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THE STANDARD EDITION OF
THE COMPLETE PSYCHOLOGICAL WORKS
OF SIGMUND FREUD

*

VOLUME VI

CHAPTER VIII

BUNGLED ACTIONS¹

I WILL quote another passage from the work by Meringer and Mayer (1895, 98) which I have already mentioned [p. 53]:²

'Slips of the tongue are not without their parallels. They correspond to the slips which often occur in other human activities and which are known by the somewhat foolish name of "oversights".'

Thus I am by no means the first to surmise that there is sense and purpose behind the minor functional disturbances in the daily life of healthy people.³

If slips in speaking—which is clearly a motor function—can be thought of in this way, it is a short step to extend the same expectation to mistakes in our other motor activities. I have here formed two groups of cases. I use the term 'bungled actions' [*Vergreifen*] to describe all the cases in which a wrong result—i.e. a deviation from what was intended—seems to be the essential element. The others, in which it is rather the whole action which seems to be inappropriate, I call 'symptomatic and chance actions' [*Symptom- und Zufallshandlungen*]. But no sharp line can be drawn between them, and we are indeed forced to conclude that all the divisions made in this study have no significance other than a descriptive one and run counter to the inner unity in this field of phenomena.

It is clear that the psychological understanding of 'bungled actions' will not be conspicuously helped if we class them under the heading of 'ataxia' or, in particular, of 'cortical ataxia'. Let us rather try to trace the individual examples back to their

¹ [Except where otherwise indicated, the earlier part of this chapter (up to p. 168) dates back to 1901.]

² [In the editions before 1910 the work was described as 'meritorious'.]

³ [Footnote added 1910:] A second publication by Meringer [1908] has later shown me how great an injustice I did to that author when I credited him with any such understanding.

particular determinants. For this purpose I shall once more make use of self-observations, though in my case the occasions for these are not particularly frequent.

(a) In former years I visited patients in their homes more frequently than I do at present; and on numerous occasions when I was at the front door, instead of knocking or ringing the bell, I pulled my own latch key out of my pocket, only to thrust it back again in some confusion. When I consider the patients at whose houses this happened, I am forced to think that the parapraxis—taking out my key instead of ringing the bell—was in the nature of a tribute to the house where I made the mistake. It was equivalent to the thought 'Here I feel I am at home'; for it only occurred at places where I had taken a liking to the patient. (Of course I never ring my own door bell.)

Thus the parapraxis was a symbolic representation of a thought which was not after all really intended to be accepted seriously and consciously; for a nerve specialist is in fact well aware that his patients remain attached to him only so long as they expect to be benefited by him, and that he in turn allows himself to feel an excessively warm interest in them only with a view to giving them psychical help.

Numerous self-observations made by other people¹ show that handling a key in this significantly incorrect way is certainly not a peculiarity of mine.

Maeder (1906) describes what is an almost identical repetition of my experiences: 'Il est arrivé à chacun de sortir son trousseau, en arrivant à la porte d'un ami particulièrement cher, de se surprendre pour ainsi dire, en train d'ouvrir avec sa clé comme chez soi. C'est un retard, puisqu'il faut sonner malgré tout, mais c'est une preuve qu'on se sent—ou qu'on voudrait se sentir—comme chez soi, auprès de cet ami.'²

Jones (1911b, 509): 'The use of keys is a fertile source of

¹ [This and the next four paragraphs were added in 1912.]

² ['Everyone has had the experience of taking out his bunch of keys on reaching the door of a particularly dear friend, of catching himself, as it were, in the act of opening it with his key just as if he was at home. This causes a delay, as he has to ring the bell in the long run, but it is a sign that he feels—or would like to feel—at home with this friend.']

occurrences of this kind, of which two examples may be given. If I am disturbed in the midst of some engrossing work at home by having to go to the hospital to carry out some routine work, I am very apt to find myself trying to open the door of my laboratory there with the key of my desk at home, although the two keys are quite unlike each other. The mistake unconsciously demonstrates where I would rather be at the moment.

'Some years ago I was acting in a subordinate position at a certain institution, the front door of which was kept locked, so that it was necessary to ring for admission. On several occasions I found myself making serious attempts to open the door with my house key. Each one of the permanent visiting staff, to which I aspired to be a member, was provided with a key, to avoid the trouble of having to wait at the door. My mistakes thus expressed my desire to be on a similar footing, and to be quite "at home" there.'

Dr. Hanns Sachs reports a similar experience: 'I always have two keys on me, one for the door of my office and one for my flat. They are not at all easily confused with each other, for the office key is at least three times as big as the flat key. Moreover, I carry the former in my trouser pocket and the latter in my waistcoat pocket. Nevertheless it often happened that I noticed as I stood at the door that I had got out the wrong key on the stairs. I determined to make a statistical experiment. Since I stood in front of both the doors every day in more or less the same emotional state, the confusion between the two keys was bound to show a regular tendency, if, indeed, it was true that it had some psychical determinant. My observation of later instances then showed that I quite regularly took out my flat key at the door of the office, whereas the opposite happened only once. I came home tired, knowing that a guest would be waiting for me there. When I reached the door I made an attempt to unlock it with the office key—which was of course much too large.'

