Freudian Slips
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Someone Else

The second chapter of *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, “The Forgetting of Foreign Words,” condenses and focuses a number of the questions that I wish to pose with that text. It and the first chapter are the only two to survive almost entirely unchanged from the first version of the book in 1901; as such, they represent unrevised examples of Freud’s writing on slips and are the primordial public interpretations of them. The reason why I am starting with the second chapter rather than the first is that it unites the categories of woman, writing, and foreign tongue in a more obvious way than does the “Signorelli” example from the first chapter. There Freud literally sketches out in a diagram a theory of the operation of parapraxis, which is then based on his inability to remember the name of a painter. The first chapter privileges image over text; for example, although words appear in Freud’s diagram, they float unlinked by conventional syntax (5). As an introduction to his diagram, Freud says that the names that arose as substitutions for Signorelli “have been treated in this process like the pictograms in a sentence which has had to be converted into a picture-puzzle (or rebus)” (5). The visual image of Signorelli’s murals of “The Four Last Things” in the Orvieto cathedral provokes a visual attempt at an explanation of the forgetting of the painter’s name, but this diagram is even less effective than Freud’s explanation in prose (which itself is not the most lucid one he ever wrote). Perhaps the relative expository ineffectiveness of the Signorelli chapter is the reason why it, of all the examples in *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, is the one that has interested critics most; it is the least threatening because it is the least textualized and, thus, the least likely to be contagious to other writing. Nevertheless, it lays out a number of themes that persist throughout *The Psychopathology of Everyday Life*: the relationship between foreign words and prohibited sexuality; the location of narra-
tives about slips in foreign countries, where they occur in dialogues between traveling men; difficulties in identifying and identifying with canonical figures of Western culture. These currents, which appear for the first time in "The Forgetting of Proper Names" in reference to visual images, are more fully developed in terms of written texts in chapter 2, "The Forgetting of Foreign Words," and succeeding chapters.

The second chapter repeats the context of the first. Like it, the second chapter provides only one example of a slip. Both chapters are narrated in the context of a dialogue between Freud and another man during a holiday trip, and both depend upon Italian geography and Italian languages for their stimuli. But the slip in the second chapter is based on a written text rather than on a painting, and both the slip and its interpretation are constituted verbally rather than visually. Putting the slip into narrative in the second chapter sets the anecdotal pattern that will continue for the rest of the book; it also establishes the slip as written entity and privileges language as a determinant in the making and unraveling of slips.

The second chapter begins:

The current vocabulary of our own language, when it is confined to the range of normal usage, seems to be protected against forgetting. With the vocabulary of a foreign language it is notoriously otherwise. (8)

Both here and in the first chapter the slip is narrated by means of the foreign—it takes place in foreign languages, on foreign soil, during conversations between men who are speaking their native languages but who need to use a foreign language with and in their native discourse in order to express, or repress, something for which the native tongue alone does not suffice.

Last summer—it was once again on a holiday trip—I renewed my acquaintance with a certain young man of academic background. I soon found that he was familiar with some of my psychological publications. (8–9)

Two men of the same social class are traveling for the holidays; one is younger than the other, but they share an "academic back-
ground,” that is, they have read and mastered the same canonical texts. They share a common discourse, and that discourse will determine the outcome of the interpretations produced by their conversation. The dialogue narrated by Freud is one between members of the same privileged group. But the privileges of class, sex, and education are not the only defining factors. The slip takes place while the two are talking “about the social status of the race to which we both belonged”; Freud’s traveling companion is, like Freud, a Jew. The younger man gives “vent to a regret that his generation was doomed (as he expressed it) to atrophy, and could not develop its talents or satisfy its needs.” Anti-Semitism was a serious obstacle to academic and professional advancement in Freud’s Austria, both early in the century and later.3 The friend wants to punctuate his “speech of impassioned fervour” against this state of affairs with a line from the Aeneid, in which Dido calls upon her descendants to take revenge upon Aeneas and his descendants. But at this point the friend goes silent; he cannot get the quotation right, so he rearranges the words:

Exoriar(e) ex nostris ossibus ulti
or.

[Let there arise from our bones an avenger.]

Apparently, Freud is not above shaming his friend for his error, because he quotes the young man as saying,

Please don’t look so scornful: you seem as if you were gloating over my embarrassment. Why not help me? There’s something missing in the line; how does the whole thing really go?

