

“Freudful Mistakes”: On Forgetting and On Forgetting Psychoanalysis

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Forget Psychoanalysis!

If you forget psychoanalysis then “You never made a more Freudian mistake, excuse yourself!” (Joyce 1992, p. 411) To forget psychoanalysis is, I will argue, amongst other things, to forget that language matters. Psychoanalysis, the “talking cure” (Freud and Breuer 1974, p. 83), a phrase coined by Anna O. in English, begins with a recognition of the power of language in relation to matter. Language, such as the signifier “arm” in the case of Anna O., determines the symptom, the paralysis of matter (Adams 1986). These are “magic words” (Abraham and Torok 1986), which echo in the body and in matter. Language matters not only because language determines the unconscious symptom, but also because language engages with matter and because language itself is strangely material. We should not forget that. Today, however, we are called to abandon the “prison-house of language” for the “great outdoors” (Meillassoux 2008, p. 7)—to escape the limits of human subjectivity and its “correlation” with reality, a correlation often achieved through language, for the materiality that lies beyond. In the ironic suggestion by the writer Iain Sinclair, considering his own constant writing on “territories,” “terrain does not require the neurosis of language” (2016, p. 38).¹ The various speculative and new materialisms proclaim unironically, in different forms, that language does not matter or, more tentatively, that language matters less than matter. We are called to forget that language matters. What, though, if we try to remember language matters? What happens if we return to the matter of language through forgetting? These are the stakes of my intervention.

Of course, James Joyce, who coined the phrase “Freudian mistake” in *Finnegans Wake*, wanted nothing more than to forget psychoanalysis. Joyce was angered by C. G. Jung’s essay on *Ulysses*, hostile about Jung’s treatment of his daughter Lucia, and generally dismissive of the “new Viennese school” as inferior to the insights of Thomas Aquinas (Joyce 1994, p. 264). In *Finnegans Wake*, Joyce writes of the “grisly old Sykos who have done our unsmiling bit on ‘alices, when they were young and easily Freudened in the penumbra of the procuring room” (Joyce 1992, p. 115). The psychos, Freud and Jung, do grisly work on young girls in their consulting rooms, pimping them out to their “unsmiling” theories. Of course, however, Lacan wrote that Joyce “is the simplest consequence of a refusal—such a mental refusal!—of a psycho-analysis, which, as a result, his work illustrates” (Lacan 1977, p. ix). The revenge of psychoanalysis upon Joyce is that while Joyce may be the one who most forgot, or tried to forget, psychoanalysis, his work is, for Lacan, the greatest illustration of psychoanalysis as an encounter with language and with *jouissance* (Lacan 2016). After all, both Joyce and Freud

knew something of enjoyment, of *jouissance*, as their names testify (Lacan 2016, p. 146). They also both knew something about language.

Joyce, we might say, forgets psychoanalysis to remember the matter of language, which is writing. According to Derrida, what Joyce finds in writing is an

endeavour [that] would try to make the structural unity of all empirical culture appear in the generalised equivocation of a writing that, no longer translating one language into another on the basis of their common cores of sense, circulates through all languages at once, accumulates their energies, actualises their most secret consonances, discloses their furthestmost common horizons, cultivates their associative syntheses instead of avoiding them, and rediscovers the poetic value of passivity. (Derrida 1989, p. 102)

Joyce's passivity before language tries to make language appear as such, but also, as Lacan suggested, makes language appear as *lalangue*, the intersection of *jouissance* and language (Lacan 2016, p. 146). Jacques-Alain Miller notes that "there is a *jouissance*, which drives directly from the relation to language" (Miller 2005, p. 12), which Joyce achieves. Joyce's writing is a writing that while trying to forget psychoanalysis illustrates the saturation of language by *jouissance*, the moment of the "lettering" and "littering" of language (Joyce 1992, p. 93; Lacan 2016, p. 145). Language appears in and through equivocation and homophony (Milner 2017). The "freudful mistake" is the "frightful mistake" (through English as *lalangue*) and a "joyful mistake" (through German as *lalangue*). The frightful mistake is to forget the "freudful mistake" and so to forget the joyful mistake, to forget that language matters. This is why the path back to psychoanalysis and language lies in the Freudian slip, as the moment that allows us to register that language matters in its frightful and joyful aspects.

