debt to the father who went before. The displaced authority, in this case, is not only Goethe but also Fliess. The slip in the Goethe quotation thus marks a failure to stay loyal to the structures of academic paternity and legitimacy.

On the textual, rather than the biographical, level the analysis of the slip has other related implications. The letter asks to "borrow" a quotation that, first of all, does not belong to Fliess, since it supposedly comes from a drama by Goethe, and, second, because of its inaccuracy, cannot even be said to belong to Goethe. The slip undoes the notion of authorship; it compromises the integrity of a classic text by disrupting its paternity. The author of the slip both participates in and disrupts the authoritative text and, in this case, does so as a consequence of the creation of a new book. The slip disturbs the authoritative text at its most elemental levels, those of the word and the letter. When quotations are mixed up, so are authority and attribution. The slip can show
how one text slides into, away from, around, and through others. It can illuminate the structures of writing that explicitly constitutes itself as analytical and critical—of the writing of others, of borrowed words.

Borrowed words are words that belong to someone else. In the example that I am discussing, the words that Freud seeks to borrow come from Goethe by way of Fliess. They are the words of an other, a text, through whom the borrower seeks to establish a relationship with a third person, who is somehow perceived to have a right to that authoritative text. They are words that need to pass through a form of translation—from Goethe to Fliess to Freud—before they can become Freud’s own. As such, they are a kind of foreign language. One is more susceptible, as Freud says, to committing slips when using a foreign language than when employing one’s native tongue. But sometimes miscommunication in a foreign tongue is preferable to any form of communication in one’s original language. Sometimes a foreign tongue is the only one that will do. This is particularly true in questions of desire: the foreign tongue is someone else’s tongue in my mouth.

To borrow words is both to assume the authority of the other and to avoid, to a certain extent, responsibility for what one is saying: I may have said it, but I said it in someone else’s words. Because of the possibilities for displacement that are involved in the use of foreign words, they are ideal for discussing or referring to sexual desires that, however strongly they may be felt, may not be entirely acceptable to the party or parties they concern. As examples of this displacement of problematic sexual feelings into foreign languages, I would like to cite the frequent use, by sensitively tempered speakers of English, of French and Latin words and phrases to describe particular events and situations and even the general acceptance of the anglicized term double entendre as a way of flagging sexually inflected puns so that they may be obliquely referred to but certainly not ignored. By using the words of an other, a writer may project his or her unacceptable desires onto and through another body of discourse. This other discourse, embodied in a foreign tongue, can itself become a repository for the unwelcome desire operating between two or more people.

The quotation from Faust is such a repository. Freud did not need to ask Fliess for permission to quote Goethe. His work was and is part of a cultural patrimony that stretches from the lowest to the highest levels of German-speaking society. (I remember my paternal grand-
mother, a countrywoman who left a small village in Burgenland to become a seamstress in Budapest, where she sneaked into lectures at the university, reciting Goethe’s poems from memory with a look of transport on her face.) When Freud asks Fliess to borrow Goethe’s words, he must be asking for something other than those words, which are no more Fliess’s than they are anybody’s. The words of a canonical text become, here, an object of exchange between two men, an authoritative text that they can share and over which their relationship may take place. The quotation becomes a locus of men’s (homme, in French) homosocial desire, or, in Luce Irigaray’s term (in French a double entendre, of course), hom(m)osexuality, in which a woman (or a text or a territory or a car or some other feminized object) is used as a conduit for the prohibited homosexuality, or male-centered desire, between men.9 In the case of Freud’s relationship with Fliess this male homosocial desire is made explicit in the letter of 7 August 1901. The paragraph that follows the one I quoted earlier runs:

As to Breuer, you are certainly quite right about the brother, but I do not share your contempt for friendship between men, probably because I am to a high degree party to it. In my life, as you know, woman has never replaced the comrade, the friend.10

Some years later Freud would confide to his biographer Ernest Jones that, regarding his feelings in reference to Fliess, “There is some piece of unruly homosexual feeling at the root of the matter.”11