After pointing out the friend’s frustration, Freud gives him the correct version of the quotation:

Exoriare ALIQUIS nostris ex ossibus ulti
or.

[Let SOMEONE arise from our bones as an avenger.]

The friend feels stupid at having forgotten the word, but he also knows that Freud claims “that one never forgets a thing without some reason” and says that he “should be very curious to learn how I came
to forget the indefinite pronoun ‘*aliquis*’ in this case.” His attitude before his slip is instructive. It is customarily unpleasant for people of academic background to have to admit a lack of mastery over a classic text. But in this instance the man who slips is willing to learn how it happened. To achieve this, Freud tells him to say, “candidly and uncritically,” whatever comes into his mind in regard to the slip. This insistence upon free association begins the dialogue, itself represented as uninterrupted by critical remarks imposed from without, that recounts the analysis of the slip.

First, the friend divides *aliquis* into two words, *a* and *liquis*. Then he thinks of *reliquien* (relics), liquifying, fluidity, and fluid, followed by allusions to Saint Augustine and Saint Januarius (whom Freud calls calendar saints) and, finally, of the miracle of the annual liquefaction of Januarius’ blood at Naples. This comes with a reference to the French occupation of that city, when the liquefaction was delayed until a general insistently hoped to the local priest that it would occur as soon as possible, which it did. At this point the man stalls in his associations but, when pressed by Freud, says,

“Well then, I’ve suddenly thought of a lady from whom I might easily hear a piece of news that might be very awkward for both of us.”

“That her periods have stopped?”

“How could you guess that?”

“That’s not difficult any longer; you’ve prepared the way sufficiently. Think of the calendar saints, the blood that starts to flow on a particular day, the disturbance when the event fails to take place, the open threats that the miracle must be vouchsafed, or else…. In fact you’ve made use of the miracle of St. Januarius to manufacture a brilliant allusion to women’s periods.” (11)

This is a conversation between two bourgeois men who are both inside (by virtue of their academic backgrounds) and outside (because of their Jewishness) their society’s hegemony. While they are traveling for pleasure, they enact both a mastery over and a failure to dominate a classic text and then construct a scene that interprets that mastery and failure in terms of the female and the foreign. Men who travel together produce a certain kind of discourse—I am thinking of the
“farmer’s daughter” jokes that were, not long ago, the staple of traveling salesmen. Exchanging stories about women from other geographical areas is something that Freud and his friend, traveling salesmen, and soldiers have in common. Men who travel together through foreign lands tend to link their experience of the land with their experience of the women who live in it; both the land and the women are spaces in which the men may take pleasure. When they discuss the land and the women that they have enjoyed, the men are brought into closer contact with each other. Foreign women and foreign lands serve as exchange objects between traveling men, and discourse about them reinforces the homosocial bond.

What I have just explained describes the standard patriarchal politics of travel narrative: the bond holding together a group of dominant males is strengthened by the exchange of a specialized and closed discourse about foreign women and feminized foreign lands. But, because of the question of anti-Semitism, in the alquias anecdote the situation is slightly more complicated. Regardless of the degree of the assimilation of bourgeois European Jews in the first third of the twentieth century, there was an insistence by the Christian majority on constructing the “Jew” as a feminized, foreign other. The “Jew” was placed on the same side of structures of binary opposition as “woman” and the “foreign”; like them, the “Jew” was seen as erotically uncontrollable, mendacious, scheming, mysterious, not willing or able to uphold the values of, and thus a threat to, Christian European civilization. But the idea of the “Jew” was even more menacing than that of woman and the foreign because, unlike the latter two terms, which remained strictly within the limits imposed upon them, the “Jew” slipped between binarized concepts and thus threatened the discourse and definitions of established power. The “Jew” was constructed not only as passionate but as learned and rational. The “Jew” was “foreign” but excelled at the highest levels of European art and the professions. Because it is both here and there, at home and foreign, the idea of the “Jew” breaks down the rigidity of the boundaries that define the discourses of power.

