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v. 22 OF THE COMPLETE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKS OF

SIGMUND FREUD

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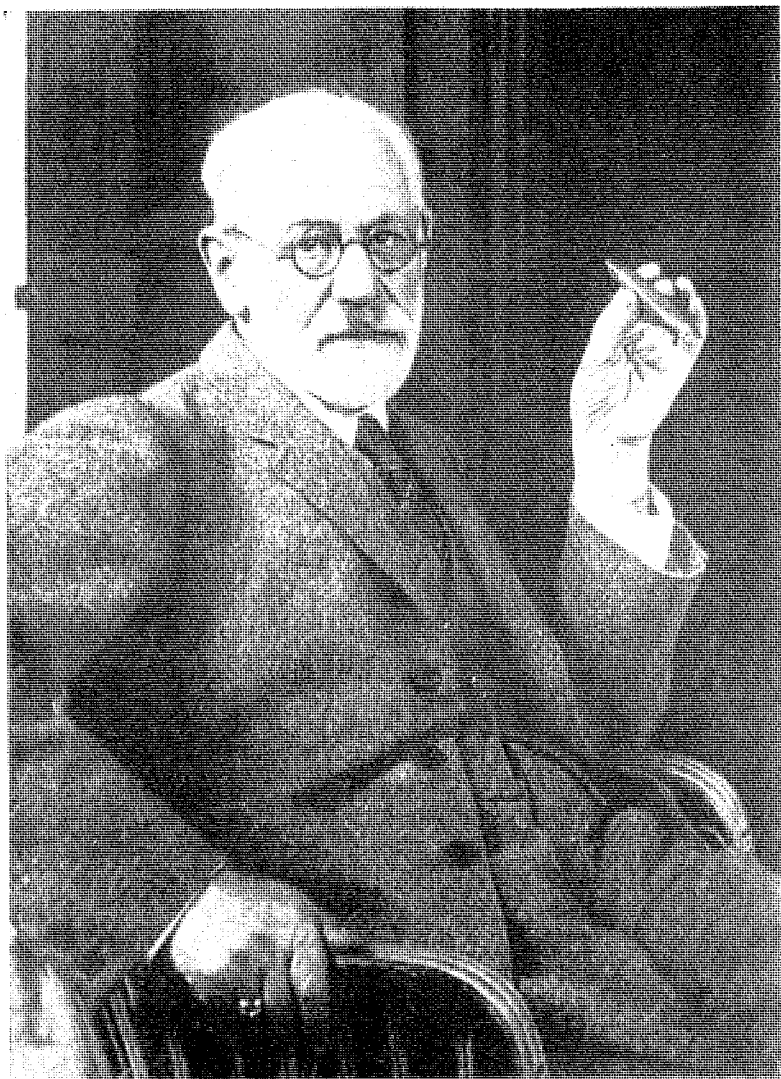
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(1932-36)

New Introductory
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and
Other Works



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THE SUBTLETIES OF A
FAULTY ACTION

(1935)

DIE FEINHEIT EINER FEHLHANDLUNG

(a) GERMAN EDITIONS:

1935 *Almanach 1936*, 15–17.

1950 *G.W.*, 16, 37–9.

(b) ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS:

'The Fineness of Parapraxis'

1939 *Psychoan. Rev.*, 26 (2), 153–4. (Tr. A. N. Foxe.)

'The Subtleties of a Parapraxis'

1950 *C.P.*, 5, 313–15. (Tr. James Strachey.)

The present translation, with an altered title, is a corrected version of the one published in 1950.

This was a late, but not the last, contribution by Freud to his favourite topic of the psychopathology of everyday life. (Freud, 1901*b*.) He returned to it once again in his unfinished 'Elementary Lessons' (1940*b* [1938]).

