

The Signifying Bind:

Sigmund Freud and the Suspicion of the Unknown

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In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud unearths the unconscious logic of our nocturnal world, extracted through the language of psychoanalysis to fulfil his dream of interpretation. Freud's formulation of distorted wishes and their latent source proceeds from a hermeneutic unravelling of the manifested dream; to this extent, his conception of a violent and repressed oneiric unconscious is born out of the process of its own interpretation. Indeed, his psychoanalytic project in general is premised on the penetrability of the unconscious, whose dynamic processes he binds to representation as "contents" belonging to a "system" or "phase" (of psychical acts).¹ And yet in fathering an unconscious of "latent ideas" open nonetheless to interpretation,² a tension arises between the analysable structure of dreaming and Freud's original insight of an un-conscious as necessarily without consciousness. On the one hand, he famously proclaims a conceptual entry – "Where id was, there ego shall be" – which implies the amenability of the unconscious (id) to psychoanalytic recovery, to appropriation by the ego.³ On the other hand, he accentuates the dream's thoughts and processes as "incredible", "alien", and even "unknown".⁴ Is the unconscious incredible, then, but not impenetrable?

This paper sounds out tensions in both Freudian psychical systems and their textual inception, in search of the limit of interpretation. Freud's writings afford a latent discordance between the hermeneut and the "master of suspicion",⁵ as the project of analysis at times belies the enigmatic opacity of the origin it posits. The measured lucidity of Freud's technique infers a *symbolic* psychical organisation, and overshadows his textual insinuation of the inherently unrepresentable—of the 'unknown'. Thus the conflict between hermeneutics and suspicion percolates Freud's thinking, his intuitions, and his eponymous slips, as the parapraxes of his own dreams, interpretations, and work intimate the possibility of unconsciousness unbounded by signification. Far from aspiring to resolve this disharmony, we must entertain its centrality to the nature of dreaming.

Our appeal to the properly un-conscious seeks to reinvigorate Freud's systemic model in the face of poststructuralist debate. The 'unknown' renders a platform for the unrepresentable alongside the structuralist rubric and rigour of Freud's psychical organisation. We shall proceed by exploring the mechanics of the dream, as well as reading several of Freud's own dreams against the grain of his interpretations, arguing firstly for the interpenetration of psychical systems, and secondly, paradoxically, for the unknown.

The system of distance

Freud delineates the unconscious almost exclusively through representation, as an aggregation of ideas: "in the unconscious, there are only contents, cathected with greater or lesser strength".⁶ Though he speaks of instincts and psychical acts, they are necessarily re-presented (whereby they undergo censorship): "The nucleus of the Unconscious consists of instinctual representatives which seek to discharge their cathexis".⁷ Where conscious reality is threatened by anti-social desires, such cathectic energies – attached always to ideas – are repressed, emergent only in the distorted forms of dreams, slips, jokes, and so on. Freud's most dynamic model of unconscious function proposes "primary processes" comprising "thing-presentations", to which "word-presentations" are attached in the becoming-conscious of the 'thing'.⁸ This does not, however, preclude the conceptual aspect of 'thing-presentation', which Samuel Weber, in contrast to Strachey's ubiquitous translation,⁹ refers to as "thing-representation".¹⁰ Thus Weber underscores the iterable and ideational structure of the unconscious. Instinctual excitation is always already deferred in this symbolic repetition—in this unconscious context of thing-representation. Freud himself confirms that "no psychical apparatus exists which possesses a primary process only", insisting on "thought identity" and its cathectic diffusion through secondary processes.¹¹ Excitation, it seems, implies identity.¹²

The first dream analysed in *Interpretation* is one of Freud's own, 'Irma's Injection', which concerns a patient who seeks treatment from Freud and two of his colleagues regarding pains in her throat, stomach and abdomen.¹³ Freud's analysis concludes that the dream fulfils a wish: that he escapes responsibility for Irma's persisting pains; it also revenges him on his colleagues (Otto and Dr M.) and vents a general concern for Freud's professional conscientiousness, as well as for his and other people's health.¹⁴ Two examples of his self-analysis follow:

‘A preparation of propyl ... propyls ... propionic acid.’ [...] This liqueur [a gift from ‘our friend’ Otto] gave off such a strong smell of fusel oil that I refused to touch it. [...] The smell of fusel oil (amyl ...) evidently stirred up in my mind a recollection of the whole series—propyl, methyl, and so on.¹⁵

The dream revenges Freud on Otto: the injection of ‘propyls’ connects, through its smell, to the fusel-oil bouquet of the liqueur; Freud’s unconscious attack on his colleague’s inferior calibre as a medical practitioner is transferred firstly to Otto’s inferior liqueur, and secondly to the preparation. So Otto’s strange injection is to blame for Irma’s pains—not Freud.

‘She looked pale and puffy.’ My patient always had a rosy complexion. I began to suspect that someone else was being substituted for her.¹⁶

Freud later recognises Irma’s assimilation here with another girl who he had once thought would be well disposed to therapy. This condensation juxtaposes, upon analysis, the other girl’s favourable disposition against Irma’s abandonment of therapy. The unconscious wish for professional absolution thus shifts the blame onto Irma’s resistance to treatment, which precipitates her own responsibility for the ongoing ailment. Thus ‘Irma’s Injection’ instances several wishes, their latent thoughts, and the dream-work of condensation and displacement that distorts them into the conscious material of the dream.

