

FREUD ON WRITING: SOME HISTORICIST PERSPECTIVES

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The link between psychoanalysis and writing is inextricable, especially since psychoanalytic theory both explains and justifies itself through analogies with writing. In particular, I wish to examine two such analogies: the textual analogy of the psyche's content in Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* and the writing machine analogy of the psyche's structure in Freud's *Note on the 'Mystic Writing Pad'*. The ramifications of using the written text as a paradigm to explain psychological behavior affects theories of how writing produces meaning, of how the psyche negotiates its own textual nature and how this textual basis of psychoanalysis effects the institutional nature of psychoanalytic practice. I wish to focus on the relation between writing and the interpretation of psychological phenomena at their joint intersection with history by looking at three readings of Freud by Derrida, de Certeau and Deleuze/Guattari. In brief, the following question will be considered: how does writing produce meaning and what does this historicizing function imply about the psyche in general?

Even a cursory glance at Freud's dream interpretation reveals a unique approach. Freud both uses his own dreams as scientific material and refuses to refer to a fixed universal key of translation. It is the latter that allows Freud to provide an innovative explanation of the relation between the signifier and the signified in dreams. As Derrida points out:

The absence of an exhaustive and absolutely infallible code means that in psychic writing which thus prefigures the meaning of writing in general, the difference

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between signifier and signified is never radical.
(Derrida 210)

Indeed, Freud further suggests that dreams completely emancipate the signifier from the signified. This results in the treatment of words as things in themselves to the extent that words and plays on words are almost solely responsible for conveying meaning. However this treatment of signifiers immediately poses a problem for translating dreams. If the signifiers in dreams manufacture their own significance, the very arbitrariness of this production resists the possibility of translation. This is because translation requires a permanent code enabling the "substitution or transformation of signifiers while retaining the same signified, always *present*, despite the *absence* of any specific signifier" (Derrida 210). It is clear that object of contention is the presupposed presence of meaning itself. On a *prima facie* level, by postulating both latent and manifest contents Freud seems to follow the paradigm of translation: transforming the latent signifiers into manifest signifiers which better express the always present but buried meaning which persists through the substitution game. However, a closer look at Freud's project reveals something different. The meaning of dreams does not so much satisfy the checklist of metaphysical attributes of immutability - enduring presence, atemporality, unity - but is itself a production and hence fundamentally historical. This interpretation of Freud, somewhat against his intentions but without betraying him, now needs to be validated.

The motivation for postulating a two-tiered conception of meaning itself follows from Freud's conviction that manifest meanings are generally deliberate distortions which dissimulate the wishes that the dreamers want to but are 'uncomfortable with' fulfilling. Freud first explains the psychological basis for such dissimulation via an analogy with writers. Dream wishes are like books whose meaning needs to be distorted to circumvent political censorship. One notable feature of this analogy is that Freud distinguishes between oral and written pronouncements. Oral pronouncements are

repressed after they have been spoken and so exhibit silence rather than distortion whereas written pronouncements are suppressed beforehand if they intend to make it into print. Thus, the "stricter the [social] censorship, the more far-reaching will be the disguise and the more ingenious the means employed for putting the reader on the scent of the true meaning" (Freud 224). With this analogy, Freud not only abrogates individual/social distinctions by using social phenomena to explain matters of the individual psyche but he also privileges the written text over the phonetic one as the closest approximation of the human psyche.

For Derrida, this is crucial. It evinces a radical departure from the logocentric nostalgia which privileges speech as unmediated (logos as both words and reason; particularly the Christian adaptation of logos for the original Word, uniting word and deed in completeness and self-sufficiency) over writing as a mediated and hence corrupted, 'after the fact' supplement to the original meaning. If Freud conceives the psyche as a written text, then he already sees it as deferring the originally intended meaning. Moreover if repression precedes articulation, then all meaning and subsequently all understanding of ourselves is always already a dissimulation and interpretation. It is always historical and never original. Freud himself further validates this view of the historicized unconscious by describing the self as initially fractured and fundamentally plural. Dream distortion, like all conscious thought, is the handiwork of two agencies whereby the "distressing dreams do in fact contain something which is distressing to the second agency, but something which at the same time fulfills a wish on the part of the first agency" (Freud 228). Thus, the basic epistemic unit of Freudian psychology, the individual, consists of two mutually conflicting agents instead of the unified Kantian individual which is the basis of enlightenment views of consciousness. Instead of Kant's transcendental subject (who is the fixed, unified organizer of his sensations) Freud emphasizes the irrational, the unseen, the involuntary controlling the voluntary. In short, everything outside the scientific

domain of reason. Not only does Freud render the passions as motive agents, he also considers language as the joint production of desire and force. Desire expresses itself textually to bypass self-censorship. Writing is born out of desire's repression and so too is always originally repressed.