THE SUBTLETIES OF A FAULTY ACTION

I was preparing a birthday present for a woman friend¹—a small engraved gem for insertion into a ring. It was fixed in the centre of a piece of stout cardboard and on this I wrote the following words: 'Voucher for the supply by Messrs. L., jewelers, of a gold ring . . . for the attached stone bearing an engraved ship with sail and oars.' But at the point at which I have here left a gap, between 'ring' and 'for' there stood a word which I was obliged to cross out since it was entirely irrelevant. It was the little word '*bis*' [the German for 'till']. Why should I have written it at all?

When I read the short inscription through, I was struck by the fact that it contained the word '*für*' ['for'] twice in rapid succession: '*for* the supply'—'*for* the attached stone'. That sounded ugly and should be avoided. It then occurred to me that '*bis*' had been substituted for '*für*' in an attempt to escape this stylistic awkwardness. No doubt that was so; but it was an attempt that made use of remarkably inadequate means. The preposition '*bis*' was quite out of place in this context and could not possibly be substituted for the necessary '*für*'. So why precisely '*bis*'?

But perhaps the word '*bis*' was not the preposition determining a time-limit. It may have been something totally different—the Latin '*bis*'—'for a second time', which has retained its meaning in French. '*Ne bis in idem*'² is a maxim of Roman law. '*Bis! bis!*' cries a Frenchman if he wants a performance repeated. So that must be the explanation of my senseless slip of the pen. I was being warned against the second '*für*', against a repetition of the same word. Something else must be put instead of it. The chance identity in sound between the foreign word '*bis*' which embodied the criticism of the original phraseology

¹ [Ernest Jones (1957, 269) mistakenly identifies the friend as Lou Andreas-Salomé. In fact she was Mrs. Dorothy Burlingham, who is still (1962) in possession of the ring and of the piece of cardboard to which the stone was attached.]

² ['Do not institute the same proceedings twice.']

and the German preposition made it possible to insert '*bis*' instead of '*für*' as though by a slip of the pen. But this mistake gained its purpose not by being *made*, but only after it had been *corrected*. I had to cross out the '*bis*' and in so doing I had myself, so to speak, done away with the repetition which was disturbing me. A variant, not without interest, of the mechanism of a parapraxis!

I felt very much pleased with this solution. But in self-analysis the danger of incompleteness is particularly great.¹ One is too soon satisfied with a part explanation, behind which resistance may easily be keeping back something that is more important perhaps. I related this little analysis to my daughter, and she immediately saw how it went on:

'But you gave her a stone like that for a ring once before. *That's* probably the repetition you want to avoid. One doesn't like always to be making the same present.' I was convinced by this; the objection was obviously to a repetition of the same *present*, not of the same *word*. There had been a displacement on to something trivial with the object of diverting attention from something more important: an aesthetic difficulty, perhaps, in place of an instinctual conflict.

For it was easy to discover the further sequel. I was looking for a motive for not making a present of the stone, and that motive was provided by the reflection that I had already made the same (or a very similar) present. Why should this objection have been concealed and disguised? Very soon I saw clearly why. I wanted not to give the stone away at all. I liked it very much myself.

The explanation of this parapraxis was found without raising any great difficulties. Indeed, a consoling thought soon occurred to me: regrets of this kind only enhance the value of a gift. What sort of gift would it be if one were not a little bit sorry to part with it? Nevertheless the episode enables one to realize once more how complicated the most unobtrusive and apparently simplest mental processes may be. I made a slip in writing out

¹ [The risk of incomplete interpretation had been insisted upon in the case of dreams in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), *Standard Ed.*, 4, 279 and 5, 523. For the special difficulties in self-analysis, see a footnote to the 'History of the Psycho-Analytic Movement' (1914d), *ibid.*, 14, 20-1.]

some instructions—put in a '*bis*' where a '*für*' was needed—I noticed it and corrected it: a small mistake, or rather attempt at a mistake, and yet based upon this large number of premisses and dynamic determinants! Indeed, the mistake could not have occurred if the material had not been particularly favourable.