The treacherous identities of the unconscious perpetually seek expression in manifest reality, while the ego maintains a resistance to the menace implied by these primal ideas. Mediating between the two systems, psychical processes (typified by the dream) are governed by the opposing forces of cathectic discharge and censorship:

one of these forces constructs the wish which is expressed by the dream, while the other exercises a censorship upon this dream-wish and, by the use of this censorship, forcibly brings about a distortion in the expression of the wish.¹⁷

In the Freudian economy, distortion reconciles these forces of cathexis and censorship through an ideational removal. Intermediate connections distance and mitigate the latent idea by way of increasingly remote derivatives, ending in a manifest content.¹⁸ Thus the Irma dream displaces a vengeful cathexis across the malodorous liqueur, the propyls, and Otto’s injection. Dream-work consists of the connections formed by the primary processes of condensation and displacement, it scarpers along a path “of least resistance” between cathexis and censorship.¹⁹

Distortion constitutes, therefore, a psychological expenditure through the exchange of signs that both enacts and bridges the distance between conscious and unconscious contents.

While Freud emphasises the “sharp cleavage [...] between conscious and unconscious mental activity”,²⁰ his model binds psychological organisation to a signifying economy of distance but not division. A tension stretches across the dream-work of increasingly removed derivatives which cannot support a “frontier” of unconsciousness.²¹ Freud’s quantitative system of distance contravenes the qualitative distinction between the repressed and the unresisted. In the case of the condensation of Irma and the therapeutically inclined girl, the apparent substitution of traits comprises a chain of associations: “pale and puffy” refer back to the value of psychotherapy and Freud’s analytic success, and ultimately absolve him of responsibility for Irma’s complaint. But his dreaming expression of innocence carries the trace of its unconscious origin in doubt, fear—the counterpart of professional anxiety. Distortion here both initiates a repression of the cathectic dream-thought and yet insinuates the latter within the conscious: it is less a cleavage than a series of connections. Unconscious thing-representations ‘continue into’ the preconscious in the distorted form of their derivatives; they even trip into the conscious, as manifest reality exhibits the warp of unconscious combination in the residue of dreams, the disjunction of slips, the absurdity of jokes, and so forth. Moreover, the perverse distortions of wishes and thoughts are available to analytic excavations: the unconscious accedes to Freud’s dream of interpretation; its *structure* is susceptible to a retrospective exegesis, to the unravelling of its significations, its condensations and displacements.²² At this point, there is no place for the ‘unknown’ as an unrepresentable ‘space’ (or ‘mode’), for the psyche must submit to the signifying bind.

The proliferous wish

This hermeneutic model of the unconscious fulfils Freud’s investigative ambition, and entails a clinical methodology of great value, alongside one of the grander achievements of twentieth-century philosophy. However, such a systematic access to the unconscious exists in tension with his purported cleavage between phases, not to mention the departure from the ‘incredible’, ‘alien’ and ‘unknown’. The ‘path of least resistance’ strays from his conception of a “violent opposition” (to “questionable” mental processes), in the seeming oxymoron of a

‘least violent’ resistance.²³ How, then, are we to understand the structure of the unconscious, if it must at once support appropriation and succour the unknown?

Where Freud argues for a qualitative distinction between the repressed unconscious and the immanently available preconscious, he resorts in practice to a *quantitative* mechanism that vitiates systemic division:

If these derivatives have become *sufficiently far removed* from the repressed representative, whether owing to the adoption of distortions or by reason of *the number of intermediate links* inserted, they have free access to the conscious. It is as though the resistance of the conscious against them was *a function of their distance* from what was originally repressed.²⁴

Resistance functions inversely to removal or distance, conceivable as the number of associations, distortions, or links between the repressed content and its manifest derivative. Freud elaborates:

In carrying out the technique of psychoanalysis, we continually require the patient to produce such derivatives of the repressed as, in consequence either of their remoteness or of their distortion, can pass the censorship of the conscious. [...] the patient can go on spinning a thread of associations, till he is brought up against some thought, the relation of which to what is repressed becomes so obvious that he is compelled to repeat his attempt at repression. Neurotic symptoms, too, must have fulfilled this same condition, for they are derivatives of the repressed, which has, by their means, finally won the access to consciousness which was previously denied to it.²⁵

Resistance remains until enough links or distortions have sufficiently distanced the original to render the representation available to the conscious, winning it that ‘free access’ by which Freud defines the preconscious system. In the case of the Irma dream, Otto’s injection appears ‘sufficiently far removed’ from the original dream-thought of revenge, whereas a direct, vengeful allusion to the inferior liqueur remains too close to the repressed representative for conscious consideration (until analysis unearths this wish).

At the same time, Freud insists on the interconnection of the entire psychical apparatus, and on the distribution of resistance across it:

the whole of the associated environment of the substitutive idea [is] cathected with special intensity, so that it can display a high degree of sensibility to excitation. Excitation of any point in this structure must inevitably, on account of its connection with the substitutive idea, give rise to a slight development of anxiety; [...] unconscious influence extends to the whole phobic outer structure.²⁶

Freud even speaks of a resistance persisting in conscious contents – to *manifest* representations, for example, in the forgetting of dreams – acknowledging that repression proper “affects an idea which is preconscious or even actually conscious”.²⁷ Otto’s injection, then, though manifest in the dream and consciously remembered, remains resisted by virtue of its association with the displaced idea of vengeance and professional culpability. In this way, the anxiety of the unconscious infiltrates conscious contents, as the distorted wishes (manifested by means of condensation and displacement) insinuate a connective residue of resistance.