It is interesting in this regard to note that the specific problem of professional jealousy that disrupted Freud’s and Fliess’s relationship was connected to the question of bisexuality. Fliess had first told Freud that he believed that all human beings were bisexual in 1897, but by the summer of 1900 Freud had forgotten about Fliess’s assertion, which he had originally disputed, and Freud was expressing the idea to Fliess as if it were Freud’s invention. The incident appears in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life in chapter 7, “The Forgetting of Intentions and Impressions,” in which Freud admits his mistake and also that “it is painful to be requested in this way to surrender one’s originality” (144). The question of who came up with the idea first, and the fact that the submissive man (Freud) seeks to usurp the priority of the authoritative man (Fliess) by forgetting the facts, is certainly an oedipal one. Yet it is conceivable that the same difficulty might have arisen
over any number of issues and questions that the two men had
discussed over the years. But it is specifically the idea of bisexuality that
generates first an unpleasantness and then, finally, a rift between the
two men.

When he discusses the bisexuality slip in the public forum that is
*The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* and also in the private correspon-
dence with Fliess, Freud’s manner is characteristically honest and
clinical. But his rigorous self-analysis and openness are not enough to
defuse the explosive potential that the notion of bisexuality, as a sexual
constitution that by definition cannot always live up to the idealized
constructs of a compulsory heterosexuality, can exercise over lan-
guage. The awareness of an “unruly homosexual feeling” does not
necessarily neutralize it, and the mere discussion of it, no matter how
clinical, in a discourse organized by heterosexuality, will tend to dis-
rupt that discourse. James Strachey and Ernest Jones both note that
Freud got the date of his walk with Fliess wrong: it did not occur in
the year that Freud puts it, 1901, but, rather, in 1900. Jones says that
this is because 1901 was “a time when he [Freud] no longer met Fliess,
but still wanted to.”12 After the misdated explanation of the bisexuality
slip, Freud continues:

Finding fault with one’s wife, a friendship which has turned into
its opposite, a doctor’s error in diagnosis, a rebuff by someone
with similar interests, *borrowing someone else’s ideas*—it can hardly
be accidental that a collection of instances of forgetting, gathered
at random, should require me to enter into such distressing sub-
jects in explaining them. (144; italics mine)

The idea of borrowing is connected to “distressing subjects.” While the
desire to borrow or the act of borrowing may not in themselves be
symptomatic, an error in articulating that which is to be borrowed is.
In this example a slip in the “correct” organization of relationships
between men—that is, a slip-up in the heterosexual rules that deter-
mine what men are permitted to desire from one another—produces
a slip in writing. The bisexuality parapraxis, carefully recounted but
still erring inside the book, is announced outside the book, in the letter
that asks for a literally unauthorized gift.

Here, as elsewhere in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, it is
evident that a parapraxis marks a slip of gender. Not only do para-
praxes occur when gender slips, but, as I will show in the course of this study, both the theory and the text of The Psychopathology of Everyday Life depend upon, and are possible because of, slippages in orthodox gender structures. Not surprisingly, the strategy of canonical analysis of the slip itself, as a manifestation of unconscious content, is to feminize it in its relationship to the orderly, rational discourse in which it occurs. Slippage in a text is then materially constituted as difference.

This difference is evident in the two versions of the Faust quotation that Freud supplies:

Nun ist die Welt von diesem Spuk so voll

[Now is the world so full of this haunting]

and

Nun ist die Luft von solchem Spuk so voll

[Now is the air so full of such haunting]13

The slip marks the space between the world and the air, and between this and such. In both cases the boundaries are unclear; for example, it is difficult to tell where the world ends and the air begins—where does earth slip into ether? The first version highlights a concreteness and a specificity that are absent from the second: that the world is full of this particular menace is a slightly more immediate expression than that the air is full of such and such a kind of threat. The indistinctness of Goethe’s version is spookier though, because his haunting inhabits the air, which we inhale—the indefinite Spuk can enter us with our life’s breath or is already part of it. The effect of this slip is to undo the binary opposition between world and air, to distress the distinction between material and spirit. The space between the terms is inhabited by the slip.