(b) There is a house where twice every day for six years, at regular hours, I used to wait to be let in outside a door on the second floor.¹ During this long period it has happened to me on

¹ [Cf. below, p. 177.]

two occasions, with a short interval between them, that I have gone a floor too high—i.e. I have '*climbed too high*'.¹ On the first occasion I was enjoying an ambitious day-dream in which I was 'climbing ever higher and higher'. On this occasion I even failed to hear that the door in question had opened as I put my foot on the first step of the third flight. On the other occasion, I again went too far while I was deep in thought; when I realized it, I turned back and tried to catch hold of the phantasy in which I had been absorbed. I found that I was irritated by a (phantasied) criticism of my writings in which I was reproached with always 'going too far'. This I had now replaced by the not very respectful expression 'climbing too high'.

(c) For many years a reflex hammer and a tuning fork have been lying side by side on my writing table. One day I left in a hurry at the end of my consulting hour as I wanted to catch a particular suburban train; and in broad daylight I put the tuning fork in my coat pocket instead of the hammer. The weight of the object pulling down my pocket drew my attention to my mistake. Anyone who is not in the habit of giving consideration to such minor occurrences will doubtless explain and excuse the mistake by pointing to the haste of the moment. Nevertheless I preferred to ask myself the question why it actually was that I took the tuning fork instead of the hammer. My haste could just as well have been a motive for picking up the right object so as not to have to waste time in correcting my mistake.

'Who was the last person to take hold of the tuning fork?' was the question that sprang to my mind at that point. It was an *imbecile* child, whom I had been testing some days before for his attention to sensory impressions; and he had been so fascinated by the tuning fork that I had had some difficulty in tearing it away from him. Could the meaning be, then, that I was an imbecile? It certainly seemed so, for my first association to 'hammer' was '*Chamer*' (Hebrew for 'ass').

But why this abusive language? At this point we must look into the situation. I was hurrying to a consultation at a place

¹ [The German '*versteigen*' would, on the analogy of '*verlesen*', '*verschreiben*', etc., mean 'to mis-climb'; but its normal meaning is 'to climb too high' or, figuratively, 'to over-reach oneself'.]

on the Western railway line, to visit a patient who, according to the anamnesis I had received by letter, had fallen from a balcony some months earlier and had since then been unable to walk. The doctor who called me in wrote that he was nevertheless uncertain whether it was a case of spinal injury or of a traumatic neurosis—hysteria. That was what I was now to decide. It would therefore be advisable for me to be particularly wary in the delicate task of making a differential diagnosis. As it is, my colleagues are of the opinion that I make a diagnosis of hysteria far too carelessly where graver things are in question. But so far this did not justify the abusive language. Why, of course! it now occurred to me that the little railway station was at the same place at which some years before I had seen a young man who had not been able to walk properly after an emotional experience. At the time I made a diagnosis of hysteria and I subsequently took the patient on for psychical treatment. It then turned out that though my diagnosis had not, it is true, been incorrect, it had not been correct either. A whole number of the patient's symptoms had been hysterical, and they rapidly disappeared in the course of treatment. But behind these a remnant now became visible which was inaccessible to my therapy; this remnant could only be accounted for by multiple sclerosis. It was easy for those who saw the patient after me to recognize the organic affection. I could hardly have behaved otherwise or formed a different judgement, yet the impression left was that a grave error had been made; the promise of a cure which I had given him could naturally not be kept.

The error of picking up the tuning fork instead of the hammer could thus be translated into words as follows: 'You idiot! You ass! Pull yourself together this time, and see that you don't diagnose hysteria again where there's an incurable illness, as you did years ago with the poor man from that same place!' And fortunately for this little analysis, if not fortunately for my mood, the same man, suffering from severe spastic paralysis, had visited me during my consulting hour a few days before, and a day after the imbecile child.

It will be observed that this time it was the voice of self-criticism which was making itself heard in the bungled action. A bungled action is quite specially suitable for use in this way

as a self-reproach: the present mistake seeks to represent the mistake that has been committed elsewhere.

(d) Bungled actions can, of course, also serve a whole number of other obscure purposes. Here is a first example. It is very rare for me to break anything. I am not particularly dexterous but a result of the anatomical integrity of my nerve-muscle apparatus is that there are clearly no grounds for my making clumsy movements of this kind, with their unwelcome consequences. I cannot therefore recall any object in my house that I have ever broken. Shortage of space in my study has often forced me to handle a number of pottery and stone antiquities (of which I have a small collection) in the most uncomfortable positions, so that onlookers have expressed anxiety that I should knock something down and break it. That however has never happened. Why then did I once¹ dash the marble cover of my plain inkpot to the ground so that it broke?

My inkstand is made out of a flat piece of Untersberg marble which is hollowed out to receive the glass inkpot; and the inkpot has a cover with a knob made of the same stone. Behind this inkstand there is a ring of bronze statuettes and terra cotta figures. I sat down at the desk to write, and then moved the hand that was holding the pen-holder forward in a remarkably clumsy way, sweeping on to the floor the inkpot cover which was lying on the desk at the time.

The explanation was not hard to find. Some hours before, my sister had been in the room to inspect some new acquisitions. She admired them very much, and then remarked: 'Your writing table looks really attractive now; only the inkstand doesn't match. You must get a nicer one.' I went out with my sister and did not return for some hours. But when I did I carried out, so it seems, the execution of the condemned inkstand. Did I perhaps conclude from my sister's remark that she intended to make me a present of a nicer inkstand on the next festive occasion, and did I smash the unlovely old one so as to force her to carry out the intention she had hinted at? If that is so, my sweeping movement was only apparently clumsy; in reality it was exceedingly adroit and well-directed, and

¹ [In 1901 and 1904 only: 'recently'.]

understood how to avoid damaging any of the more precious objects that stood around.