Freud’s stated insistence that the preconscious has ‘free access to the conscious’ is contested by his textual implications: by the proximity and connection of conscious contents to repressed representatives; by the operation of repression on conscious ideas; and by the quantitative distribution of resistance underpinning the possibility of repression itself. The web of psychical interconnection presupposes an ongoing resistance antagonistic to this ‘freedom’ and anxious about this ‘access’. All signification – conscious and unconscious – conveys a relation of distance to repressed representatives, expressible as a measure of resistance. Psychoanalysis itself demonstrates both the contiguity *and the potential consciousness* of censored associations, along with the abiding resistance attached to them. This appears to be the limiting condition of a hermeneutics deduced from manifest contents: interpretation inherits their immersion in a context of resistance, anxiety and desire. Given “the intricate network of our world of thought”,²⁸ and the ‘associative environment’ of ideas, *resistance is inherent to representation.*

Furthermore, this spectrum of resistance, predicated on its formulation through distance, cannot support internal classification (such as the “frontier” between the unconscious and preconscious, between the repressed and the unresisted).²⁹ Freud asserts, on the one hand, that the distinction between unconscious and preconscious systems resides in the censorship of the former but not the latter:

the unconscious idea is excluded from consciousness by living forces which oppose themselves to its reception, while they do not object to other ideas, the fore-conscious ones. [...] Only then the difference between foreconscious ideas, which can appear in consciousness and reappear at any moment, and unconscious ideas which cannot do so gains a theoretical as well as practical value.³⁰

And yet he admits, on the other hand, that resistance binds to preconscious (and conscious) representations. The dream-wish affects the whole of its 'associated environment', which perforce extends, however minimally, to all signification bounded by psychical connections. Thus the proliferating wish is always already insinuated in a relation of distance with the conscious.

The quantitative operation of resistance belies Freud's qualitative imposition of systemic distinction between the preconscious and unconscious. Distance, which constitutes repression, cannot provide for a discrete unconscious—and does not Freud's hermeneutic tacitly confirm the insinuation of the latent in the manifest?³¹ Unconscious representations are not distinct, but distant from the preconscious. Qualitatively speaking, then, *the preconscious is the sum of sub-conscious organisation*.

Doubts abounding

Given the representational connectedness of psychical activity, what remains to the necessarily incredible—to the unknown? Despite his structuralist leanings, a tension unsettles Freud's thesis of the absolute penetrability of dream-interpretation, as he himself hints at a hermeneutic insufficiency: "There is at least one spot in every dream at which it is unplumbable—a navel, as it were, that is its point of contact with the unknown".³² Interred in a footnote amid repeated claims both to analytic pervasion and to an accessible unconscious vested in representation ("Hildebrandt is unquestionably right in asserting that we should be able to explain the genesis of every dream-image if we devoted enough time and trouble to tracing its origin"³³), Freud's admission glimmers with a suspicion of the unthinkable—a 'navel', an origin, a severance.

This unknown ("*der Unerkannten*"³⁴) signals a point where referential connectivity ends—the limit of representation. Freud returns to the navel, to this nascent refusal of hermeneutic ubiquity, just once:

There is often a passage in even the most thoroughly interpreted dream which has to be left obscure; this is because we become aware during the work of interpretation that at that point there is a tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled and which moreover adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream. This is the dream's navel, the spot where it reaches down into the unknown. The dream-thoughts to which we are led by interpretation cannot, from the nature of things, have any definite endings; they are bound to branch out in every direction into the intricate network of our world of thought. It is at some point where the meshwork is particularly close that the dream-wish grows up, like a mushroom out of its mycelium.³⁵

Referring henceforth to the 'Unknown' in the majuscule to signal this 'point', 'passage', or 'navel', we submit that it inheres in the failure itself of representation. For if the Unknown cannot contribute to our knowledge of contents, if it 'cannot be unravelled' (interpreted by associations), it must be unrepresentable.³⁶

Whereas Freud has no further practical use for his umbilical Unknown, we must recognise that it re-affirms the *suspicion* of an un-conscious; that is, of a psychical possibility beyond the ideational organisation of the pre/conscious.³⁷ For despite his structuralist procedure, Freud's account of the Irma dream offers a glimpse of the Unknown. He writes that, looking down her throat, "I saw some remarkable curly structures which were evidently modelled on the turbinal bones of the nose"—a remarkable condensation indeed, which he claims alludes to various repressed contents:

The white patch reminded me of diphtheritis and so of Irma's friend, but also of a serious illness of my eldest daughter's [...] The scabs on the turbinal bones recalled a worry about my own state of health. I was making frequent use of cocaine at that time to reduce some troublesome nasal swellings. [...] I had been the first to recommend the use of cocaine [which] had brought serious reproaches down on me. The misuse of that drug had hastened the death of a dear friend of mine.³⁸

The mutual exclusion of 'nose in throat' is unpacked by Freud into individual identities, introducing sense to its senselessness—the inconsonance is resolved. And yet, beside the condensation (and unravelling) of *contents* is the 'evidently' ("offenbar"³⁹) character of their 'presentation': the *impossible familiarity* with which Freud instantly intuits the nasality of the throat. It is not a paradox of facts (the level amenable to Freud's interpretations) but of fashion (in the adverbial), of the condition and limit of signification. Despite Freud's structuralist transliteration, the dream exerts the logic of a "double bind", in which something impossible can *evidently* be the case.⁴⁰ The immediacy of this 'evidently' consists neither in the dissemination of ideas, nor in a propositional lack of logic, but in a *style*—in an absurd disjunction, a sudden glut amid the sobriety of Freud's prose, which giddies and trips across the rationality of his discourse.⁴¹

Such a style would, for example, be outside the chain of displacement witnessed in the propyls, less a violent idea (of revenge) than the violence itself of ideational dislocation. The throat's *evidently* incorporating a nose antagonises, through the adverb, the logic of their combination. Whereas a retrospective analysis can sketch the disparate representations of 'curly nasal structures' and