The Primal Scene of Forgetting

Freud is driving in the company of a stranger from Ragusa in Dalmatia to a place in Herzegovina: "I asked my companion whether he had ever been to Orvieto and looked at the famous frescoes painted there, painted by . . ." (Freud 1975, p. 39). An ellipsis appears, the three dots (. . .) that indicate an omission or falling short. In this case, the omission of the name of the painter, a moment of forgetting, a falling short at the moment of expression. This elliptical moment might well be understood as the rhetorical figure of "aposiopesis," the indication of a "falling silent." As a rhetorical figure, this usually indicates being overcome by passion, being speechless with rage or feeling. In fact, we could say, Freud's analysis will supply that missing passion to what seems a trivial act of forgetting.

¹ On neurosis as the "mediation" of language, the psyche and the material, see Noys 2017a and 2018.

Freud has forgotten the name of a painter, Signorelli, who painted the frescoes the “Four Last Things” in Orvieto Cathedral. It is an apocalyptic moment. Freud, however, remembers two other names of painters—*Botticelli* and *Boltraffio* (ibid., p. 38). Freud seeks explanation in the previous topic of conversation, which concerned the (supposed) custom of “Turks” living in *Bosnia* and *Herzegovina* to confide in doctors and resign themselves to their fate when fatally ill. They address the doctor as “*Herr* [Sir]” (ibid., p. 39). A second, repressed thought of Freud’s is the emphasis these “Turks” place on sexual enjoyment as the highest value of life—so much so that death is preferable to that loss. Here we can see in the figure of these “Turks” fantasies of racialized enjoyment and the speculation on a subject who possesses “full” enjoyment and, in this case, who will sacrifice their life for the sake of that enjoyment (Žižek 1990). In particular, this is the continuation of the fantasy of the “Orient” that projects on to the Other as site of enjoyment (Grosrichard 1998). Freud was also concerned with the news that reached him at *Trafoi* of a patient’s suicide due to an incurable sexual disorder (Freud 1975, p. 40). Forgetting was not random, but motivated, and motivated by the desire to repress thoughts of “death and sexuality” (ibid., p. 40).

This act of repression is evident in the process by which Signorelli is forgotten. The name is split in two, in which the first part, “Signor,” which recalls “Herr” and so death and sexuality, is displaced into *Herzegovina* and *Bosnia* (ibid., p. 41). The second part, “elli” is then the root for the movement from *Bosnia* into “Botticelli,” while “Boltraffio” absorbs “Trafoi” and the “Bo.” The result is a rebus, a picture puzzle,² and this is the chance for one of Freud’s famous diagrams,³ which traces the splitting of the signifier into component “letters,” little bits of nonsense, that are treated homophonically to generate new signifiers (ibid., p. 41). This moment of forgetting is the eruption of *lalangue* into language, in which the failure of repression reveals not only the instance of Freud’s forgetting and repression, but also the “primal repression” which denies the entry of the “psychical (ideational) representative” of the drive into consciousness and language (Freud 1984a, p. 147). It is the absence, the “hole” made in language (Lacan 2016, p. 21), which reveals the insistence of the drive as what matters. The drive is that uncanny concept “lying on the frontier between the mental and the physical” (Freud 1977, p. 83; Dolar 2017). In this moment matter, in the form of the insistence of the drive, of the bodily circuit (Lacan 1977, p. 178), penetrates language, to cross Freud’s diagram of forgetting with Lacan’s diagram of the circuit of the drive (ibid.).

Already, this remembering of forgetting in psychoanalysis I am undertaking is taking place under the tutelage of Lacan, who has done most to remind psychoanalysis, which can also

² Freud famously describes the dream as a “rebus” (Freud 1976, p. 382).