It is in fact my belief that we must accept this judgement for a whole series of seemingly accidental clumsy movements. It is true that they make a show of something violent and sweeping, like a spastic-atactic movement, but they prove to be governed by an intention and achieve their aim with a certainty which cannot in general be credited to our conscious voluntary movements. Moreover they have both features—their violence and their unerring aim—in common with the motor manifestations of the hysterical neurosis, and partly, too, with the motor performances of somnambulism.¹ This fact indicates that both in these cases and in the movements under consideration the same unknown modification of the innervatory process is present.

Another self-observation,² reported by Frau Lou Andreas-Salomé, may give a convincing demonstration of how obstinate persistence in an act of 'clumsiness' serves unavowed purposes in a far from clumsy way:

'Just at the time when milk had become scarce and expensive I found that I let it boil over time and time again, to my constant horror and vexation. My efforts to get the better of this were unsuccessful, though I cannot by any means say that on other occasions I have proved absent-minded or inattentive. I should have had more reason to be so after the death of my dear white terrier (who deserved his name of "Druzok"—the Russian for "Friend"—as much as any human being ever did). But—lo and behold!—never since his death has even a drop of milk boiled over. My first thought about this ran: "That's lucky, for the milk spilt over on to the hearth or floor wouldn't even be of any use!" And in the same moment I saw my "Friend" before my eyes, sitting eagerly watching the cooking, his head cocked a little to one side, his tail wagging expectantly, waiting in trustful confidence for the splendid mishap that was about to occur. And now everything was clear to me, and I realized too that I had been even *more* fond of him than I myself was aware.'

¹ [Freud returned to the notion of 'somnambulist certainty' at the end of this book, p. 250, below. In later editions it reappeared in two examples quoted by him, pp. 140 and 142, above.]

² [This example was added in 1919.]

In the last few years,¹ during which I have been collecting such observations, I have had a few more experiences of smashing or breaking objects of some value, but the investigation of these cases has convinced me that they were never the result of chance or of unintentional clumsiness on my part. One morning, for example, when I was passing through a room in my dressing-gown with straw slippers on my feet, I yielded to a sudden impulse and hurled one of my slippers from my foot at the wall, causing a beautiful little marble Venus to fall down from its bracket. As it broke into pieces, I quoted quite unmoved these lines from Busch:

'Ach! die Venus ist perdü—
Klickeradoms!—von Medici!' ²

This wild conduct and my calm acceptance of the damage are to be explained in terms of the situation at the time. One of my family was gravely ill,³ and secretly I had already given up hope of her recovery. That morning I had learned that there had been a great improvement, and I know I had said to myself: 'So she's going to live after all!' My attack of destructive fury served therefore to express a feeling of gratitude to fate and allowed me to perform a '*sacrificial act*'—rather as if I had made a vow to sacrifice something or other as a thank-offering if she recovered her health! The choice of the Venus of Medici for this sacrifice was clearly only a gallant act of homage towards the convalescent; but even now it is a mystery to me how I made up my mind so quickly, aimed so accurately and avoided hitting anything else among the objects so close to it.

Another case of breaking something, for which I once again made use of a pen-holder that slipped from my hand, likewise had the significance of a sacrifice; but on this occasion it took the form of a propitiatory sacrifice to avert evil. I had once seen fit to reproach a loyal and deserving friend on no other grounds than the interpretation I placed on certain indications coming

¹ [This paragraph and the four following ones were added in 1907.]

² ['Oh! the Venus! Lost is she!']

Klickeradoms! of Medici!']

From Wilhelm Busch's *Die fromme Helene*, Chapter VIII.]

³ [This refers to the illness of Freud's eldest daughter in 1905. (Jones, 1957, 409.) Cf. also p. 180 below.]

from his unconscious. He was offended and wrote me a letter asking me not to treat my friends psycho-analytically. I had to admit he was in the right, and wrote him a reply to pacify him. While I was writing this letter I had in front of me my latest acquisition, a handsome glazed Egyptian figure. I broke it in the way I have described, and then immediately realized that I had caused this mischief in order to avert a greater one. Luckily it was possible to cement both of them together—the friendship as well as the figure—so that the break would not be noticed.

A third breakage was connected with less serious matters; it was only the disguised ‘execution’—to borrow an expression from Vischer’s *Auch Einer*¹—of an object which no longer enjoyed my favour. For some time I used to carry a stick with a silver handle. On one occasion the thin metal got damaged, through no fault of mine, and was badly repaired. Soon after the stick came back, I used the handle in a mischievous attempt to catch one of my children by the leg—with the natural result that it broke, and I was thus rid of it.

The equanimity with which we accept the resulting damage in all these cases can no doubt be taken as evidence that there is an unconscious purpose behind the performance of these particular actions.

In investigating the reasons for the occurrence of even so trivial a parapraxis as the breaking of an object,² one is liable to come across connections which, besides relating to a person’s present situation, lead deep into his prehistory. The following analysis by Jekels (1913) may serve as an example:

‘A doctor had in his possession an earthenware flower vase which, though not valuable, was of great beauty. It was among the many presents—including objects of value—which had been sent to him in the past by a (married) woman patient. When a psychosis became manifest in her, he restored all the presents to her relatives—except for this far less expensive vase, with

¹ [Theodor Vischer (1807–87), the author of this novel (1878), was a Professor of Aesthetics, who is repeatedly quoted in Freud’s book on jokes (1905c). The novel, as well as another of Vischer’s lighter works, is referred to again in ‘On Psychotherapy’ (1905a), *Standard Ed.*, 7, 259 and 267. See also above, p. 140 n. 1.]