Perhaps die Welt crept into Freud’s version from the line that precedes the quotation, in which Faust laments his quest for knowledge, and says that he was a man once, before he learned what he now knows:
Das war ich sonst, eh ich’s im Dürsten suchte,
Mit Frevelwort mich und die Welt verfluchte.

[Once I was that, before I searched the gloom,
cursing myself and the world with iniquitous words.]

Analysis of a psyche or of writing in this context—that is, a context in which one seeks not self-knowledge but, rather, mastery over that which is perceived as other—has ended up feeling like a descent into the gloom, like a gradual process of self-damnation, or at least of convicting oneself with one’s own words.

At this point in the drama Faust is near his end. Four sisters—Want, Guilt, Need, and Worry—have come to prepare the way for their brother, Death. Because Faust is a rich man, only one of the sisters, Worry, can enter his house. She is the haunting shape who blinds him just before he dies: Worry survives the omniscient investigator.

Similarly, Spuk is a word that survives the slippage between the two quotations. It is a noun that has no plural form, and it means “haunting, ghostly apparition, nightmare, ghastly business”—something amorphous and scary, that comes in uninvited. When combined with the identity specified in Faust, that of Worry, Spuk becomes analogous to the ever-unwelcome manifestations of the repressed. The errors in the first quotation, as well as its preservation of Spuk’s integrity, only serve to emphasize the continuity of the presence of the anxiety-bearing, haunting shape.

It is not inconsequential that this shape should embody a feminine being. Spuk is a masculine noun in German, but such materiality as there is of Spuk in Faust is feminine: it refers to a community of four sisters whose job it is to undo Faust, the mastermind. When the quotation becomes an epigraph to The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, which is a study of the unwelcome eruptions of the repressed into language, of the haunting of discourse by the repressed, Spuk may be understood as slip, as a feminine interloper in the purportedly masculine realms of grammar, meaning, and the conscious. After listening to the four sisters talk among themselves, Faust says,
Den Sinn der Rede konnt ich nicht verstehn.

[The sense of their speaking I cannot understand.]

but then he goes on to paraphrase, quite accurately, what he has just heard. Like anyone else caught in a slip, he understands its meaning all too well but displaces the responsibility for this understanding onto someone or something else, the discourse of a feminized other.

The feminization of the slip in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is the result of a slip in gender. *Spuk*, the amorphous haunting thing, may be a masculine noun, but it is concretely engendered in the text as feminine. The female becomes a context through which the slip is told and analyzed. *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is thus written under the rubric of slipped gender. It is told literally under the authority of a quotation from *Faust* that started out as a misquotation: *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is a book about slips written by way of a book that slipped. Finally, it is a book profoundly influenced by and produced by means of the borrowing of the words of an other (and of the many others who contributed examples of their own slips to the book's eleven editions). It is constituted by means of a foreign language—that is, by words that are not one's own. The story of slips in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* is told by means of more than two hundred anecdotes, the majority of them narrated over the bodies of women or texts and foreign words that have been subjected to a process of connotative feminization. This study explores the relationship of woman, writing, and the foreign tongue and why it is that they are seemingly indispensable to the elaboration of a theory of the existence of the unconscious and its emergence into language.

Near the end of the essay "Freud and the Scene of Writing," Jacques Derrida suggests the question of

a *psychopathology of everyday life* in which the study of writing would not be limited to the interpretation of the *lapsus calami*, and, moreover, would be more attentive to this latter and to its originality than Freud himself ever was. "*Slips of the pen*, to which I now pass, are so closely akin to slips of the tongue that we have
nothing new to expect from them” (XV, 69). This did prevent Freud from raising the fundamental juridical problem of responsibility, before the tribunal of psychoanalysis, as concerns, for example, the murderous lapsus calami (ibid.).