³ On Freud’s diagrams, see Gamwell and Solms 2006.

forget, that language matters. In fact, Lacan draws inspiration from Freud's account of forgetting as a revelation that the unconscious operates through language, through the signifier, and also by "effacement" (ibid., p. 27). It is this operation through language that means that Freud's notion of the unconscious is, according to Lacan, not the Romantic unconscious of "the divinities of the night" (ibid., p. 24).⁴ The unconscious is not the site of "primordial will" but of the "play of the signifier" (ibid.). This is not a happy play, because in the phenomena of the unconscious there is always an *impediment* (ibid., p. 25). "In a spoken or written sentence something stumbles" (ibid.). In this moment, we see "absence emerge" and "silence emerge as silence" (ibid., p. 26). For Lacan, the incident of the forgetting of Signorelli is one that demonstrates this mode of effacement, of silence emerging and of the censorship by which the unconscious emerges:

The term *Signor, Herr*, passes underneath—the absolute master, I once said, which is in fact death, has disappeared there. Furthermore, do we not see, behind this, the emergence of that which forced Freud to find in the myths of the death of the father the regulation of his desire? After all, it is to be found in Nietzsche, who declares, in his own myth, that God is dead. And it is perhaps against the background of the same reasons. For the myth of the *God is dead*—which, personally, I feel much less sure about, as a myth of course, than most contemporary intellectuals, which is in no sense a declaration of theism, nor of faith in the resurrection—perhaps this myth is simply a shelter against the threat of castration. / If you know how to read them, you will see this threat in the apocalyptic frescoes of Orvieto cathedral. (Lacan 1977, p. 27; see also Lacan 2002, p. 316)

A certain defence emerges even in Freud, about the "absolute master" death, about the myths of the dead father, which like Nietzsche's death of God, is, Lacan suggests, a shelter against the threat of castration. In this way, we can suggest, Freud is also at risk of forgetting the relation to language as the relation to castration. Even more radically, as Miller suggests, castration, or the fantasies around it, might conceal "the true traumatic kernel [...] the relation to language" (Miller 2005, p. 15).

The risk of making the trauma the trauma of the relation to language is that the relation of language to the drive might be occluded. What we can take from Lacan is the rewriting of forgetting, of the lapsus, of the "freudful mistake" towards the "frightful mistake" and the "joyful mistake"—towards the "original fault" (Lacan 2016, p. 5). For Lacan, writing in *Seminar XXIII*:

⁴ It is for this reason that the prophets of the vitalist Romantic unconscious constantly reject the "mechanical" (we would say logical) unconscious of Freud, from Jung to Ludwig Klages (Lebovic 2013, p. 53; Noys 2015, p. 172).

The fault expresses the life of language, life being utterly different for language from what is simply called *life*. What signifies *death* for the somatic support has just as much place as *life* in the drives that fall within the remit of what I've just called *vie de langage*. (Lacan 2016, p. 128)

The life of language is something that coincides with death, or coincides with the uncanny correspondence between the life drive and the death drive. This is what is forgotten in the forgetting of psychoanalysis, of forgetting, and of language—the “life of language” in which the drive intersects with and infuses language.

Two Ways of Forgetting Psychoanalysis

What does it mean to forget this moment of forgetting? What if we were to forget the drive, to forget psychoanalysis? This often takes the form of an imperative “forget about it”; an active desire to forget the psychoanalytic interpretation of forgetting. Forgetting remains, but without the causal form psychoanalysis inscribes, without “death and sexuality,” without the drive. This is the moment of resistance to psychoanalysis, which, as Jacques Derrida proposes, can take a double form: the usual sense resistance *to* psychoanalysis, as an opposition to psychoanalysis, and the second sense of a resistance *of* psychoanalysis, an internal resistance in which psychoanalysis confronts its own limit (Derrida 1998, pp. vii-viii). I want to take two examples that instantiate these forms of resistance and forgetting. The first is that of Sebastiano Timpanaro's *The Freudian Slip* (1974), which targets Freudian slips and this instance of Freud's forgetting. Timpanaro rejects psychoanalysis as an unnecessary imposition of the unconscious onto language by suggesting that language itself can account for this forgetting and any “freudful mistakes.” If this is resistance *to* psychoanalysis, Catherine Malabou's *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage* (2007) is an example of the resistance *of* psychoanalysis, in which psychoanalysis is pushed towards its internal limit. Malabou argues that not only can psychoanalysis not account for the traumatic results of brain injury or illness, but also that these forms of damage pose a problem to the psychoanalytic search for meaning in relation to trauma.