² [This paragraph and the example which follows were added in 1917.]

which he could not bear to part, ostensibly because it was so beautiful. But this embezzlement cost a man of his scrupulousness a considerable internal struggle. He was fully aware of the impropriety of his action, and only managed to overcome his pangs of conscience by telling himself that the vase was not in fact of any real value, that it was too awkward to pack, etc.—Some months later he was on the point of getting a lawyer to claim and recover the arrears (which were in dispute) of the fees for the treatment of this same patient. Once again the self-reproaches made their appearance; and he suffered some momentary anxiety in case the relatives discovered what could be called his embezzlement and brought it against him during the legal proceedings. For a while indeed the first factor (his self-reproaches) was so strong that he actually thought of renouncing all claims on a sum of perhaps a hundred times the value of the vase—a compensation, as it were, for the object he had appropriated. However, he at once got the better of the notion and set it aside as absurd.

‘While he was still in this mood he happened to be putting some fresh water in the vase; and despite the extreme infrequency with which he broke anything and the good control that he had over his muscular apparatus, he made an extraordinarily “clumsy” movement—one that was not in the least organically related to the action he was carrying out—which knocked the vase off the table, so that it broke into some five or six largish pieces. What is more, this was after he had made up his mind on the previous evening, though not without considerable hesitation, to put precisely this vase, filled with flowers, on the dining-room table before his guests. He had remembered it only just before it got broken, had noticed with anxiety that it was not in his living-room and had himself brought it in from the other room. After his first moments of dismay he picked up the pieces and by putting them together was just deciding that it would still be possible to make an almost complete repair of the vase, when the two or three larger fragments slipped from his hand; they broke into a thousand splinters, and with that vanished all hope for the vase.

‘There is no doubt that this parapraxis had the current purpose of assisting the doctor in his law-suit, by getting rid of something which he had kept back and which to some

extent prevented his claiming what had been kept back from him.

'But apart from this direct determinant, every psychoanalyst will see in the parapraxis a further and much deeper and more important *symbolic* determinant; for a vase is an unmistakable symbol of a woman.

'The hero of this little story had lost his young, beautiful and dearly-loved wife in a tragic manner. He fell ill of a neurosis whose main theme was that he was to blame for the misfortune ("he had broken a lovely vase"). Moreover, he had no further relations with women and took a dislike to marriage and lasting love-relationships, which unconsciously he thought of as being unfaithful to his dead wife but which he consciously rationalized in the idea that he brought misfortune to women, that a woman might kill herself on his account, etc. (Hence his natural reluctance to keep the vase permanently!)

'In view of the strength of his libido it is therefore not surprising that the most adequate relationships appeared to him to be those—transient from their very nature—with married women (hence his keeping back of another person's vase).

'This symbolism is neatly confirmed by the two following factors. Because of his neurosis he entered psycho-analytic treatment. In the course of the session in which he gave an account of breaking the "earthenware" vase, he happened much later to be talking once more about his relations with women and said he thought he was quite unreasonably hard to please; thus for example he required women to have "unearthly beauty". This is surely a very clear indication that he was still dependent on his (dead, i.e., unearthly) wife and wanted to have nothing to do with "earthly beauty"; hence the breaking of the earthenware ("earthly") vase.

'And at the exact time when in the transference he formed a phantasy of marrying his physician's daughter, he made him a present of a vase, as though to drop a hint of the sort of return-present he would like to have.

'Probably the symbolic meaning of the parapraxis admits of a number of further variations—for example, his not wanting to fill the vase, etc. What strikes me, however, as more interesting is the consideration that the presence of several, at the least of

two, motives (which probably operated separately out of the preconscious and the unconscious) is reflected in the doubling of the parapraxis—his knocking over the vase and then letting it fall from his hands.¹

(e)² Dropping, knocking over and breaking objects are acts which seem to be used very often to express unconscious trains of thought, as analysis can occasionally demonstrate, but as may more frequently be guessed from the superstitious or facetious interpretations popularly connected with them. The interpretations attached to salt being spilt, a wine-glass being knocked over, a dropped knife sticking in the ground, etc., are well known. I shall not discuss till later [p. 254 ff.] the question of what claims such superstitious interpretations have to being taken seriously. Here I need only remark that individual clumsy actions do not by any means always have the same meaning, but serve as a method of representing one purpose or another according to circumstances.

Recently we passed through a period in my house during which an unusually large amount of glass and china crockery was broken; I myself was responsible for some of the damage. But the little psychical epidemic could easily be explained; these were the days before my eldest daughter's wedding. On such festive occasions it used to be the custom deliberately to break some utensil and at the same time utter a phrase to bring good luck. This custom may have the significance of a sacrifice and it may have another symbolic meaning as well.

When servants drop fragile articles and so destroy them, our first thought is certainly not of a psychological explanation, yet it is not unlikely that here, too, obscure motives play their part. Nothing is more foreign to uneducated people than an appreciation of art and works of art. Our servants are dominated by a mute hostility towards the manifestations of art, especially when the objects (whose value they do not understand) become a source of work for them. On the other hand people of the same education and origin often show great dexterity and reliability in handling delicate objects in scientific institutions,

¹ [Cf. p. 105 (b).]

² [The first and third paragraphs in this section date back to 1901; the second was added in 1910.]

once they have begun to identify themselves with their chief and to consider themselves an essential part of the staff.

