

3 excerpts

From

Phantoms in the Voice: A Neuropsychanalytic Hypothesis on the Structure of the Unconscious

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1

Among the many fragments I received, here is a particularly beautiful one, given in a context totally unlike Vienna in 1910—namely, Brussels in 2010:

“For six months now a good friend of mine has lived in הרב in the Netherlands. While I had visited him already twice, I noticed how I systematically forgot the name of this city. The first time that I tried to reflect on the reasons for this forgetting, I focused on the second part of the word, namely “maar”. Because she was still frequently present in my mind, this immediately made me think of “Marianne”, whose first name starts with the same syllable. This girl has been my only serious relationship, and she left me after two years. My lack of engagement in our relationship was the main cause of our breaking up. I had a really hard time, and for a long time I remained focused on her, but without seeing her, however. I also noticed how I often forgot words containing the syllable “-mar-“. But the forgetting of the word “Alkmaar” struck me with much more insistence; indeed, I had to ask the help of my roommate three times after searching for it myself for a long while. Writing down “Akmaar” (at that time I thought this was the spelling of the city’s name), I noticed that the two first letters of the word had a very important meaning to me: AK corresponds to a combination in a poker hand. Indeed, A stands for “ace” and K for “king”. It is one of the strongest hands and therefore it’s one of the most played. I’ve been practicing poker on the internet for three years. Even if today I succeed in limiting the number of hours I play a day, I have in the past, including during my relationship with Marianne, spent more hours playing poker than I spent on sleep. I often refused to go out with her, so that I could continue

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playing. In other words, my addiction to the game was then almost complete, and this was the major reason for our splitting up. This association within the same word might explain my inability to retain it in memory, since this word concentrates on one the two major aches of my past and of my present.”

Notice how the interplay between the two parts of the words is also very meaningful here: this guy lost his “strong hand” with Marianne—he is no longer her king nor her ace. His forgetting of the word “Alkmaar”, again, is not due to the semantics of the words, referring to the city or to his friend in that city, but has everything to do, as he convincingly analyses himself, with the signifier “Alkmaar” and how the material form of the word, independently of its semantics, has a proper unconscious logic. Now, a critic could still object that my class of (500) first-year psychology students was under collective hypnosis of my suggestive influence and exactly produced what I was looking for.

2

Let us therefore end with a last example coming from someone who, of all people, cannot be suspected of being in a transference alliance with Freud or Freudian theories—namely, the well-known

neuroscientist and dream specialist Allan Hobson. In a strikingly sincere first-person account, Hobson (2002, pp. 386-387) reports one of his first dreams when dreaming gradually came back while he was recovering from a lateral medullary infarct in 2001. Here is a fragment:

“It took place in a foreign country.... Lia [Hobson's wife] and I were on a trip.... We had plans to stay in an old-fashioned inn. There was already some discomfort and difficulty finding each other as we got the boat near to the shore. I caught glimpses of her. She was talking to someone else, a man. At one point, either before or just after we got off the boat, I noticed that she had given or sold to him a half-inch bit used with my large brace to drill holes in wood in Vermont. I was very surprised and somewhat hurt by this. I noticed also that the bit had been used to make a very perfect hole in the shoulder bag, which the man wore. It was a shoulder bag very much like mine. In the dream, Lia explained to me that she had sold the drill but would give me the money. It still seemed to me odd that she would give a stranger one of my most precious tools without asking me. I was feeling very vexed and apprehensive.... [S]he made it clear to me that she needed to have a secret life. When I was asking her about this man, it was clear that she meant that she needed to be free to have an affair with him if she wanted to. I found that very odd and very disquieting and tried to express my concerns. When we finally got to what appeared to be the inn, there was a strange scene in which she was again difficult to find. But I found her in what looked like a kitchen and she was preparing to cook some food, which struck me as odd, since this was such a flimsy excuse. I asked her when she would be finished and she looked at her watch and she said 45 min, to which I agreed, knowing that this was all the time she would need to make love with whichever stranger she had selected.”

The rest of the dream is also very interesting, but focusing on this first part, it seems clear, as Hobson (2002, p. 386) himself admits, that “the drill bit and the hole in my shoulder bag make only Freudian sense”. That the bit has a phallic meaning seems rather undeniable, but, probably unsuspected by Hobson himself, this is not only so in the Freudian “symbolic” reading on the level of the semantics of the bit (a drill, with an elongated piece which bores holes) but also in a Lacanian reading on the level of the signifier. Indeed, it is important to underscore that Hobson is in Nice in France when he has this stroke and that when recovering from it, he is cared for in a hospital in Monaco surrounded by a French-speaking staff. The “bit” in his dream, when read on the level of the signifier, is almost identical both in spelling and in sound to the French word “bite” [pronounced with the same “i” sound as in the English “bit”], which is a common slang word for, precisely, “penis.” It seems that Hobson's dream process had made sure there should be no ambiguity on the true nature of “one of his most precious tools” ...