Derrida explains the significance of considering meaning as the differential between the two forces of desire and repression:

There is no present text in general and there is not even a past present text, a text which is past as having been present. The text is not conceivable in an originary or modified form of presence. The unconscious text is already a *weave of pure traces*, differences in which force and meaning are united - a text nowhere present, consisting of archives which are *always already* transcriptions. Originary prints. Everything begins with production. Always already: repositories of meaning which was never present, whose signified presence was always reconstituted by deferral. (Derrida 211)

There is no present text because repression (the social censor) always defers and by deferral produces meaning. The 'originary prints', then, are the product of two actions. Because meaning is only articulated after repression, it is always already deferred (desire only achieves articulation through negotiation with the censor). Furthermore, the 'uncorrupted', 'original' presence of desire is always reconstituted by this deferral; it is interpreted or produced and not uncovered in its unadulterated state. Freud has thus historicized Kant's transcendental subject. Since we are initially plural and self-alienated, we also possess an inner historicity. Our own existence and self-knowledge is not something freely articulated but through its original deformation implies a production of meaning.

Both the pervasiveness of this deferral as well as Freud's task of founding a discourse out of the nonverbal interaction of psychic forces is encapsulated in his treatment of rhetorical figures. Rhetorical figures in their capacity as constitutive

components of meaning are themselves events (hence historical) by which deformation creates gaps between what is desired, the expression of this desire and its fulfillment. In one of Freud's dreams he realizes that "the wish to go to Rome had become in my dream - like a cloak and symbol for a number of other passionate wishes" (Freud 285). The manifest content is here explicitly identified with the apparently concurrent rhetorical figures of symbol and veil. But for something to qualify as a symbol (as opposed to being a trivial and hence negligible statement) is to confront us with the history of its effects. Thus although the symbol confronts us, it also masks the process by which it gains its importance and why it is meaningful in the first place.

According to de Certeau, this symbol/mask duality is "at the heart of Freudian discoveries - the return of the repressed" (de Certeau 3). Indeed he states that this 'mechanism':

is linked to a certain conception of time and memory, according to which consciousness is both the deceptive *mask* and operative *trace* of events that organize the present. (de Certeau 3)

Thus the symbol is both an archive of the differences between memories forgotten and remembered (why it is meaningful in the first place) - this is the operative trace - and the violence done to meaning to ensure its permanence - this is the deceptive mask. If we define the symbol as a special kind of sign that has practically effaced its referent, we approach Freud's notion of condensation. For example, in the dream about Irma's injection, Freud interprets Irma as a condensed figure who stands for many people: his daughter, the patient who succumbed to poisoning, his wife, her friend. Irma has become the collective image for people who had been "sacrificed to the work of condensation" (Freud 406). On the one hand, the use of 'sacrifice' indicates a violence done to meaning - a dissimulation. On the other hand, the condensation creates a proliferation of signifiers because such "multiple

determination makes it easier for an element to force its way into the dream-content" (Freud 402). This, at least theoretically, implies an infinity of interpretations. An infinity which too has been sacrificed for the sake of intelligibility. In this sense, the intelligibility of the present, its ability to explain itself to itself "takes the place of the history lost to it"; both because its meaningfulness is itself derived from a dissimulation of meaning (the violence done to meaning in order to communicate it) and because intelligibility itself is based on a system of exclusion (de Certeau 29b). Thus, not only is the present itself always reconstituted by deferral (the original violence which communicates meaning) but itself must colonize and empty out the past in order to retain its clarity.

The same implications hold for displacement, the other rhetorical figure Freud emphasizes. The "consequence of the displacement is that the dream-content no longer resembles the core of dream-thought and that the dream gives no more than a distortion of the dream-wish which exists in the unconscious" (Freud 417). Distortion is the type of manifestation (dream-content) which is a disguise, a willful substitute which nevertheless fulfills the dream-thought in its fictive, hence rhetorical sphere. However, if the psychic structure of desire and repression is universal, then all articulation of desire will need to circumvent repressive censorship and so will always be removed from the desire it wishes to articulate. This vitiates the possibility of anyone approaching a finalist interpretation of latent meaning. The two rhetorical figures of condensation and displacement are crucial in interpreting the textual fabric of the psyche; both are figures that are not self-evident but require a reading. Condensation in its near equivocation with symbols implies a reading concomitant with the rhetoric of optics; its heraldic qualities require a fine-tuned gaze; whereas displacement implies a complex grammar of interpretation.