I insert here¹ a communication from a young technician which gives us some insight into the mechanism of a case of material damage:

'Some time ago I worked with several fellow-students in the laboratory of the technical college on a series of complicated experiments in elasticity, a piece of work which we had undertaken voluntarily but which was beginning to take up more time than we had expected. One day as I returned to the laboratory with my friend F., he remarked how annoying it was to him to lose so much time on that particular day as he had so much else to do at home. I could not help agreeing with him and added half jokingly, referring to an incident the week before: "Let us hope that the machine will go wrong again so that we can stop work and go home early."—In arranging the work it happened that F. was given the regulation of the valve of the press; that is to say, he was, by cautiously opening the valve, to let the fluid under pressure flow slowly out of the accumulator into the cylinder of the hydraulic press. The man conducting the experiment stood by the manometer and when the right pressure was reached called out a loud "stop!". At the word of command F. seized the valve and turned it with all his might—to the left! (All valves without exception are closed by being turned to the right.) This caused the full pressure of the accumulator to come suddenly on to the press, a strain for which the connecting-pipes are not designed, so that one of them immediately burst—quite a harmless accident to the machine, but enough to oblige us to suspend work for the day and go home.—It is characteristic, by the way, that when we were discussing the affair some time later my friend F. had no recollection whatever of my remark, which I recalled with certainty.'

Similarly,² falling, stumbling and slipping need not always be interpreted as purely accidental miscarriages of motor actions. The double meanings that language attaches to these expressions are enough to indicate the kind of phantasies involved,

¹ [This example, which was later quoted by Freud in the fourth of his *Introductory Lectures* (1916-17), was added in 1912.]

² [This paragraph dates back to 1901.]

which can be represented by such losses of bodily equilibrium. I can recall a number of fairly mild nervous illnesses in women and girls which set in after a fall not accompanied by any injury, and which were taken to be traumatic hysterias resulting from the shock of the fall. Even at that time I had an impression that these events were differently connected and that the fall was already a product of the neurosis and expressed the same unconscious phantasies with a sexual content, which could be assumed to be the forces operating behind the symptoms. Is not the same thing meant by a proverb which runs: 'When a girl falls she falls on her back'?

We can also count¹ as bungled actions cases of giving a beggar a gold piece instead of a copper or small silver coin. The explanation of such mistakes is easy. They are sacrificial acts designed to appease fate, to avert harm, and so on. If a devoted mother or aunt, directly before going for a walk in the course of which she displays unwilling generosity of this kind, is heard to express concern over a child's health, we can have no more doubts about the meaning of the apparently disagreeable accident. In this way our parapraxes make it possible for us to practise all those pious and superstitious customs that must shun the light of consciousness owing to opposition from our reason, which has now grown sceptical.

(f) There is no sphere² in which the view that accidental actions are really intentional will command a more ready belief than that of sexual activity, where the border line between the two possibilities seems really to be a faint one. A good example from my own experience of a few years ago shows how an apparently clumsy movement can be most cunningly used for sexual purposes. In the house of some friends I met a young girl who was staying there as a guest and who aroused a feeling of pleasure in me which I had long thought was extinct. As a result I was in a jovial, talkative and obliging mood. At the time I also endeavoured to discover how this came about; a year before, the same girl had made no impression on me. As the girl's uncle, a very old gentleman, entered the room, we both jumped to our feet to bring him a chair that was standing

¹ [Added in 1907.]

² [This paragraph and the following one date back to 1901.]

in the corner. She was nimbler than I was and, I think, nearer to the object; so she took hold of the chair first and carried it in front of her with its back towards her, gripping the sides of the seat with both hands. As I got there later, but still stuck to my intention of carrying the chair, I suddenly found myself standing directly behind her, and throwing my arms round her from behind; and for a moment my hands met in front of her waist. I naturally got out of the situation as rapidly as it had arisen. Nor does it seem to have struck anyone how dexterously I had taken advantage of this clumsy movement.

Occasionally, too, I have had to tell myself that the irritating and clumsy process of dodging someone in the street, when for several seconds¹ one steps first to one side and then to the other, but always to the same side as the other person, till finally one comes to a standstill face to face with him (or her)—this 'getting in someone's way', I have had to tell myself, is once more a repetition of an improper and provocative piece of behaviour from earlier times and, behind a mask of clumsiness, pursues sexual aims. I know from my psycho-analyses of neurotics that what is described as the *naïveté* of young people and children is frequently only a mask of this sort, employed so that they may be able to say or do something improper without feeling embarrassed.

Wilhelm Stekel has reported very similar self-observations.² 'I entered a house and offered my right hand to my hostess. In a most curious way I contrived in doing so to undo the bow that held her loose morning-gown together. I was conscious of no dishonourable intention; yet I carried out this clumsy movement with the dexterity of a conjurer.'

I have already³ been able again and again [cf. pp. 96 and 132] to produce evidence that creative writers think of parapraxes as having a meaning and a motive, just as I am arguing here. We shall not be surprised, therefore, to see from a fresh example how a writer invests a clumsy movement with significance, too, and makes it foreshadow later events.

Here is a passage from Theodor Fontane's novel *L'Adultera* [*The Adulteress*, 1882]. '... Melanie jumped up and threw one of the large balls to her husband as though in greeting. But her

¹ [In 1901 only: 'for half a minute.']

² [Added in 1907.]

³ [This paragraph and the following one were added in 1917.]

aim was not straight, the ball flew to one side and Rubehn caught it.' On the return from the outing that led to this little episode a conversation between Melanie and Rubehn takes place which reveals the first signs of a budding affection. This affection blossoms into passion, so that Melanie finally leaves her husband and gives herself entirely to the man she loves. (Communicated by H. Sachs.)