‘throat’, pacified in the sense of their condensation, this fleeting *style* injects a trauma into the discourse of mutual exclusion. This appreciation of style corresponds to the sweep and whimsy of dreaming beyond the staid representation of the dream; it enlivens Freud’s otherwise mechanical transliterations; it launches a real, limiting trauma amid the merely conceptual paradox of his subsequent analysis.⁴² Where Freud maintains identity, and extracts meaning and rationality from the dream’s metonymy, ‘evidently’ skits across nose and throat with a *simultaneity* unbounded by discursive contiguity. Nose and throat are subsumed by ‘evidently’, which – like the umbilical Unknown – ‘adds nothing to our knowledge of the content of the dream’, *tangling* the ‘nose-in-throat’ in a stylistic, adverbial indifference. Thus, it is only later, having omitted the adverb (“What I saw in her throat: a white patch and turbinal bones with scabs on them”⁴³), that Freud is able to differentiate and analyse the metonymy, divested of its style. While we can posit the Unknown at this ‘point’ or ‘navel’ of signifying entanglement, it cannot be unravelled (as Freud confesses) and serves as the limit of interpretation.

Later in the dream, Freud recounts: “[Leopold] also indicated that a portion of the skin on the left shoulder was infiltrated. (I noticed this, just as he did, in spite of her dress.)...”. Freud trails off with this ellipsis, and his interpretation is equally unhinged:

In spite of her dress. This was in any case only an interpolation. We naturally used to examine the children in the hospital undressed: and this would be a contrast to the manner in which adult female patients have to be examined. I remembered that it was said of a celebrated clinician that he never made a physical examination of his patients except through their clothes. Further than this I could not see. Frankly, I had no desire to penetrate more deeply at this point.⁴⁴

Freud seems to dismiss the point as mere ‘interpolation’, being *at once* unable and yet disinclined to analyse it further. The celebrated clinician has little relevance to Freud’s discussion, signalling instead a certain anxiety over the examination of female patients—precisely at the expense of professional responsibility (one of the original dream-thoughts). Freud suggests earlier that the strange phrasing of ‘the skin on her left shoulder’ refers to “a left upper posterior infiltration”; that is, to tuberculosis.⁴⁵ But this association only accentuates the incongruity of Freud’s noticing Irma’s *skin* (and by analysis her lung) *in spite of her dress* (“Trotz des Kleides”⁴⁶). The torsion here of discourse again inflects a style – a

double bind – upon the network of representation, in the lunge of anxiety and desire that transports us from dress to flesh. And this is the very moment of dreaming – as distinct from the secondary elaboration of contents and analysis – the fugitive glitch in which the skin, or lung, is ‘apparent’, despite being covered by a dress.⁴⁷

If the dream process clothes Irma (in both representations and a therapeutic antipathy), the analysis must attain to an undressing—not simply the revelation of deeper meanings, but also the sounding out of the limit of interpretation: the naked desire, the disjunctive style of Freud’s anxiety (over sexual attentions, perhaps). Freud notes the general “suppression of affects” in dreams, and their “level of indifference” in “emotional tone”; this he attributes to the suspension of motor impulses while sleeping and, moreover, to contrary affects’ censoring each other.⁴⁸ Yet it seems strange (and one of the less successful aspects of *The Interpretation of Dreams*) that two antithetical affects should neatly annul each other to produce an “inhibition of affect”.⁴⁹ We might have supposed an affective cacophony, or at least this morbid calm, in place of the “indifferent ring” Freud ascribes one such dream.⁵⁰ This point of affective suppression rekindles the tension between dreaming and the dream, and we must suspect the transliteration’s failure of the intensity of oneiric process. Freud recoils as ‘Irma’s Injection’ trips over ‘evidently’ and ‘in spite of her dress’, asserting instead that the dream-work, in the service of censorship, renders dreams “not infrequently [...] colourless, and without emotional tone of any great intensity”.⁵¹ This observation testifies, conversely, to the censorship exerted by *transliteration* and its analysis; but the Unknown is without the signifying bind, and insinuates *its* intensity into manifest discourse as a tangle, a tension, a style.

Such is the affective core of dreaming as opposed to the subsequent content of dreams. The less-than-circumspect sexualisation of Irma (in dwelling on the propriety of her wearing clothes and the resistance to ‘further penetration’ [*“mich hier tiefer einzulassen”*⁵²]), signals alternative dream-wishes unacknowledged, here, by Freud. Furthermore, the anxious disparity between examination and voyeurism, between therapist and paramour (or professional resentment and unrequited desire), is manifest not in the representational derivatives of a latent wish, but in the disjunctive simultaneity of surface and depth. Alongside the amorous dream-thought emerges an affective tangle of skin-and-lung in their/its indifference (the plural subsumed by Freud’s ‘in spite of’).⁵³ Affective intensity

tears the fabric of representation, as metonymical overdetermination is traversed by the trauma of style.