This rhetoric of optics crucially demonstrates how Freud once again privileges the written over phonetic language. One way Freud emphasizes the written text is by comparing the dream-content with a pictographic script (Freud 381-2).

Words in their capacity as pictures can mean many contradictory things at once. As Derrida points out, this is in contrast with phonetic writing which necessarily relies on linear execution, always moves "from present to present point" and so remains in "profound complicity with logos (or the time of logic) which is dominated by the principle of noncontradiction, the cornerstone of all metaphysics of presence" (Derrida 217). Freud's allegiance to nonphonetic writing, particularly emphasized in its resistance of all logical relations and linear unfoldings of narrative, is further exposed in the following paragraph:

The different portions of this complicated structure stand, of course, in the most manifold logical relations to one another. They can represent foreground and background, digressions and illustrations, conditions, chains of evidence and counter-arguments. When the whole mass of these dream-thoughts is brought under the pressure of the dream-work, and its elements are turned about, broken into fragments and jammed together - almost like pack-ice - the question arises of what happens to the logical connections which have hitherto formed its framework. What representation do dreams provide for 'if', 'because', 'just as', 'although', 'either-or', and all the other conjunctions without which we cannot understand sentences or speeches? (Freud 422)

Aside from the spatialization or optical representation associated with referring to dream-content as pack-ice and hence circumvention of this 'time of logic', we have here a most peculiar situation. The crux of the Freudian position is that the unconscious causes certain conscious behaviors. But here, Freud insists that the whole causal contribution of the unconscious to understanding our desires is not immanent within the dream-content. Instead our discursive understanding interprets the unconscious, this pack-ice, as causally efficacious. For example, whereas the dream-content is 'and', 'and', 'and' *ad infinitum* we substitute 'either', 'or',

'because' etc. In other words, every narrative history, even the personal biography of the analysand involves attributing a motivation and causal links which are not immanent in the unconscious. For scientific purposes this has a two-fold significance: first it exposes how causal and logical connections used in constructing historical narrative are substitutions, interpretations; in short, fictions and second implies that the unconscious can never be conceptualized in its original state because understanding it is always already an interpretation. So far, however, Freud has only elucidated various characteristics of the psyche's content by comparing dreams with texts and rhetorical figures. Now, I will turn to the *Mystic Writing Pad* to investigate another textual metaphor which, this time, will express the structure or how the psyche works.

Freud begins his exposition by delineating the merits and limitations of two forms of writing: paper-pen and chalk-slate. Although the advantage of paper-pen writing lies in its ability to maintain a 'permanent trace' the receptive capacity of the writing surface is finite, easily exhaustible and cannot lose whatever trace has been inscribed on it. The chalk-slate method, on the contrary, both has a 'receptive capacity for an unlimited time' and can erase the memory traces which have become uninteresting and obsolete. It, however, suffers the reverse of the paper-pen method, namely its complete inability to maintain a permanent trace (Freud 227b). But with the invention of the mystic writing pad, Freud finds an apparatus which has "an unlimited capacity for new perceptions and nevertheless lays down permanent - even though not unalterable - memory-traces of them" (Freud 228b). Freud describes the functioning of the pad:

To make use of the Mystic Pad, one writes upon the celluloid portion of the covering-sheet which rests on the wax slab. For this purpose no pencil or chalk is necessary, since the writing does not depend on the material being deposited on the receptive surface...a pointed stilus scratches the surface, the depressions

upon which constitute the 'writing' ...If one wishes to destroy what has been written, all that is necessary is to raise the double covering-sheet from the wax slab by a light pull...the close contact between the waxed paper and the wax slab at the places where it has been scratched (upon which the visibility of the writing depended) is thus brought to an end and does not recur when the two surfaces come together once more. (Freud 229b)