A lapsus calami is a slip of the pen. In The Psychopathology of Everyday Life the slipping pen is murderous only in regard to women; Derrida is referring in this quotation to a series of anecdotes that recount how a doctor repeatedly wrote orders for overdoses of drugs for elderly women (122–25). Only chance prevented the deadly prescriptions from being administered. In another anecdote Freud mixes up two bottles of medications that he is applying to an old woman’s eyes and is horrified by his mistake (177–78). I discuss these examples in detail later. For the moment I want to take Derrida’s suggestion further and to use an analysis of the book on slips to raise the problem of responsibility in reference not only to psychoanalysis but also to the practice and practitioners of critical theory in general. Theory and analysis carried out over the body of woman have effects beyond the boundaries of the text, on real women’s bodies. We can be sure that no anecdotes about prescriptions for fatal overdoses that were administered to women appear in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. But the written slip, as record, provides a means of tracing the structures of theory and their effects on feminized others.

The anecdotes that appear in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life—whether they are about slips of the tongue, bungled actions, forgetting, or the other kinds of parapraxes—have in common with the ones about slips of the pen the fact that they are, in the book, codified as writing. Regardless of the circumstances of its occurrence, the Freudian slip is a written one. Parapraxis as theory and as event is textualized. This idea has at least two implications for “a psychopathology of everyday life in which the study of writing would not be limited to the interpretation of the lapsus calami.” First, it breaks down the apparent distinctions between slips of the pen and slips of the tongue: both of these, as well as the other kinds of slips, are translated into writing in Freud’s book. The written narration of the slip thus becomes the ground of its analysis. Second, the definition of slip as written entity suggests, like Derrida, a much broader symptomatology of writing than what The Psychopathology of Everyday Life has to say about slips of the pen. This
study concerns itself with Freud’s writing on and of all kinds of para-
praxes.

“Freud and the Scene of Writing” first appeared in English in
1978. Aside from Derrida’s suggestion at the end of that essay, remark-
ably little attention has been paid to either the idea of the slip or to The
Psychopathology of Everyday Life, despite the fact (or perhaps because
of it) that, of all of Freud’s works, it is the one that most explicitly
discusses the ways that language, and written language in particular,
is traduced by the repressed. The critical approaches to the text that
have appeared have either used it to attack Freudian analytic method-
ology or to inform studies of other works. The Italian Marxist critic
Sebastiano Timpanaro, in 1976, and James Guetti, in 1988, have similar
responses to the text, with Guetti’s article echoing Timpanaro’s book
in many respects, except for that of class analysis. Both men call
Freud’s methodology into question and state that his formulation of a
relationship between the slip and the unconscious is an example of
circular logic or of illogic.16 Timpanaro does so on the basis of com-
parisons with textual criticism (the branch of philology that deals with
errors of transcription and quotation in manuscripts) and seeks to
prove that slips do not manifest the existence of an unconscious but
are, rather, mechanical aberrations that do not necessarily have any
psychic significance for the person who produces them. Guetti sees a
tautology in Freud’s understanding of the slip-unconscious relation-
ship:

The significance one might assign to a slip of the tongue cannot
logically be justified until the unconscious is established as its
source. And the existence of the unconscious as a separate mental
faculty cannot be proved unless faulty acts of speaking or other
behavior already have a sense yet to be derived from it. (40)

What strikes me as interesting about both writers is the vehe-
mence of their insistence upon the idea that slips do not mean any-
thing. Anyone who has had the misfortune of uttering a slip during
an argument, and thus losing a position of rhetorical superiority, or
of writing a slip that somehow compromised one’s authority or credi-
bility knows that a theory of the unconscious is not necessary to appre-
ciate the eruption of meaning that a slip represents: all that is neces-
sary is a reader or listener who takes the slip at its literal value. *Unconscious* is the word that psychoanalysis uses to define one of the currents contributing to the slip's meaning. Nevertheless, the slip has meaning for people who have never heard of the unconscious or who do not accept the theory of its existence. An awareness of the meaningfulness of slips antedates any Freudian theory of them by several centuries. 17