These examples from 'Irma's Injection' are far from isolated, and arise from the tensions within Freud's transliterative inconsistency or interpretative shortfall as a fraught discordance. Take his brief 'Closet' dream:

A hill, on which there was something like an open-air closet: a very long seat with a large hole at the end of it. Its back edge was thickly covered with small heaps of faeces of all sizes and degrees of freshness. [...] I micturated on the seat; a long stream of urine washed everything clean; the lumps of faeces came away easily and fell into the opening. It was as though at the end there was still some left.⁵⁴

Freud interprets this candid account in terms of Hercules, cleaning the Augean stables, with elements of Gulliver and Gargantua thrown in; the absence of any disgust (in the dream) results from the contrary impulses of "delusions of inferiority" and "megalomania", which, Freud maintains, combine to produce a "an indifferent feeling-tone owing to the mutual inhibition".⁵⁵ Freud in effect is washing away the massed excrement of his detractors, yet without exaggerating his achievement. What he fails to mention in analysis is the ambiguous remnant atop the closet, which besmirches both his superhuman feat and the integrity of his interpretation. Doubt is cast doubly in the lump that remains and the uncertainty of its remaining: it construes an unconscious residue which thwarts the closure and cleanliness of representation; it glimpses at Freud's insufficiency to his Herculean task, at his false modesty; and it suggests that the best efforts of interpretation will leave an elusive kernel upon the boundless mouth of the Unknown. That is to say, an un-conscious doubt limits the unity of Freudian hermeneutics.⁵⁶

In another dream Freud dissects his own pelvis and legs, "which I saw before me as though in the dissecting-room, but without noticing their absence in myself and also without a trace of any gruesome feeling".⁵⁷ He asseverates that the auto-evisceration symbolises the publishing of his self-analysis: "A wish then arose that I might get over this feeling of distaste [for self exposure]; hence it was that I had no gruesome feeling in the dream".⁵⁸ Freud also reasons that the dream expresses, happily, the wish that "children may perhaps achieve what their father has failed to do", and although in fact he woke up "in a mental fright" (the dream continues in a remote land where he has to cross a chasm with his "sore" legs) the dream-thought was actually positive: its manifest content of the difficult crossing was

responsible for the anxiety, not the latent idea.⁵⁹ But the apparent optimism of this wish for publication, in the absence of affect during the dissection, conflicts with the ongoing perplexity of those dismembered legs:

The pelvis had been eviscerated, and it was visible now in its superior, now in its inferior, aspect, the two being mixed together. [...] I was then once more in possession of my legs and was making my way through the town. But (being tired) I took a cab. [...] Finally I was making a journey through a changing landscape with an Alpine guide who was carrying my belongings. Part of the way he carried me too, out of consideration for my tired legs. [...] Before this I had been making my own way forward over the slippery ground with a constant feeling of surprise that I was able to do it so well after the dissection. [...] the chasm had to be crossed over from the window. At that point I became really frightened about my legs.⁶⁰

Freud mentions only that his legs had felt tired during the day; however, this point of *vacillation*, though not emotional, is absurdly protracted, and ends with the very feeling of fright that was absent in the actual dissection. If the legs betoken Freud's body of work, then this lingering doubt flitting and frenzied between representations reunites the horror of dissection/publication with the final, waking fright. The Unknown – this *tangle* of legs at once mangled and mended – traverses the dream in an affective style of rampant anxiety.⁶¹

The oceanic Unknown

Perhaps these inconsistencies could be further interpreted in pursuit of total assimilation; however, their entanglement belongs less to the failure of penetrable representation than to the failure of representation itself. This affective style is not simply “attached” to or “detached” from ideas (as Freud prescribes the emotional content of dreams),⁶² but wreaks an emotional havoc from the disjointed stream of signification. Recalling the Unknown's ‘tangle of dream-thoughts which cannot be unravelled’, dreaming becomes, ironically, less fathomable the more it is unravelled, bound, and tangled by representation: an over-dressing, as it were; a bandage that strangles the wound.⁶³ The Unknown is not ‘resisted’ as such, but necessarily discordant with the operation of resistance and representation—thus it inheres in elusion. The recuperative activity of censorship structures (remembers, renders conscious) the nonrecoverable origin of dreaming as that which was always already a manifest dream-content; conversely, ‘para+praxis’, as ‘alongside+activity’, suggests precisely this primal energy that stalks signification as a force of trauma.⁶⁴ In the Irma dream, a suspicion of the Unknown – of death?

– shadows Freud’s concern for his health, *abounding* in the parapractic breakdown of ‘evidently’, in the disparate simultaneity of nose-in-throat. Inherently unthinkable, the Unknown is *approached* by a sounding out of tension, by the style of discursive absurdity as representation stutters over the ‘unplumbable’.

Insofar as the dream-wish ‘grows up out of the mycelium’, this origin corresponds to the ‘pre-perceptual appetite’ Freud posits as prior to ‘wishful’ identity: he theorises that in the infant, an internal and originary stimulus (hunger, perhaps) produces an ongoing excitation, which ends “through outside help” with satisfaction.⁶⁵ Here, the image of the wish translates from the perception of satiety, which in turn had arisen from a “continuous”, unrepresentable excitation. Freud explains, at length:

An essential component of this experience of satisfaction is a particular perception (that of nourishment, in our example) the mnemonic image of which remains associated thenceforward with the memory trace of the excitation produced by the need. As a result of the link that has thus been established, next time this need arises a psychical impulse will at once emerge which will seek to re-cathect the mnemonic image of the perception and to re-evolve the perception itself, that is to say, to re-establish the situation of the original satisfaction. An impulse of this kind is what we call a wish; the reappearance of the perception is the fulfilment of the wish...⁶⁶

Such continuity, elsewhere assigned to the instinct (which “never operates as a force giving a *momentary* impact but always as a *constant* one”⁶⁷), reflects the unravelled tangle of the Unknown.⁶⁸ Where the structuralist model maps desire onto a lack, this continual stimulus entails an *appetite*: prior to the identity of perception, it denotes an unformulated, appetent energy of representational distress.⁶⁹

The continuity, indifference, or bound density of the Unknown correlates to a narcissistic sameness, which Freud likens to the “oceanic” sensibility in religion (and in general).⁷⁰ He explains religious communion as reviving the uterine ‘experience’ in which self and world are undifferentiated: “a sensation of eternity”, “a feeling of indissoluble connection, of belonging inseparably to the external world as a whole”.⁷¹ The Unknown invokes savage, unformulated energies whose appetent continuity (prior to perceptual identity) is antagonistic to the reserve of their verbalisation. This truly un-conscious provides for the ‘violent opposition’ Freud intuits as inimical to conscious possibility: not the ‘harbouring of feelings for’ (Irma?), but an unbounded, oceanic appetite *without* the image of its satiety,

alongside its derivative identity and emergence in Irma. And out of this density grows a readiness—a *wish*—and a dream.