Sebastiano Timpanaro is an almost classical instance of the resistance to psychoanalysis. In *The Freudian Slip*, as his friend Perry Anderson summarizes:

Timpanaro showed how often errors of memory or slips of the tongue that Freud had attributed to repressed sexual materials were to be explained more persuasively by a standard set of deviations from the lexical norm, “corruptions” of which philologists had developed their own fine-grained classification. (Anderson 2001)

It is the materiality of language, rather than any force of “death and sexuality,” which is to account for “freudful mistakes.” Even more classically, Timpanaro’s objections to psychoanalysis are also rooted in a personal animus due to its failure to cure him of his neurotic symptoms—the intense anxiety caused by public speaking and agoraphobia (Anderson 2001). What is noteworthy, although at the risk of “wild psychoanalysis,” is that these symptoms are symptoms of speaking and of appearing in public. They are symptoms that language matters in the relation of desire to expression.

In Timpanaro’s account of Freud’s forgetting of Signorelli and its replacement by Botticelli, the explanation is that it is merely “a confusion between words of an equal number of syllables which are also connected by a marked phonic similarity, or even better, by assonance or rhyme” (Timpanaro 1976, p. 64). The explanation of the more unlikely substitution of Boltraffio is, according to Timpanaro, a misguided act of correction (*ibid.*, p. 71). As Freud is now thinking of Botticelli, the path of correction lies along Renaissance artists beginning with “Bo-”. For Timpanaro, language matters but in the very matter of its blind materiality, in the very literal substance of its own operations that create errors for its users.⁵

This scepticism towards psychoanalysis also extends to what Timpanaro understands of Lacan’s emphasis on the “primacy” of the signifier (*ibid.*, p. 222). While Timpanaro concedes, in a postscript, this is “not without interest” (*ibid.*), in a footnote in the body of the text he is much more typically condemnatory:

I must confess that I am incurably committed to the view that in Lacan’s writing charlatany and exhibitionism largely prevail over any ideas that are of a comprehensible, even if debatable, nature: behind the smoke-screen, it seems to me, there is nothing of substance (Timpanaro 1976, p. 58 n. 5)

The unkind Freudian or Lacanian critic might note the excess of this denunciation, including the accusation of “exhibitionism,” in relation to Timpanaro’s own phobias, but what is also interesting is the suggestion of a lack of “substance.” We might read this in terms of the replacement of the materialism of language with a materialism of the signifier. Again, the resistance to psychoanalysis turns on materiality—on the rejection of psychic reality, let alone the Lacanian Real, Catherine Malabou has suggested the necessity of taking neuroscience seriously as a thinking of the capacities of the brain. Using her concept of plasticity, also a term in neuroscience, Malabou argues that the brain offers capacities for change that are not simply consonant with neoliberal capitalist flexibility (Malabou 2008, pp. 78–82). Also, as plasticity can

⁵ There is some strange similarity between this contention and the late work of Paul de Man, who argues that it is “the prosaic materiality of the letter” which disrupts ideology and aesthetics (de Man 1996, p. 90).

refer to traumatic damage (as in plastic explosives), Malabou argues the brain can undergo far more radical traumas than are usually considered in psychoanalysis. In line with Spinoza's famous remark about the body, "they do not know what a body can do" (Spinoza 1976, p. 72), we can say, "they do not know what a brain can do."

Malabou's analysis in *The New Wounded* makes a transition, as her subtitle has it, "from neurosis to brain damage." Malabou argues that psychoanalysis relies on a sexual aetiology of neurosis that correlates an external traumatic event with an inner sexual conflict (Malabou 2012, p. 2). This involves Freud distinguishing violent events that affect the brain, such as lesions or brain damage, from the field of psychic life. What psychoanalysis cannot think, according to Malabou, is "the wound without hermeneutic future" (ibid., p. 8), a charge she also repeats to Lacan and Žižek (Malabou 2015). Contrary to the image of a subject already subject to sexual trauma, Malabou posits the "new wounded" as forms of subjectivity in which trauma intrudes from outside, is senseless, and rearranges the coordinates of personality.⁶ In this way, she eliminates the psychoanalytic account of forgetting, which depends on sexual meaning and the drive, from consideration in psychic life. While we might recognize the truth of this claim, but see it as restricted to these severe forms of brain damage, Malabou argues

I thus authorize myself also to extend the category of "new wounded" to cover every patient in a *state of shock* who, without having suffered brain lesions, has seen his or her neuronal organization and psychic equilibrium permanently changed by trauma. (Malabou 2012, p. 10; italics in original)

While traversing psychoanalysis to the limit of the hermeneutic, both in Freud and Lacan, Malabou ends up restricting psychoanalysis to a very limited field as the "new wounded" expands as a category to become the signature disorder of the present moment.