For these reasons it is important to note the context in which the slip in the alquias example occurs:

The speaker had been deploring the fact that the present generation of his people was deprived of its full rights; a new generation,
he prophesied like Dido, would inflict vengeance on the oppressors. (14)

The problem of anti-Semitism and the misquotation of an ultracanonical text coincide in this conversation. Both the use of the canonical text and the slip itself are highly politicized; the friend counters a form of political oppression (anti-Semitism) with the citation of a text that has a very high cultural value in the oppressor's system. He is turning its own texts of power (over which he has mastery) back on it. The *Aeneid* is, in part, the story of the foundation of an empire; it glorifies and justifies the dominion of one nation over others and may be read as a literary enfranchisement of hegemony. The friend's reliance upon the quotation of the *Aeneid* as a function of political rhetoric poses the question of what it means for a despised other to cite a text that has helped to contruct oppression back at the oppressor. This question is at least partially explored in the engagement with psychoanalytic method that follows the representation of political desire (in the quotation) and its frustration (in the slip). Freud continues:

He had in this way expressed his wish for descendants. At this moment a contrary thought intruded. "Have you really so keen a wish for descendants? That is not so. How embarrassed you would be if you were to get news just now that you were to expect descendants from the quarter you know of. No: no descendants—however much we need them for vengeance." (14)

The intensity of the friend's feelings makes it clear that he really does want some kind of vengeance against his oppressors; he wants someone (*aliquis*) to rise up from his failure and avenge the injustice done to him. To cite a master text back at the masters is to tell them that the seeds of their own fall are already present in the texts that they use to justify their dominion. But this use of the master's texts can be problematic for a radical reinterpreter of those texts. I will not go as far as Audre Lorde, who writes that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house," because I think that an engagement with and rereading of the master's texts can have a revolutionary effect on the way that culture is constructed. But I do think that the encounter with those texts will test the depths of a critic's radical commitment and show where it is weak or co-opted.
Freud's friend stumbles over his citation of Virgil and cannot help but delete a crucial part of it: *aliquis*, the pronoun that indicates the unknown someone else, whose job it will be to achieve the justice left undone in the present. The friend wants someone to avenge him, but the slip marks the degree to which he is unwilling to upset another hegemonic social structure in order to attain his goal; the announcement of the imminent birth of a descendant, he says, "would be very awkward" (11). Its awkwardness stems from the fact that it would further disrupt the young man's professional ambitions, and be a source of social shame, if he were discovered to have fathered an illegitimate child. As much as he may want descendants who can put right the wrongs done to him because of anti-Semitism, he is still heavily invested in other values of the dominant culture and unwilling to go all out against them: any descendants that he may have must participate in existing forms of legitimacy. It is interesting that this resistance to his own radical project (attacking and dismantling an oppressive system by means of its own texts) should be grounded or located in the realm of paternity. His allegiance to patriarchy undoes him. Because the friend cannot give up the privileges of enfranchised fatherhood—that is, because of his identification with the rule of the father—his political desire to combat anti-Semitism frustrates itself. The slip in his citation of Virgil shows where his political commitment slips; if respectability (i.e., the approval of the dominant society) matters more than vengeance, or the reordering of social categories, then very little can be achieved. In the case of Freud's young friend, and in radical criticisms in general, the slip is thus evidence of an undertow of orthodoxy and accommodation. It shows how perilous it can be to use hegemonic texts to critique hegemony; canonized readings of the texts of power are so strong that they can wreak havoc with what one wants to say with or against them. It is hard to borrow Dido's words without borrowing her defeat and self-destruction as well.

Freud does not tell the reader what happened to the friend or to his Italian lover. The text does not say whether the friend's desire for vengeance was finally thwarted or fulfilled; Freud has the last word in the interpretive dialogue, and the friend disappears from the narrative. The pedagogical intent of the dialogue from Freud's point of view seems to be twofold: to prove to his friend that the slip has meaning and to prove that meaning to the reader as well. Both its personal and its political implications for the friend drop out of the text in favor of
the assertion of the mastery of Freud’s method. Similarly, the issue of anti-Semitism, which was the catalyst for the quotation and for the slip, is set aside, because the very mention of anti-Semitism, as an emblem of its real historical influence and its role in frustrating the careers of talented men, threatens the positive reception of Freud’s theories and discoveries.