The end of representation

We began with the tension between interpretation and suspicion, and have arrived at the incommensurability of desire and appetite, discourse and the Unknown. Our renegotiation of the Freudian model in his own terms opens it to a poststructural *rapprochement*: to a sensibility akin to Derridean unconscious elusion; to an ungrasped schizoanalysis, frenetic nevertheless in its productions.

Language and analysis appear bound by representation, whereas the oneiric ‘object’ of their investigations is parapractic, pre-perceptual, and necessarily tangled (until pacified in transliteration). Freud’s Irma dream, once transcribed and analysed, loses the impact of its dreaming affect (its unhesitating anxiety, violence and vengeance) amid the concerns for professionalism and health, and the petty rivalry of his interpretation. While hermeneutics approximates dreaming firstly in transliteration and secondly in interpretation – binding it to discourse and resistance – the disjunctive style of an oceanic sublime approaches a primal and continuous uterine appetite. And this is the boundless limit imposed by the Unknown upon signification.

Hamish is a doctoral candidate in the English Department at the University of Sydney. This piece was born out of his recently submitted thesis on the Absurd in twentieth-century literature, whose theatrical parameters seemed necessarily to spill over into the uncanny, the unconscious, and finally the unknown. It reflects a broader interest also in Modernism, and the literary shift from signification to the unthinkable.

¹ Sigmund Freud, "The Unconscious," 1915, *On Metapsychology: The Theory of Psychoanalysis*, James Strachey, trans., Angela Richards, comp. & ed. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1984), 175 & 190.

² Sigmund Freud, "A Note on the Unconscious in Psychoanalysis," 1912, *On Metapsychology*, 53f.

³ The intention of psychoanalysis is "to strengthen the ego... so that it can appropriate fresh portions of the id" (Sigmund Freud, *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 1933, James Strachey, trans. & ed. [London: Hogarth Press, 1981], 80). In Freud's formulation of the ego, superego and id, the latter is a repository of primal desire, of instincts attached to ideational representatives—see Freud, "Unconscious," 179.

⁴ Freud, "Unconscious," 172; Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation Of Dreams*, 1900, James Strachey, trans., Strachey, Alan Tyson & Angela Richards, eds. (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991), 186 n2.

⁵ Alan D. Schrift, "Nietzsche's French Legacy," *The Cambridge Companion to Nietzsche*, Bernd Magnus & Kathleen M. Turner, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 326. Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche and Freud comprise Schrift's three 'masters', whose philosophical *suspicion* destabilised the self-assurance of Western discourse.

⁶ Freud, "Unconscious," 190. These contents are latent ideas, "ideational representatives", or "cathexes"—objects "charged with [libidinous] energy" (see Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*, 1917, James Strachey, trans. & ed., Angela Richards, ed. [Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1991], 380).

⁷ Freud, "Unconscious," 190. Derrida confirms this constitutive move from instinct to its representative as "the effort of life to protect itself by *deferring* a dangerous cathexis, that is, by constituting a reserve. The threatening expenditure or presence are deferred with the help of breaching or repetition" (Jacques Derrida, "Freud and the Scene of Writing," 1966, *Writing and Difference*, Alan Bass, trans. [London: Routledge, 2001], 253).

⁸ See Freud, "Unconscious," 206f.

⁹ Strachey is the pre-eminent English translator of Freud, having produced the *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*.

¹⁰ Samuel Weber, *The Legend of Freud* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), 81, my emphasis. Leledakis reiterates: "despite the fact that the unconscious is energy, it operates always through a connection with 'representatives' [...] unconscious 'presentations' are 'word-presentations'" (Kanakis Leledakis, *Society and Psyche: Social Theory and the Unconscious Dimension of the Social* [Oxford; Washington D. C.: Berg Publishers, 1995], 127 & 136).

'Thing-representation' forms the groundwork of Jacques Lacan's pronouncement that the unconscious "is structured in the most radical way like a language" (Jacques Lacan, *Écrits: A Selection*, Alan Sheridan, trans. [London: Tavistock, 1977], 234).

¹¹ Freud, *Dreams*, 760 & 763. Primary processes afford the dream's distortions in 'condensation' and 'displacement', and pertain more to dynamic energies than to ideas, whereas secondary processes are more readily and rationally apprehended through their dependence on discourse.

¹² This is both the contention and the complaint of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari: "We therefore reproach psychoanalysis for having stifled this order of production, for having shunted it into *representation*. Far from showing the boldness of psychoanalysis, this idea of unconscious representation marks from the outset its bankruptcy or its abnegation: an unconscious that no longer produces, but is content to *believe*" (Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, 1972, Robert Hurley, Mark Seem & Helen R. Lane, trans. [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000] 296).

¹³ See Freud, *Dreams*, 182ff.

¹⁴ See Freud, *Dreams*, 196ff.

¹⁵ Freud, *Dreams*, 192.

¹⁶ Freud, *Dreams*, 184.