To repeat Derrida terms, Malabou's resistance *of* psychoanalysis comes to coincide with Timpanaro's resistance *to* psychoanalysis. Malabou's argument is for a materiality of the brain that also constitutes an affective plasticity and so replaces language (and the problem of forgetting) as the key to our "psychic" life. What I want to note is a strange symmetry here. On the one hand, for Timpanaro, language matters *more* as the matter of language. Forgetting (and slips) are merely the stuff of language, merely errors resulting from the form of language. Also, interestingly, Timpanaro also hopes for a neurophysiological explanation that will transcend the claims to science made by Freudian psychoanalysis (Timpanaro 1976, p. 95). On the other hand, for Malabou, language matters *less* to get at the matter of the brain. Forgetting

⁶ Malabou appears to be drawing upon Derrida's argument that psychoanalysis cannot deal with "radical destruction" that goes beyond a logic of repression and retention (Derrida 1998, p. 44).

is a matter of the worst, of radical trauma from the outside that is not amenable to language and meaning. In both cases, materiality is posed against the matter of language, if we take that matter, as I have suggested, to be this strange signifying absence. Language is “filled in,” or completed, by a materiality that absorbs this absence.

Remember Psychoanalysis!

I am suggesting that Timpanaro and Malabou represent two ways to forget psychoanalysis and so to forget language matters by forgetting the strange immaterial materiality of language. To complete this suggestion, I want to conclude by turning to Freud’s late essay on “Negation” (1925). Lacan remarks on this text that

It is not one of those two dimensional texts, which are infinitely flat, as mathematicians say, which have only a fiduciary value in a constituted discourse, but rather a text which carries speech insofar as speech constitutes a new emergence of truth. (Lacan 2002, p. 318)

This essay is well-known for its opening concerning the moment of resistance. Freud recounts how patients present material in the mode of a negation: “You ask who this person in the dream can be. It’s *not* my mother.” The psychoanalyst’s rejoinder is “So it *is* his mother” (Freud 1984b, p. 437; italics in original).⁷ Timpanaro singles out this moment as the sign of a Freudian refusal to consider counterexamples: “the patient is always, or nearly always, wrong when he makes a denial, because every negation on his part is in reality a manifestation of resistance and thus an involuntary confession” (Timpanaro 1976, p. 56). In this way, according to Timpanaro, while Freud recognizes a psychological mechanism he generalizes it to such an extent that there is no space for denial and refutation within psychoanalysis.⁸

This initial point in Freud’s paper opens out onto a discussion of negation that has a wider “metapsychological” significance as a mechanism of defence crucial to the ego (Lacan 2002, p. 311). Because what is negated appears, negation is a lifting of repression if not an acceptance of what has been repressed. Lacan notes, through negation “doubtless the ego makes a great many things known to us” (Lacan 1988, p. 59). In the experience of negation, the affective and the intellectual are separated, but, we would add, the material and the linguistic are intertwined. This is evident in the fact that the act of negation is an intellectual function linked to the “primitive” function of the oral drive. The intellectual judgement of negation corresponds to the judgement of whether I would like to eat this or whether I would like to spit it out (Freud 1984b, p. 439). The act of negation is the act of spitting something out, but in that

⁷ On the “logic” of this negation of the mother, see Zupančič 2012.

⁸ Freud would later dispute this claim to infallibility in his “Constructions in Analysis” (1937).

act what is negated appears, it has a presence in the mouth, on the tongue, before being negated, before becoming nothing. If, in forgetting, something is present in the mode of absence, we can “taste” the absent word on the tip of our tongue, in negation something absent is made present to be ejected from the mouth—to be spat out. This can obviously include words, as we can spit those out too.