Both Timpanaro and Guetti see Freud's way of interpreting slips as inventing or inserting meaning where there was none or supplanting a preexistent meaning. The former says that Freud's "is an effort to penetrate *at all times* to an underlying, unpleasant reality arrived at only by dint of a victory over the subject's resistances" (179); Guetti thinks that Freud's version of slips wants to "reveal... and provide access to a state of mind or a sequence of meanings truer than the one they interrupt" (37). Neither critic mentions that the slip does not need anyone to call attention to it: it is usually glaring and if invisible, is so only to the person who produced it. On 23 October 1992, at a rally in New Jersey, then President George Bush began a sentence by saying "I hate to ruin a lovely recession—I mean recession... ." The slip was reported on the local television news and appeared the next evening in the "Weekend Update" news parody on "Saturday Night Live." 18 Its meaning, as I have mentioned, is not the result of elaborate interpretive processes but, rather, of its literalness, and, it is important to note, it has political implications, which Bush tried to ignore but which "Saturday Night Live" emphasized.

In somewhat different circumstances I gave a paper before a very large audience at the university where I earned my doctorate. I was doing a psychoanalytic reading of some lesbian pornographic images and wanted to show how lesbian desire differs from heterosexual desire, particularly in relationship to castration. But I was anxious about the presentation and found that the question I most wanted to avoid (because it challenged my academic mastery of the situation) inserted itself most inopportune: I loudly proclaimed the word *phal-lus* in the middle of a sentence in which it did not comfortably fit. But, of course, the word was crucial, if until that point unavailable, to the public discussion, and, because the slip was acknowledged rather than ignored, it changed the rest of the session's discourse. My point here is that the meaning of the intrusion of the word need not be painfully extracted: it is evident on the literal level. Acknowledging the political
importance of a slip produces a different succeeding discourse than does pretending it never happened.

Similarly, contrary to what Timpanaro and Guetti say, the interpretation of the slip does not have to be seen as “truer” than or competitive with the discourse that it interrupts. A slip does not only mean something else; instead, it means with the discourse it appears in. My phallus slip is relevant here, because it shows, paradoxically, how slips displace what some theorists have called the phallocentric way of reading and writing—a way that seeks single meanings and erases the participation of an unconscious in the making of discourses. It is interesting to note that neither Timpanaro nor Guetti tests Freud’s method on themselves. Both authors can only see analysis, and psychoanalysis in particular, as a method for the domination of others. I am aware that psychoanalytic theory has been used to excuse or enfranchise the domination of subordinate groups, such as women and gay people of both sexes. But that does not mean that it cannot be a powerful tool for liberation as well. Its particular utility is in terms of self-criticism. Those who take exception to Freud’s interpretive methods might start with “Constructions in Analysis,” a late essay that suggests that the analysand’s emotional affect in response to a construction offered by an analyst may be the best gauge of the construction’s accuracy. The vehemence of the texts that I have been discussing here, and their investment in showing Freud to be “absurd,” “obviously illogical,” “amusing,” “extreme,” “ludicrous,” “embarrassing” (these adjectives are from Guetti’s article, but similar ones appear in Timpanaro’s book as well), seems, at the least, misplaced. But, if Freud’s theory of the meaning of slips is conceived of as an unwelcome challenge to notions of linguistic, psychic, or political mastery, then the emotional response is more understandable. At any rate, it is interesting to note how criticisms of Freud’s method echo Fliess’s comment (cited on page 12) that “the reader of thoughts merely reads his own thoughts into other people’s.” Such critical reactions seem based in a need to determine which man will own mastery over interpretation.