This apparatus corresponds with remarkable precision to Freud's radically dualistic model of consciousness. The system Pcpt-Cs (analogous to the covering sheet) receives perceptions but in order for it to "react like a clean sheet to each new perception" it retains no permanent trace (Freud 228b). Instead the retention of the permanent traces is a function of the mnemonic systems which lies behind the perceptual system (analogous to the wax slab) and receive the trace of inscription. Already two important aspects emerge; first the psychical system consists of two separate but inter-related systems thus once again affirming an original plurality in our psychical constitution and second this psychical dualism itself implies that the "depth of the Mystic Pad is simultaneously a depth without bottom, an infinite allusion and a perfectly superficial exteriority" (Derrida 227). In other words, this contraption allows for both a potentially infinite depth of implied meaning and the endless accretion of trace in the 'deep' but limitless unconscious which lies behind the perception. It is a potentially infinite writing of the present (one can write on the celluloid *ad infinitum*) while simultaneously avoiding foundationalist pretenses (each system functions separately but in tandem: there is no first innocence in consciousness; to be conscious is to be, from the beginning, plural). Another important implication is that the ability to lift the celluloid and erase the writing is just as integral as the permanent traces which remain on the wax slab. Indeed, it seems that the psychical structure (and analogously writing) is contingent both on the contact between the celluloid and wax slab and the lifting of this contact which erases percep-

tion and cleanses the receptive surface to receive sensory data anew. Memory functions to retain the trace of all these present moments. Further, memory points to the differences in what we perceive. It retains the difference between what perceptions are written down, engraved as trace and what perceptions permeate our consciousness without notice. Thus, not only are perceptions themselves cathected in that the only perceptions to contact with the receptive surface are those which interest us, but, derivatively, memory only retains traces of those perceptions cathected in the first place. Because perception is already an inscription on the celluloid, it follows that the "perceived may be read only in the past, beneath perception and after it" (Derrida 224). What we are actually conscious of perceiving is the cathected perceptions inscribed on our receptive system. Thus, the 'perceived' is always initially delayed. This explains Derrida's claim that "memory or writing is the opening of that process of appearance itself" (Derrida 224). Appearance itself is contingent on the writing and memory traces which by differentiating perceptions create the conditions for the appearance.

Freud next continues his analogy by comparing the "actual breaking of contact which occurs when the writing stops in the Mystic Writing Pad" with the "periodic, non-excitability of the perceptual system" (Freud 225b). Freud postulates that consciousness functions as a series of periodic, discontinuous "cathectic innervations" as if the "unconscious stretches out feelers...towards the external world and hastily withdraws them" (Freud 231b). This periodic discontinuity has several important ramifications. First, on the Freudian schema the essence of our consciousness does not lie outside of time such as the Cartesian cogito, Plato's forms or other classic, timeless specimens. Second, this implies a heterogeneous, discontinuous concept of time rather than the homogeneous time typical of historiographic writing. Time is not an empty, homogeneous volume through which we progress historically in a smooth continuum between the past and present. Rather consciousness itself is a discontinuous flickering and so implies a different relation between the past and

present. The present is disconnected from the past and this vitiates any simple cause-effect relation between them. Moreover, the spatial metaphor implied in the writing pad analogy further complicates linear cause-effect relations by inscribing the past on top of the present. The previous present is erased by the new present so that each present is simultaneously discontinuous with the past and yet contingent on its very erasure. The present maintains its necessary virginity by complete expulsion of the past; with gross imperialism it constitutes itself out of the past's exile. Moreover, if the present is always constituted anew by the deliberate forgetfulness of the past this demonstrates that memory is always originally repressed, that this repression is what allows consciousness to function and that the radical discontinuity of the subject implies that it too is always reconstituted anew. Like pure perception, a pure subject "does not exist: we are written as we write, by the agency within us which always already keeps watch over perception" (Derrida 226). Thus, we write ourselves in order to be conscious but this is always both a deferring of the previous present and the erasure of ourselves.

But Freud did not conclude this. Instead, Freud retains the idea of a subject whose potentially radical discontinuity is precariously maintained by the intangible concept of an unconscious retaining these 'permanent traces'. This metaphysics of presence constitutes Freud's greatest betrayal. As Derrida states: "An unerasable trace is not a trace, it is a full presence, an immobile and incorruptible substance, a son of God, a sign of parousia...that is not a mortal germ" (Derrida 230). Freud neglects the fact that the script of dreams and the mystic pad are only representations and so are static, inferior analogies rather than the foundations of a science. So on the one hand, to use de Certeau's happy phrase, Freud radically "used the dream as a Trojan horse to historicize rhetoric and reintroduce it into the citadel of science" (de Certeau 23b). But on the other hand, he kills the metaphor, naturalizes the unconscious not as hypothetical construct but as fact and so builds his interpretations and practice on the burial ground

of catachresis. In other words, Freud performs mythology or the science of origins. It is precisely Freud's desire to treat the unconscious as a first cause that has evinced complaints from critics. Deleuze/Guattari complain that Freud's need for a transcendental guarantee imposes the verb 'to be' on these conjunctions of 'and', 'and', 'and' which is the infinity of interpretation (Deleuze/Guattari 25). The 'to be' of consciousness is complicitous with the metaphysics of presence which permeates Western philosophy; seeking beginnings and erecting foundations instead of nullifying them. It is this complicity which ties the institutional model of Freudian thought to psychoanalytic practice as institution.¹