(g)¹ The effects produced by the parapraxes of normal people are as a rule of the most harmless kind. Precisely for this reason it is an especially interesting question whether mistakes of considerable importance which may be followed by serious consequences—for example, mistakes made by a doctor or a chemist—are in any way open to the approach presented here. [Cf. also above, pp. 122–5.]

As I very rarely find myself undertaking medical treatment, I can report only one example from my personal experience of a bungled action of a medical kind. There is a very old lady whom I have been visiting twice a day for some years.² On my morning visit my medical services are limited to two actions. I put a few drops of eye-lotion into her eye and give her a morphine injection. Two bottles are always prepared for me: a blue one with the collyrium and a white one with the morphine solution. During the two operations my thoughts are no doubt usually busy with something else; by now I have performed them so often that my attention behaves as if it were at liberty. One morning I noticed that the automaton had worked wrong. I had put the dropper into the white bottle instead of the blue one and had put morphine into the eye instead of collyrium. I was greatly frightened and then reassured myself by reflecting that a few drops of a two per cent solution of morphine could not do any harm even in the conjunctival sac. The feeling of fright must obviously have come from another source.

In attempting to analyse this small mistake I first thought of

¹ [The first four paragraphs in this section date back to 1901.]

² [This old lady, who is also mentioned on pp. 164 and 256, appears as well in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), *Standard Ed.*, 4, 118 and 239. Her death is reported in a letter to Fliess of July 8, 1901 (Freud, 1950a, Letter 145).]

the phrase 'sich an der Alten vergreifen',¹ which provided a short cut to the solution. I was under the influence of a dream which had been told me by a young man the previous evening and the content of which could only point to sexual intercourse with his own mother.² The strange fact that the [Oedipus] legend finds nothing objectionable in Queen Jocasta's age seemed to me to fit in well with the conclusion that in being in love with one's own mother one is never concerned with her as she is in the present but with her youthful mnemonic image carried over from one's childhood. Such incongruities always appear when a phantasy that fluctuates between two periods is made conscious and so becomes definitely attached to one of the two periods. While absorbed in thoughts of this kind I came to my patient, who is over ninety, and I must have been on the way to grasping the universal human application of the Oedipus myth as correlated with the Fate which is revealed in the oracles; for at that point I did violence to or committed a blunder on 'the old woman'. Here again the bungled action was a harmless one; of the two possible errors, using the morphine solution for the eye or the eye lotion for the injection, I had chosen by far the more harmless one. This still leaves the question open of whether we may admit the possibility of an unconscious intention in mistakes that can cause serious harm, in the same way as in the cases which I have discussed.

Here then my material leaves me in the lurch, as might be expected, and I have to fall back on conjectures and inferences. It is well known that in the severer cases of psychoneurosis instances of self-injury are occasionally found as symptoms and that in such cases suicide can never be ruled out as a possible outcome of the psychical conflict. I have now learnt and can prove³ from convincing examples that many apparently accidental injuries that happen to such patients are really

¹ ['To do violence to the old woman.' The German word '*vergreifen*' means both 'to make a blunder' and 'to commit an assault'.]

² The 'Oedipus dream', as I am in the habit of calling it, because it contains the key to the understanding of the legend of King Oedipus. In the text of Sophocles a reference to such a dream is put into Jocasta's mouth [line 982 ff.]. Cf. *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900a), *Standard Ed.*, 4, 261-4.

³ [In the editions before 1924 the sentence ran: 'and shall one day prove. . . .']

instances of self-injury. What happens is that an impulse to self-punishment, which is constantly on the watch and which normally finds expression in self-reproach or contributes to the formation of a symptom, takes ingenious advantage of an external situation that chance happens to offer, or lends assistance to that situation until the desired injurious effect is brought about. Such occurrences are by no means uncommon in cases even of moderate severity, and they betray the part which the unconscious intention plays by a number of special features—e.g. by the striking composure that the patients retain in what is supposed to be an accident.¹

Instead of a number of cases² I will give a detailed report of only a single example from my medical experience. A young married woman broke her leg below the knee in a carriage accident, so that she was bed-ridden for weeks; what was striking was the absence of any expressions of pain and the calmness with which she bore her misfortune. This accident introduced a long and severe neurotic illness of which she was finally cured by psycho-analysis. In treating her I learnt of the circumstances surrounding the accident and of certain events that had preceded it. The young woman was staying with her very jealous husband on the estate of a married sister, in company with her numerous other sisters and brothers with their husbands and wives. One evening in this intimate circle she showed off one of her accomplishments: she gave an accurate performance of the can-can, which was received with hearty applause by her relatives but with scanty satisfaction by her husband, who afterwards whispered to her: 'Carrying on like a tart again!' The remark struck home—we will not enquire whether it was only on account of the dancing display. She spent a restless night. Next morning she felt a desire to go for a drive. She selected the horses herself, refusing one pair and asking for another. Her youngest sister wanted her baby and its nurse to go in the carriage with her; my patient vigorously

¹ In the present state of our civilization self-injury which does not have total self-destruction as its aim has no other choice whatever than to hide itself behind something accidental or to manifest itself by imitating the onset of a spontaneous illness. Formerly self-injury was a customary sign of mourning; at other periods it could express trends towards piety and renunciation of the world.

² [This paragraph and the next two were added in 1907.]

opposed this. During the drive she showed signs of nerves; she warned the coachman that the horses were growing skittish, and when the restless animals were really causing a moment's difficulty she jumped out in a fright and broke her leg, while the others who stayed in the carriage were unharmed. Although after learning these details we can hardly remain in doubt that this accident was really contrived, we cannot fail to admire the skill which forced chance to mete out a punishment that fitted the crime so well. For it had now been made impossible for her to dance the can-can for quite a long time.