The goal of this pedagogical dialogue is not to address political problems but, rather, is merely to prove that the teacher knows more than the student. The dialogue reproduces existing hierarchies and depoliticizes what started out as a political conversation. The analytic method illustrated in the *aliquis* chapter does not show how an analysand (or a radical discourse) can learn from its own points of slippage; it only seeks to prove its own legitimacy by showing that a discourse has slipped, and for what reason. At this point Freud is too interested in asserting the correctness of his own answer to be able to help the friend to learn anything about himself. In order to be politically effective, a radical criticism must disrupt the traditional hierarchy that privileges answer over question. Instead of what happens in Freud’s version of the narrative, in which the answer seeks to fulfill and put an end to the question, it could be acknowledged that the answer and question exist in a symbiotic discursive relationship, that one does not have meaning without the other, and that a belief in an absolute mastery is the death of inquiry. The friend’s first impulse when he sees Freud grimacing at his error is to ask for a correction that will put an end to his embarrassment. But it also shows him moving beyond shame to analysis:

How stupid to forget a word like that! By the way, you claim that one never forgets a thing without some reason. I should be very curious to learn how I came to forget the indefinite pronoun *aliquis* in this case. (9)

The friend vacillates between the question and the answer, between wanting and not wanting to know. He is tending toward political engagement, but his own co-optation and Freud’s displacement of the friend’s questions in favor of his own answer make it possible for difficult but crucial matters—like anti-Semitism and the rupture of patriarchal rules—to disappear from the discussion. Correction can be used to put an end to dialogue.
Nevertheless, Freud’s strategy does have political implications; it suggests that, if radical discourse slips—and, in so doing, shows where it is in league with orthodoxy—so might the discourses of power slip and thereby indicate where they can be taken apart. For example, Freud’s narrative avoids analyzing a certain stumble in the friend’s process of association, even while dutifully recording that it occurred:

The people attach great importance to this miracle and get very excited if it’s delayed, as happened once at a time when the French were occupying the town. So the general in command—or have I got it wrong? was it Garibaldi?—took the reverend gentleman aside and gave him to understand, with an unmistakable gesture to the soldiers posted outside, that he hoped a miracle would take place very soon. And in fact it did take place. . . . (10)

Freud quotes the friend’s explanation of the miracle of Saint Januarius but does not comment on the confusion between Garibaldi (the father of Italian unification) and the alien French general. The point of this unanalyzed forgetfulness is that it indicates the elasticity of the boundaries between opposing factions in a political conflict and the difficulty of distinguishing between the categories “ally” and “enemy,” between home and the foreign. The absence of an analysis of this point of confusion—again of a foreign name (that of the French general)—is symptomatic of ambivalence about taking up a position in reference to a political and historical reality.

The stumble around the name of the general does not fit in with Freud’s answer to the friend’s slip, and so it is left outside the analysis. But because it is an allusion to war and to the relationship between religion and political conflict, and, finally, an indication of an inability to decide whose side one is on, it marks the return of the displaced issue of anti-Semitism. Not being able to distinguish between Garibaldi and a French general not only puts into doubt who is on my side but also puts into question whose side I am on. Like bourgeois, male members of despised ethnic or religious groups, “persons of academic background” who are members of oppressed groups living in the late twentieth century find themselves both “here” and “there,” on both sides of matters of privilege and oppression. A refusal to choose sides may be a strategic move to avoid the limitations imposed by adherence to unnecessary oppositions, or it may be a passive
form of accommodation to oppressive structures. In either case, or in others that may arise, such a radical critic may find herself in a situation like that of Freud’s friend, in which the demands of respectability (or of one’s profession) conflict with legitimate and urgent political desires; the result is a discourse that undermines itself.

One way through this difficulty is to analyze one’s own points of slippage. As I have explained, the young friend shows some will to do this, and Freud indicates a way, or method, that still could work today. But there is a further caution to be taken from the *aliquis* example and its evasion of the problem of anti-Semitism. The reason that the narrative *cannot* develop a discourse against anti-Semitism is that its analytic scene, like the friend’s solution to his dilemma over descendants, remains ensconced in patriarchal modes. The problem with this scene is that, on multiple levels, the body of a woman is made to serve as the ground for “academic” dialogue. The desires to keep mastery over paternity, of a child or of a theory, make it impossible for Freud and his friend to analyze the structures of domination that make not only racism (as anti-Semitism) but also sexism possible. The need to retain patriarchal dominance here makes it impossible to work against racism. Two men talking together would rather sacrifice themselves than sacrifice their dominance over woman, and thus, at least in terms of politics, their discourse becomes reactionary. A narrative that begins by being about anti-Semitism turns into a story of a vacation fling that went wrong; it also proves the persistence of the connection between racism and sexism and makes clear yet again that it is not possible to work against the former without combating the latter.