This curious Freudian junction involves the intersection between historicism and fiction. Once again writing history (individual or social) involves both exile and imperialism or "cannibalistic discourse" (de Certeau 29b). On the one hand, the writing process "establishes at the beginning of writing a separation or exile" (de Certeau 29b). Oedipus begins interpreting his origins when he realizes that he is exiled from them. The unknown past pervades his present with a feeling as uncanny as the hidden 'trace' of the past engraved on his ankles. Thus the interpretation of origins, this Oedipal discourse, is founded in absence. Discourse is separated from its referent just as the 'present' of consciousness is always constituted by the forgotten past it colonizes (the writing pad is always erased). On other hand, writing is a "cannibalistic discourse" which takes the place of the 'history lost to it" (de Certeau 29b). In other words, dreams are initially alienated from their meaning because they express desires mutated by their articulation, nevertheless they also retain the trace which calls out to us to interpret them. But when we interpret we also deform the meaning of this trace and so the historical narration is cannibalistic: explanation crosses out the origin in order to speak about it. This is where the betrayal of psychoanalysis occurs. It substitutes the crossing out, the negation, the acknowledgment of the absence of origin (which is always originally deferred) for "survival under reprieve" (Deleuze/Guattari 125). The can-

nibalistic discourse equates "discourse and reality by imposing its discourse as the law governing the real" (de Certeau 32b). Thus, it legitimates its own interpretation - rhetorical, fictive, itself a vehicle of deferral - by making it 'scientific'.

This is where de Certeau locates institutionalizing gesture of psychoanalysis which differs from fiction precisely because it claims it "might do or become what it says of writing" (de Certeau 30b). So, if writing is the result of the negotiation of desire with the censor then to write this negotiation is essentially to write and construct the unconscious. Because there is no palpable origin, there is no way to make the unconscious conscious without engaging in the original duplicity of writing. The meaningfulness of the unconscious is produced, not recouped. But although for both Freud and a poet such as Schiller there is a loss of knowledge the outcome is different: "Freud's theoretic production is permitted by a loss of knowledge while for Schiller poetic creation is permitted by a disappearance of being" (de Certeau 30b). Once again the presence/absence dichotomy resurfaces. For Freud the loss of knowledge (exile from origin) avoids the nihilism and profound antilogos of this complete loss of 'being' through masking its own production. It creates a discourse that speaks for the referent 'being' which, by the sleighthand of the psychoanalytic institution's own credibility as curative, is resurrected from the netherworld of nothingness. Freud produces 'being', naturalizes it in the name of the psychoanalytic institution and then proceeds to inscribe this 'real' unconscious with a truly 'documentary' history. This nothingness is, in fact, the hinge that legitimates the authoritative position of the analyst. He intervenes in the name of this nothingness and then proceeds to stamp his historicizing of the unconscious with the mark of reality. The institution qualifies the slide from historicity to epistemic skepticism (or poetic nothingness) via the authority of history 'as it happened'. Historicism which refuses to recognize its fictiveness dissimulates itself by the mask of official, grand history.

Thus, although Freud ventures into historicism, he returns to historiography. But the textual analogies of the psyche, from the textual content of the psyche in the *Interpretation of Dreams* to the textual structure of the psyche in the *Mystic Writing Pad* have done their work. Freud may have betrayed his historicizing activities - historicizing rhetoric, demonstrating the original dissimulation of writing, exceeding the phonetic discourse typical of metaphysics, temporalizing and spatializing writing and the unconscious - but they, in turn, also betray him. To use Oedipal imagery against Freud, the son, the offspring of his work in turn betrays the father. The putative authority of psychoanalysis is undone by the postulates it needs in order to exist.

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NOTES

1. "The state as a model for the book and for thought has a long history: logos, the philosopher-king, the transcendence of the Idea, the interiority of the concept, the republic of minds, the court of reason, the functionaries of thought, man as legislator and as subject" (Deleuze/Guattari 24).