¹⁷ Freud, *Dreams*, 225.

¹⁸ The instinctual representative, Freud muses, "proliferates in the dark, as it were, and takes on extreme forms of expression, which when they are translated [by analysis] and presented to the neurotic are not only bound to seem alien to him, but frighten him by giving him the picture of an extraordinary and dangerous strength of instinct" (Sigmund Freud, "Repression," 1915, *On Metapsychology*, 148). These 'extreme forms' are the derivatives, and inscribe an ideational and excitatory distance from the instinctual representative, inflected nevertheless with a measure of its cathexis.

¹⁹ Freud, *Dreams*, 677.

²⁰ Freud, "Repression," 146-7.

²¹ Freud contends, elusively, that "the unconscious is *continued into* what are known as derivatives, that it is accessible to the impressions of life, that it constantly influences the preconscious, and is even, for its part, subjected to influences from the preconscious" (Freud, "Unconscious," 194, my emphasis).

²² Laplanche celebrates the Freudian psychoanalytic method precisely for its "meticulous description of the paths providing access to the unconscious" (Jean Laplanche, "A Short Treatise on the Unconscious," 1993, Luke Thurston, trans. *Essays on Otherness*, John Fletcher, ed. [London: Routledge, 1999], 85).

²³ Freud, *Introductory Lectures*, 335.

²⁴ Freud, "Repression," 149, my emphases.

²⁵ Freud, "Repression," 149.

²⁶ Freud, "Unconscious," 186-7.

²⁷ Freud, "Unconscious," 183; see also Freud, *Dreams*, 672, and Freud, "Repression," 149ff.

²⁸ Freud, *Dreams*, 671.

²⁹ Freud, "Unconscious," 197f. Freud hazards something of this preconscious ambiguity – partaking both of resistance and free access – in terms of "attention": "A very great part of this preconscious originates in the unconscious, has the character of its derivatives and is subjected to a censorship before it can become conscious. Another part of the preconscious is capable of becoming conscious without any censorship. [...] to every transition from one system to that immediately above it (that is, every advance to a higher stage of psychical organisation) there corresponds a new censorship" (195-6). Consciousness is therefore determined by the 'attention' which discerns among preconscious contents—however, this does not allay our concern, here, regarding *repression* as against *selection*.

³⁰ Freud, "Note," 54-5; the 'foreconscious' (1912) is later rechristened 'preconscious'.

³¹ Freud's interpretative pervasion anticipates Derrida's infamous claim that "there is no *hors-texte*"; indeed, the psychical context of associations constituted by *distance* correlates to Derrida's *differential* economy of the sign, in which he notes "the relationship between the fundamental *unconsciousness* of language (as rootedness within the language) and the *spacing* (pause, blank, punctuation, interval in general, et cetera) which constitutes the origin of signification"—see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 1967, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, trans. (Johns Hopkins University Press: Baltimore, 1976) 158 & 65f.

³² Freud, *Dreams*, 186 n2.

³³ Freud, *Dreams*, 79.

³⁴ Sigmund Freud, *Die Traumdeutung* (Wien: Franz Deuticke, 1945), 78.

³⁵ Freud, *Dreams*, 671.

³⁶ Despite asserting a potential 'access' to the unconscious, Laplanche approaches this conception of the unrepresentable: "the unconscious element is not a representation to be *referred* to an external thing whose trace it would be [...] the passage to the unconscious is correlative with a loss of referentiality. The thing- or word-presentation (or, in more modern and more accurate language: the signifier), in becoming unconscious, loses its status as presentation (as signifier) in order to become a thing which no longer presents (signifies) anything other than itself" (Laplanche, 90).

Ricœur dovetails: "But we must not speak of representation in the sense of *Vorstellung*, i.e. an 'idea' of something, for an idea is itself derived from this 'representative', which, before representing things – the world, one's own body, the unreal – stands for instincts as such, presents them purely and simply" (Paul Ricœur, *Freud and Philosophy*, Denis Savage, trans. [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970], 135).

³⁷ We designate in 'pre/conscious' the psychical domain bound by representation and resistance (both the preconscious and conscious systems) by comparison with the unrepresentable Unknown.

³⁸ Freud, *Dreams*, 187.

³⁹ Freud, *Traumdeutung*, 75.

⁴⁰ Freud finds himself here – perhaps unwittingly – in a double bind: like the victim of Gregory Bateson's "contradictory injunctions" (see Gregory Bateson, *Steps to an Ecology of the Mind* [New York: Ballantine, 1972], 207ff), Freud at once acknowledges the limits of interpretation yet persists with the necessity of representation. He seeks to overcome censorship and comprehend the alien energies of the id through analysis; but the very process of analysis disseminates this boundless force across the discourse of interpretation—a censorship in itself. And just as Bateson's double bind induces the disturbed communication of, for example, the schizophrenic, Freud's language erupts with a madness of its own.

⁴¹ By 'style', we refer less to an aesthetic arrangement of representations than the sheer force of aesthesis—which in itself is unrepresentable.

⁴² And in this respect, the Unknown corresponds to the Lacanian Real, which jars the Symbolic in the warp – the “insistence of the trauma” – that ‘itself’ remains “unassimilable” (Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, 1973, Jacques-Alain Miller, ed., Alan Sheridan, trans. [New York: Norton, 1978] 55). Thus the Real “eludes us” (53), like the ‘obscure tangle of dream-thoughts’ – the inherently unrepresentable.

Lacan himself describes the umbilical Unknown as a “central point” and yet an “abyss” which disjoins the Symbolic order, rendering thereby the “subject qua indeterminate” (28).