As regards self-injuries of my own, there is little that I can report in uneventful times; but in extraordinary circumstances I find that I am not incapable of them. When a member of my family complains to me of having bitten his tongue, pinched a finger, or the like, he does not get the sympathy he hopes for, but instead the question: 'Why did you do that?' I myself once gave my thumb a most painful pinch when a youthful patient told me during the hour of treatment of his intention (not of course to be taken seriously) of marrying my eldest daughter—I knew that at the time she was lying critically ill in a sanatorium.¹

One of my boys, whose lively temperament used to make it difficult to nurse him when he was ill, had a fit of anger one day because he was ordered to spend the morning in bed, and threatened to kill himself, a possibility that was familiar to him from the newspapers. In the evening he showed me a swelling on one side of his chest which he had got by bumping against a door-handle. To my ironical question as to why he had done it and what he meant by it, the eleven-year-old child answered as though it had suddenly dawned on him: 'That was my attempt at suicide that I threatened this morning.' I do not think, by the way, that my views on self-injury were accessible to my children at the time.

Anyone who believes² in the occurrence of half-intentional self-injury—if I may use a clumsy expression—will be prepared also to assume that in addition to consciously intentional suicide there is such a thing as half-intentional self-destruction (self-destruction with an unconscious intention), capable of making skilful use of a threat to life and of disguising it as a

¹ [See footnote 3, p. 169.]

² [This paragraph and the next one date back to 1901.]

chance mishap. There is no need to think such self-destruction rare. For the trend to self-destruction is present to a certain degree in very many more human beings than those in whom it is carried out; self-injuries are as a rule a compromise between this instinct and the forces that are still working against it, and even where suicide actually results, the inclination to suicide will have been present for a long time before in lesser strength or in the form of an unconscious and suppressed trend.

Even a *conscious* intention of committing suicide chooses its time, means and opportunity; and it is quite in keeping with this that an *unconscious* intention should wait for a precipitating occasion which can take over a part of the causation and, by engaging the subject's defensive forces, can liberate the intention from their pressure.¹ The views I am putting forward here are far from being idle ones. I have learned of more than one apparently chance mishap (on horseback or in a carriage) the details of which justify a suspicion that suicide was unconsciously allowed to come about. For example, an officer, riding in a race with some fellow-officers, fell from his horse and was so severely injured that he died some days later. His behaviour on regaining consciousness was striking in some ways; and his previous behaviour had been even more remarkable. He had been deeply depressed by the death of his beloved mother, had had fits of sobbing in the company of his fellow officers, and to his trusted friends had spoken of being weary of life. He had

¹ After all, the case is no different from that of a sexual assault upon a woman, where the man's attack cannot be repelled by her full muscular strength because a portion of her unconscious impulses meets the attack with encouragement. It is said, as we know, that a situation of this kind *paralyses* a woman's strength; all we need do is to add the reasons for this paralysis. To that extent the ingenious judgement delivered by Sancho Panza as governor of his island is psychologically unjust (*Don Quixote*, Part 2, Chapter 45). A woman dragged a man before the judge alleging he had robbed her of her honour by violence. In compensation Sancho gave her a full purse of money which he took from the accused; but after the woman's departure he gave him permission to pursue her and snatch his purse back again from her. The two returned struggling, the woman priding herself on the fact that the villain had not been able to take the purse from her. Thereupon Sancho declared: 'If you had defended your honour with half the determination with which you have defended this purse, the man could not have robbed you of it.'

wanted to leave the service to take part in a war in Africa which had not interested him previously;¹ formerly a dashing rider, he now avoided riding whenever possible. Finally, before the race, from which he could not withdraw, he expressed gloomy forebodings; with the view that we hold in these matters, it will not remain a surprise to us that these forebodings turned out to be justified. I shall be told that it is not to be wondered at if a person in such a state of nervous depression cannot manage a horse as well as on normal days. I quite agree; but the mechanism of the motor inhibition produced by this state of 'nerves' should, I think, be looked for in the intention of self-destruction that I am insisting on.

S. Ferenczi of Budapest has handed over to me for publication the analysis of an ostensibly accidental injury by shooting,² which he explains as an unconscious attempt at suicide. I can only declare my agreement with his view of the matter:

'J. Ad., twenty-two years old, a journeyman carpenter, consulted me on January 18, 1908. He wanted to find out from me whether the bullet that penetrated his left temple on March 20, 1907 could or should be removed by operation. Apart from occasional, not too severe, headaches he felt perfectly well, and the objective examination revealed nothing at all apart from the characteristic powder-blackened bullet scar on the left temple, so I advised against an operation. When asked about the circumstances of the case he explained that he had injured himself accidentally. He was playing with his brother's revolver, *thought it was not loaded*, pressed it with his left hand against his *left* temple (he is not left-handed,) put his finger on the trigger and the shot went off. *There were three bullets in the six-shooter*. I asked him how the idea of taking up the revolver came to him. He replied that it was the time of his medical examination for military service; the evening before, he took the weapon with him to the inn because he was afraid of brawls. At the examination he was found unfit because of

¹ It is evident that conditions on a field of battle are such as to come to the help of a conscious intention to commit suicide which nevertheless shuns the direct way. Compare the words of the Swedish captain concerning the death of Max Piccolomini in [Schiller's] *Wallensteins Tod* [Act IV, Scene 11]: 'They say he wanted to die.'