In readings that are more open to psychoanalysis Anthony Wilden and Jane Gallop look at the slip in terms of the question “Who is speaking?” in it and do so precisely to raise the issue of mastery. But for these two authors Freud’s work on slips—specifically, the “Signorelli” example from the first chapter of The Psychopathology of Everyday Life—is used as way of beginning to discuss Lacan. Freud’s text is
set aside in favor of Lacan’s. Also, the problematics of using the phrase “Who is speaking?” in reference to written language about the slip are not addressed in either text, and neither is Freud’s writing about slips—that is, there is no inquiry into the rhetoric and representation of slips in Freud’s textual discourse. Lacan’s reading of Freud is analyzed, but the Freudian text is not approached directly. Additionally, when The Psychopathology of Everyday Life is mentioned it is not considered on its own but, rather, as part of a trio of books, with The Interpretation of Dreams and Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious. Thus, when Shoshana Felman writes about the slippery, and slipping, in The Literary Speech Act, she does so in relation to Jokes. In that book, according to Felman, humor and slipping go together, making of the discursive moment in question a pratfall. This kind of slipping (as on a banana peel) is intentional, or appropriated as intentional. The distinction between a joke and a parapraxis is that the joke is produced intentionally and intends an effect upon its hearer or reader. A joke, like a dream interpretation, is a form of conscious rhetorical mastery of problematic wishes or feelings. Jokes and dreams highlight the originality and cleverness of their authors. A successful joke teller gains mastery over others, by producing laughter in them. The joke as text is a tool of rhetorical domination.

In analytical terms the dream as text plays a passive role analogous to the joke’s active one. It may function as a text from which previously unconscious meanings may be extracted, but that meaning awaits the dreamer’s willing attention. Dreams rarely force their meaning upon the dreamer. While dreaming itself cannot be called intentional, the psychoanalytic accession to the unconscious meaning of dreams is. Thus, in both the case of jokes and of dreams the joke teller or dreamer becomes a willing participant in the production of meaning and, in both cases, does so in order to gain mastery—over an audience or (by way of interpretation) over a dream text.

A Freudian slip’s power to disrupt language and social relations comes from the fact that it is more than a thought; it is always the result of an embodied action. Unlike a dream, which can be kept to oneself, a slip insists on itself, inevitably in the presence, actual or impending, of another person. It cannot be hidden. At the moment of slipping one’s fluency in the manipulation of signs and language is called into question. Either there is too much or not enough meaning—the only thing that is certain is that one is not producing the effects
that one had consciously intended to produce. Perhaps this is one reason for the lack of attention paid to The Psychopathology of Everyday Life by literary critics and theorists. It makes too obvious the fragility of authorship, authority, and intentionality and does so in a more troubling way than even psychoanalytic or deconstructive methods that criticize the texts of others. When a slip occurs there is no need to follow occult traces of repressed content or of marginal internal contradictions: its meaning is blatant. The slip signifies that its author is not an authority, because even that author’s own discourse is out of control. This is true not only for writers who seek to achieve and believe in the possibility of mastery over language but also for writers who accept that mastery over language is tenuous at best, and perhaps not even desirable. Thus, the menace of the slip is not only that it reveals the artificiality of the hegemony of traditional structures of criticism and politics but that it undoes radical criticism as well. Because it rattles authority, it is best to avoid the discussion of slips entirely, especially since, as Freud points out:

Now slips of the tongue are highly contagious, like the forgetting of names—a peculiar fact which Meringer and Mayer have noticed in the case of the latter. I cannot suggest any reason for this psychical contagiousness. (62)

To write about slips is to risk slipping, and even to mention them is to risk being infected by them. The slip is dangerous territory for the person whose identity, however theoretically well informed, is bound up in and dependent upon making convincing interpretations. For better or for worse, this is the structure of academic writing now, as it was in the early years of the century, when Freud piled up anecdotes relating to slips in academic writing and practice in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life. The unintentional letter, word, or phrase, however unavoidable, is undesirable, and everything possible is done to eliminate it, to stay aware and alert—not in order to increase one’s knowledge of oneself but, rather, in order to avoid revealing one’s ignorance.

I would like to suggest a reason for the contagiousness of slips. In an environment like an academic one, in which the emphasis is so heavily laid on having the right answer, in mastering the discourses, a great deal of tension is generated precisely in response to the need not to slip up. When someone finally does slip, the moment of release
of control following that slip can make room for other slips to escape from the people who witnessed the first one. A slip may function as an unconscious invitation to self-revelation by dismantling, in one movement, the myth of unitary authority. It insists on the possibility of multiple discourses and of layered truths.