These various clinical fragments all show how a reading of the subject's “symptoms” at the level of the signifier, rather than or next to a semantic level, gives access to its underlying unconscious logic.

3

Finally, let us illustrate this model with a clinical case study.⁹ F. is a young man aged 22 who is a resident psychiatric patient.¹⁰ He has a sister, Sofie, who is four years younger than he is. When he was 7, a new-born baby, Stefanie, was adopted, but the adoption was not done in legal terms, and several months later the birthmother took her child back. When he was 9, a new sister, Steffie, was adopted. The family structure of the patient is further characterized by numerous incestuous relations, between his mother and her father and between brothers and sisters on the mother's side. After several months of work, F. relates a number of incestuous episodes with his sisters, which he obviously feels very guilty about. He then announces that he will not speak further on this topic. In one of the following sessions, F. produces this seemingly incoherent fragment:

“Nature determines everything. Everything comes from nature. Everything has an effect.... Colors have an effect.... Metals don't bend, inox [stainless

⁹ F. is a young man with whom I have been working in the psychiatric centre of Beernem, Belgium, since 2002. He suffered from posttraumatic stress disorder due to a history of repeated trauma both chronic and current. At the

time of treatment, he is abstinent from substance abuse but is being treated with antipsychotic and antidepressant medication.

10 Though the patient is anonymous, some of the additional data were changed so as to further make the clinical description unrecognizable. This was done while safeguarding the character of the presented material and in respect of the case it claims to make.

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steel] bends. It has effects due to circumstances. A guy and a girl have an effect on each other. This is the meaning of life, the affection, this is perfect. When done with effect, it is very well done. The teacher says it is perfect.... Everything has an effect. Proteins, all of them, from one to twelve, they have an effect. To eat [Fretten]. Jesus! To eat [Fretten].”¹¹

What is remarkable in this fragment is the repetition of the phonemes /ef/. It is suggested that this is correlated with the repetition of this phoneme in both his own first name and that of his sisters, Sofie, Stefanie, and Steffie. Indeed, one way to understand the organization of this speech fragment is to suppose that F. has reinstated a repression on the theme of his sisters. On the other hand, his desires are triggered by the frequent visits of one sister who has a lot of tender feelings toward him. We might say that the theme of his sisters is highly invested with intentions but is also radically blocked from actual execution, leading to the emergence of the “phantom of Ef”. This “phantom of Ef” finds ways to relieve its cathexis by substitute representations such as effect, perfect, affection, etc.

The substitutive representations allow the temporary relief of some tension without forcing F. to hear, or become aware, of his actual desires. At the end of the excerpt something happens: the word “*fretten*” strikes him, as though he had never heard it before: he says in Dutch, “*Fretten. Miljaarde. Fretten*”, starts to laugh, and is finally silent after this.¹² It is as if suddenly F. fully consciously hears the sounds that make up the word “*fretten*” and is struck by this.¹³ The radical disconnection between intention and execution is momentarily broken, and representational, semantic, associations are activated and create confusion. At the same time, the phantom subsides.

11 Translated from the Dutch: “De natuur bepaalt. Alles is van de natuur. Alles heeft een effect.... Kleuren geven effect.... Metalen plooiën niet, inox plooit. Het heeft een effect door omstandigheden. Een vent en een vrouw hebben effect op elkaar.... Alles heeft een effect. Proteïnen, eiwitten, in de sport laten de spieren in massa toenemen. Fretten. Miljaarde. Fretten.” [*Miljaarde* is a Flemish expletive.]

12 The theme of “eating” (popularly *fretten*) is a central theme in the family, especially between F. and his mother. The mother was fed by her father as soon as she got pregnant with F. She said: “Father always would make double meals, because I used to systematically throw up the first one.” Food is extremely (de-)regulated in the household, through a culture of pills, vitamins, healing substances, and so on. Mother always criticizes F. about his (gain or loss of) weight during her visits and would try to get feedback from her son about hers.

13 In another session, F. again played with this word “*fretten*,” as well as with similar-sounding variations on his proper name. He then jumped to his fascination with terrorist organizations, among others “ETA,” which he suddenly interpreted as “Eet *da!*” [“Eat this!”].

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