In this anecdote sexism derails discourse against racism. Racism derives its power from the enfranchisement of the belief that difference is a measure of inferiority: that which is like me is superior; that which is unlike me is inferior. Sexism reproduces the same structures, only along lines of gender rather than of ethnicity. In the *aliquis* anecdote the foreign, in terms of linguistic, geographical, ethnic, and sexual categories, becomes the locus of difference. The friend, in his ambivalent wish for descendants, and his repressed knowledge that they might come from a foreign source, intuits the fact that his fate is bound up with that of someone who is different from him, but he cannot go so far as to embrace that knowledge as something not foreign to him. If the project of radical politics can be defined as work that intends to
replace dominance with mutuality, then it must confront structures of dominance and exploitation where they live—and with some frequency, and not just in institutional or academic practice, they live at home with us, not somewhere else.

The problem for members of groups that are oppressed to greater or lesser degrees is that, because our own oppression is foregrounded in our experience, it is easy not to see how it is connected to other people’s and, further, how we, in the elaborate scheme of what seems to be survival’s pecking order, accommodate ourselves to our own and other people’s oppression. The *aliquis* example shows how two professional Jewish men maintain some privilege in the face of virulent anti-Semitism by sticking to the rules of the same public morality that would call them infanticidal. The situation might be updated to that of two lesbian professionals, for example, who pay a poor woman discount rates to do their child care and who do not or have conveniently forgotten to realize that the classist and racist pattern that they are repeating is part of the same one that would challenge their right, as gay parents, to the custody of their own children. Or an African-American intellectual expresses anti-Semitic opinions, in the process eliding the fact that dark-skinned people were gassed next to Jews in Nazi camps. A group of gay men fight for better AIDS research but do not educate themselves about feminism because they fail to realize that misogyny is at the root of homophobia. What these not at all random examples—they hit me where I live—hope to indicate is that the equivocal privileges of class, profession, or race held by people who are neither here nor there—that is, people of despised groups who have achieved or been granted some of the privileges of power—tend to be maintained by the subjection of an even less powerful, foreign, and feminine or feminized other.

This foreign other, by projection, becomes a repository for the internal difference that the “in” person of an “out” group must displace in order to keep his or her privilege. It is possible to use both the male and the female pronouns here because, regardless of sexual orientation, the somewhat oppressed person’s identification and political position in reference to the even more oppressed foreign is always that of masculine to feminine, whether that femininity is incarnated as language, text, or body. The opposition masculine-feminine is the cornerstone from which relationships of social and political power are
defined and constructed. I develop this notion, in terms of a Freudian definition of the words masculine and feminine, from Monique Wittig’s comments in the essay “On the Social Contract”:

Aristotle was much more cynical when he stated in The Politics that things must be: “The first point is that those which are ineffective without each other must be united in a pair. For example, the union of male and female” (emphasis added). Notice that this point of the necessity of heterosexuality is the first point of The Politics. And notice also that the second example of “those… which must be united as a pair” is found in “the combination of ruler and ruled.” From that time on, male and female, the heterosexual relationship, has been the parameter of all hierarchical relations. It is almost useless to underline that it is only the dominated members of the pair that are “ineffective” by themselves. For “ruler” and “male” go very well without their counterpart.9

I am not sure that Wittig here refers necessarily to all possible sexual practices between biologically male and female people; I think, rather, that her emphasis is on the construction of sexual difference in terms of the dominance of male over female, which is why I use the terms masculine and feminine in my formulation. Also, Wittig is not the first to trace the origins of domination to the oppression of the female by the male, but I think that her example is useful because it is grounded on a primordial text of Western law, Aristotle’s Politics. This grounding makes explicit the connections between sexism and a political order founded upon dominance.

Within this system Freud’s young friend needs to give expression to political feeling but is unwilling to sacrifice male privilege in order to achieve the goal his outrage seeks. His ambivalence leads him to use the words of another—foreign words, in that they are Latin and belong to Virgil and Dido. These foreign words, by way of the slip, lead to foreign places and to prohibited desire—that is, desire that threatens to break through the same structures of accommodation that led to the use of the foreign tongue in the first place. This irressipible desire returns to menace the friend’s ties to patriarchy at the same place where his allegiance to respectability undercuts his political project. In The Psychopathology of Everyday Life the slip marks not only the
undertow of currents that contradict the conscious intent of a discourse but also indicates where structures of domination ordered specifically by gender may be taken apart.