When Freud wanted to teach psychoanalysis he did not begin with jokes or dreams or a theory of personality: he started with slips. The first four of the Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis set out the whole of Freud’s project in terms of parapraxes. I would like to transpose Freud’s idea here to suggest that not only is the slip useful as an introductory concept in the teaching of psychoanalysis but that the slip itself is a way of teaching, a kind of pedagogy. As concept and as symptom, and then as object of analysis, the slip suggests a pedagogy that is not based on mastery, repression, or univocal authority. The slip teaches us to know that we do not know,22 as well as to know that we do know things that we can only know we know if we surprise ourselves by emitting them in the presence of others.

At one point, in chapter 10 of The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Freud mentions “another instructive error that put me to shame, an example of what might be called temporary ignorance” (220–21). This quotation summarizes the pedagogical utility of the slip. First, in terms of parapraxis, an error can only occur when one knows better—that is, one cannot stray from a path that one has not at some point been on. A parapraxis, then, uses error to bring previously unacknowledged information to light. Its instructiveness is related to its ability to put its author to shame—not in that it necessarily humiliates but, rather, in that it reveals the author’s ignorance and hidden knowledge to someone else. Parapractic learning takes place in community. As a pedagogical tool, paraparaxis works only if it is shared; this sharing could be conceived of as participating in shame, but only if it is shameful to expose, admit, and analyze the clumsy seams in one’s authoritative discourse. If it is used as an occasion for shaming, then the slip’s meaning can be revealed as a way of maintaining power over its author. But, if it is taken, instead, to be a manifestation of previously ignored knowledge, and a function of psychic and intellectual spontaneity, then it can be contagiously instructive.

Perhaps Faust’s downfall was that he wanted knowledge but was unwilling to learn—that is, to expose the structures upholding his mastery to another in the process of questioning. The epigraph that
Freud uses for *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* comes from one of Faust’s monologues. I chose to start this essay with the dialogue that immediately follows what Freud quoted, when Faust turns outward, finally, to ask—even if in dread—“Is someone there?” and is greeted with Worry’s response: “The question calls for Yes.” *Faust*, a text whose hero, like all the heroes of traditional narrative (and of criticism), can only exist by traversing an objectified and idealized femininity, is undone by a discourse, neither question nor answer, proceeding from a gendered position that exceeds the Faustian epistemology. In *Faust* this gendered position is named Worry, *Sorge*, and indicates the point at which authority slips. *Sorge*, as undominated femininity that slips in and undoes the Western mastermind, has a long tradition in philosophy, stretching from Goethe, through Freud and Heidegger, to Derrida.

The bodies of woman, text, and foreign tongue all serve as space in which discourses of mastery are enacted, and this is true, too, in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, in which the slip is theorized and narrated through these categories. But, as in Freud’s borrowed epi-graph, which has a slip at its origin, the very narration of the slip, like the narration of woman, tends to cause the discourse that initially objectified it to slip itself. The Faustian monologue that depends for its authority on omniscience and domination gives way in this point of contact with another discourse that answers it, not to destroy but, instead, to reinvent. The answer-question posed by the feminine *Spuk* does not, in the poem, annihilate Faust. In dialogue with him it does alter his approach to knowledge, to what he knows and what he does not want to know. Ultimately, it brings his master narrative to a close and suggests another way of thinking. “The question calls for Yes [Die Frage fordert Ja]”—a question that demands affirmation of itself as question is worrysome, and for good reason, to the Faustian mind. It shows where that mind has limited itself.

My position in reference to *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life* has something in common with that of Worry in relationship to Faust. In dialogue with Freud’s text, and borrowing from its vocabulary, I want to affirm my questions as a *Spuk* in the man’s house of interpretation—as a questioning subject, gendered female but not contained by the patriarchal definitions of her identity and discourse. If Faust’s monologue introduces *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, then let this study begin with a sister *Spuk* affirming my questions for Freud.