This intellectual function is also a matter of the drives. Judging refers not only to oral desire, but also, in the polarity of judgement, to the drive: “Affirmation—as a substitute for uniting—belongs to Eros; negation—the successor to expulsion—belongs to the instinct of destruction” (ibid., p. 441). Negation is rooted in these drives, but is also a moment of “freedom,” through the creation of a “symbol of negation” (ibid.). Certainly, as we have seen with Lacan’s emphasis on the “life of language,” the mythological opposition of Eros and Thanatos can be collapsed in the thinking of the drive as both binding and unbinding (Laplanche 1976). This is a point reiterated by Žižek, for whom the “death drive” is the inconsistent repetition that haunts and inhabits the libido (Žižek 2010, p. 305). The act of negation is the revelation of that repetition, but also a revelation that bears on the materiality of language as the moment in which language concedes the intrusion of the drive.

Language emerges as the moment of negation that, as Paolo Virno insists in a different manner, disrupts agreement and consonance for the possibility of destruction and even evil (Virno 2008). It also, I am suggesting, marks the moment of negativity as a “materiality” that comes to be in the moment of ejection. Language matters in this strange space of “materialization” and dematerialization of “something” and “nothing.” Forgetting points us towards this strange presence of absence, which is denied in those materialisms that try to close the mouth to language. They negate language, which is to say they make it present but only to say “No, language doesn’t matter.” Negation points to this persistence of language in the moment of denial. It indicates the way in which resistance and denial of language and of psychoanalysis carries the trace of that denial, of that liminal space in which “language matters.” As we live in the time of materialisms of many types (although few that are historical or dialectical), we live in the time in which language does not matter. Language has to disappear, to be forgotten, to be spat out. In the face of the circulating abstractions that make up our world, the appeal to materialism is to something that denies these abstractions. Yet, the forgetting and denial “that language matters” leaves us only with a pseudo-concrete and with little sense of what matters. The matter of abstraction is rendered absent by the abstraction of matter.

Therefore, the Freudian and Lacanian account might seem relentlessly focused on the human subject. This, for the new materialisms, is the original fault or sin that forgets the nonhuman. Jane Bennett argues that:

To attempt, as I do, to present human and nonhuman actants on a less vertical plane than is common is to bracket the question of the human and to elide the rich and diverse literature on subjectivity and its genesis, its condition of possibility, and its boundaries. (Bennett 2010, p. ix)

Access to “vital matter” is bought at what Bennett regards as the necessary cost of the elision of psychoanalysis. Instead, my suggestion is that the only access to matter is through this experience of subjectivity and at the boundary in which “matter” is not stable between the “inside” and “outside” of the subject. This experience is signalled by forgetting and negation in the mode in which language fails or in which language succeeds in rendering matter as something “outside.” The “great outdoors” is as much a “great indoors,” or the mediation or “metabolic interaction” (Marx 1990, p. 290), which forms the experience of matter.

William Burroughs once remarked, the “word may once have been a healthy neural cell. It is now a parasitic organism that invades and damages the central nervous system” (Burroughs 1999, p. 208). The conception of language as a virus, as an alien parasite or intrusion, speaks to the way in which language matters. On the one hand, as we have seen, language is a virus to be expelled to get to what matters—the materiality of language or the materiality of the brain (or a whole number of other materialities of the “great outdoors”). On the other hand, language is a virus that matters and that remains in the mouth. We forget language, only to remember that language matters, only to really remember this strange “mattering” of language: “It’s on the tip of my tongue.” “Just spit it out!” In this moment of the mouthfeel of language something matters. The desire to be free of the “virus” of language and to access matter or the nonhuman directly is a fantasy conditioned by the experience of the drive and of language. In the process of forgetting psychoanalysis, this mediation is forgotten or elided to ensure a process in which nothing gets stuck in the mouth or throat.⁹ Psychoanalysis, on the contrary, finds matter in that “nothing” stuck in the mouth, in the matter of language that engages with this “nothing” in the redoubled negation. If psychoanalysis matters today, and nothing could be less certain, it is due to this “nothing” that matters.

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⁹ “Matter” here recalls the “dream of Irma’s injection,” in which Freud dreams that he finds in Irma’s mouth “a big white patch” and “extensive whitish grey scabs upon some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modelled on the turbinal bones of the nose” (Freud 1976, p. 182).

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