⁴³ Freud, *Dreams*, 187.

⁴⁴ Freud, *Dreams*, 182 & 189.

⁴⁵ Freud, *Dreams*, 189.

⁴⁶ Freud, *Traumdeutung*, 80.

⁴⁷ Just as the system of distance dovetails with Derrida’s differential economy, the interpretative limit of the Unknown equates to Derrida’s conception of the unconscious, which “is not a potential self-presence. It differs from, and defers, itself; which doubtless means that it is woven of differences, and also that it sends out delegates, representatives, proxies, but without any chance that the giver of proxies might ‘exist’, might be present, be ‘itself’, somewhere, and with even less chance that it might become conscious... the ‘unconscious’ is no more a ‘thing’ than it is a virtual or masked consciousness. The alterity of the ‘unconscious’ makes us concerned not with horizons of modified – past or future – presents, but with a ‘past’ that has never been present, and which never will be” (Jacques Derrida, “Différance,” 1968, *Margins of Philosophy*, 1972, Alan Bass, trans. [University of Chicago Press: Chicago, 1982], 20-1).

Thus the elusive navel of the Irma dream sends out proxies in ‘further penetration’, in the ‘celebrated clinician’, in ‘not being able/wanting to see’, in the undressing eye; but is ‘itself’ only ever *approached* in this style of disjunction.

⁴⁸ “This reminds one of the peace that has descended upon a battlefield strewn with corpses; no trace is left of the struggle which raged over it.” See Freud, *Dreams*, 603ff.

⁴⁹ Freud, *Dreams*, 605.

⁵⁰ Freud, *Dreams*, 603.

⁵¹ Freud, *Dreams*, 603.

⁵² Freud, *Traumdeutung*, 80.

⁵³ The Unknown evades the poststructural reduction of psychoanalysis to neurotic lack (or affective inhibition) in preference for “desiring production”, for “the machines of desire that no longer allow themselves to be reduced to the structure any more than to persons, and that constitute the Real in itself, beyond or beneath the Symbolic” (Deleuze & Guattari, 52). The skitting of Freud’s penetrating eye across the discourse of analysis produces – *lives* – this unassimilable desire (and we note again the logic here of the double bind, which fuels Deleuze and Guattari’s project of “schizoanalysis” as the unbounded, in place of the filial and alienating identities constructed by psychoanalysis—see 316ff).

⁵⁴ Freud, *Dreams*, 605.

⁵⁵ See Freud, *Dreams*, 606f.

⁵⁶ The stool left on the seat infers the Derridean elusion of finality and determination, even as the excremental proxies bring Freud such joy.

⁵⁷ Freud, *Dreams*, 585.

⁵⁸ Freud, *Dreams*, 616.

⁵⁹ Freud, *Dreams*, 586ff.

⁶⁰ Freud, *Dreams*, 585-6.

⁶¹ Here, the Unknown invokes Slavoj Žižek’s deployment of the Lacanian Real as the “sheer fact” latent in a “traumatic antagonism” (Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* [London: Verso, 1997], 214).

⁶² Freud, *Dreams*, 601.

⁶³ Weber notes that Freudian unconscious “*Bildersprache*”, in its dislocation, constitutes “a language that does not so much re-present as it de-presents, ‘ent-stellt!’” (Weber, 118).

⁶⁴ So Freud approaches Deleuze and Guattari: “The [schizoanalytic] movement of deterritorialisation can never be grasped in itself, one can only grasp its indices in relation to the territorial representations. [...] Psychoanalysis settles on the imaginary and structural representatives of reterritorialisation, while schizoanalysis follows the machinic indices of deterritorialisation. The opposition still holds between the neurotic on the couch – as an ultimate and sterile land, the last exhausted colony – and the schizo out for a walk” (Deleuze and Guattari, 316). Deterritorialisation equates to the Unknown; style proximates the walk (and the bind) of the schizo.

⁶⁵ See Freud, *Dreams*, 719.

⁶⁶ Freud, *Dreams*, 719.

⁶⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," 1915, *On Metapsychology*, 115.

⁶⁸ Following Freud's metaphor of the 'mycelium' – the tangle of dream-thoughts at which point the dream-wish 'grows up' – Weber arrives at the 'Thallus', in which he notes "there is no differentiation" and from which "true roots are absent". He continues: "the essence of this curious figure can, it would appear, be articulated only in *negations*", "The 'root' of the dream-wish, its foundation, is defined by this absence of true roots". See Weber, 119.

⁶⁹ The Unknown qua appetite intimates (though Freud might demur) the "readiness" of Jung's "irrepresentable" archetypes, and recalls Marcuse, who pushes from thematised sexuality to the generality of Eros: "from sexuality constrained under genital supremacy to erotisation of the entire personality. It is a spread rather than explosion of libido—a spread over private and societal relations which bridges the gap maintained between them by a repressive reality principle". See Carl Gustav Jung, "The Psychology of the Unconscious," *Collected Works of C. G. Jung: Vol. 7: Two Essays on Analytical Psychology*, R. F. C. Hull, trans. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), 69; Carl Gustav Jung, "Instinct and the Unconscious," 1919, *Collected Works Vol. 8: The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, R. F. C. Hull, trans. [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1960], 133; and Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilisation: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, 1956 (London: Ark Paperbacks-Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 202.

⁷⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Civilisation and its Discontents*, 1930, Joan Riviere, trans. (London: The Hogarth Press, 1949), 8 & 21.

⁷¹ Freud, *Civilisation*, 9. Marcuse notes the "striking paradox that narcissism, usually understood as egotistic withdrawal from reality, here is connected with oneness with the universe" (Marcuse, 169).