² [This example was added in 1910.]

varicose veins; he was very ashamed of this. He went home and played with the revolver, but had no intention of hurting himself—and then the accident happened. When questioned further whether he was otherwise satisfied with life, he sighed in answer and told the story of his love for a girl who also loved him but left him all the same. She emigrated to America simply out of desire for money. He wanted to follow her, but his parents prevented him. His sweetheart left on January 20, 1907; two months, that is, before the accident. In spite of all these suspicious factors the patient stuck to his point that the shooting was an "accident". I was however firmly convinced that his negligence in failing to make sure the weapon was not loaded before playing with it, as well as his self-inflicted injury, were psychically determined. He was still labouring under the depressing effects of his unhappy love affair and obviously wanted to "forget it all" in the army. When he was deprived of this hope as well, he took to playing with the revolver—i.e. to an unconscious attempt at suicide. His holding the revolver in his left and not his right hand is strong evidence that he was really only "playing"—that is, that he did not consciously wish to commit suicide.'

Another analysis¹ of an apparently accidental self-inflicted injury, which its observer (Van Emden, 1911) has passed on to me, recalls the proverb: 'He who digs a pit for others falls in it himself.'²

'Frau X., who comes of a good middle-class family, is married with three children. She suffers from her nerves, it is true, but has never needed any energetic treatment as she is sufficiently able to cope with life. One day she incurred a facial disfigurement which was somewhat striking at the time though it was only temporary. It happened as follows. She stumbled on a heap of stones in a street under repair and struck her face against the wall of a house. The whole of her face was scratched; her eyelids became blue and oedematous and as she was afraid that something might happen to her eyes she had the doctor called in. After she had been reassured on that score, I asked her: 'But why did you in fact fall in that way?' She replied that, directly before this, she had warned her husband, who had

¹ [Added in 1912.]

² [Cf. *Ecclesiastes*, x, 8: 'He that diggeth a pit shall fall into it.']

been suffering for some months from a joint affection and therefore had difficulty in walking, to take great care in that street, and it had been a fairly frequent experience of hers to find in cases of the kind that in some remarkable way the very thing happened to her that she had warned someone else against.

'I was not satisfied that this was what had determined her accident and asked if perhaps she had something more to tell me. Yes, just before the accident she had seen an attractive picture in a shop on the other side of the street; she had quite suddenly desired it as an ornament for the nursery and therefore wanted to buy it immediately. She walked straight towards the shop, without looking at the ground, stumbled over the heap of stones and in falling struck her face against the wall of the house without making even the slightest attempt to shield herself with her hands. The intention of buying the picture was immediately forgotten and she returned home as fast as possible.—"But why didn't you keep a better look-out?" I asked. "Well," she answered, "perhaps it was a *punishment*—on account of that episode I told you about in confidence."—"Has it gone on worrying you so much then?"—"Yes—I regretted it very much afterwards; I considered myself wicked, criminal and immoral, but at the time I was almost crazy with my nerves."

'The reference was to an abortion which she had had carried out with her husband's consent, as, owing to their financial circumstances, the couple did not wish to be blessed with any further children. This abortion had been started by a woman quack but had had to be completed by a specialist.

'"I often reproach myself by thinking 'You really had your child killed' and I was afraid such a thing couldn't go unpunished. Now that you've assured me there's nothing wrong with my eyes, my mind's quite at rest: I've been *sufficiently punished* now in any case."

'This accident was therefore a self-punishment, firstly to atone for her crime, but secondly also to escape from an unknown punishment of perhaps much greater severity of which she had been in continual dread for months. In the moment that she dashed towards the shop to buy the picture, the memory of the whole episode with all its fears, which had already been fairly strongly active in her unconscious when she had warned her husband, became overwhelming and might perhaps have

been expressed in some words like these: "Why do *you* need an ornament for the nursery?—you had your child destroyed! You're a murderess. The great punishment's just coming down on you for certain!"

'This thought did not become conscious; but instead of it she used the situation, at what I might call this psychological moment, for punishing herself unobtrusively with the help of the heap of stones which seemed suitable for the purpose. This is the reason why she did not even put out her hands as she fell and also why she was not seriously frightened. The second and probably less important determinant of her accident was no doubt self-punishment for her *unconscious* wish to be rid of her husband, who, incidentally, had been an accomplice in the crime. This wish was betrayed by her entirely superfluous warning to him to keep an eye open for the heap of stones in the street, since her husband walked with great care precisely because he was bad on his legs.'¹

When the details of the case are considered² one will also be likely to feel that Stärcke (1916) is right in regarding an apparently accidental self-injury by burning as a 'sacrificial act':

'A lady whose son-in-law had to leave for Germany for military service scalded her foot in the following circumstances. Her daughter was expecting her confinement soon and reflections on the perils of war naturally did not put the family into a very cheerful mood. The day before his departure she had asked her son-in-law and daughter in for a meal. She herself prepared the meal in the kitchen after having first—strangely enough—changed her high, laced boots with arch-supports, which were comfortable for walking and which she usually wore indoors as well, for a pair of her husband's slippers that were too large and were open at the top. While taking a large pan of boiling soup off the fire she dropped it and in this way scalded one foot

¹ [Footnote added 1920:] A correspondent writes to me as follows on the subject of 'self-punishment by means of parapraxes': 'If one studies the way people behave in the street one has a chance of seeing how often men who turn round to look back at passing women—not an unusual habit—meet with a minor accident. Sometimes they will sprain an ankle—on a level pavement; sometimes they will bump into a lamp-post or hurt themselves in some other way.'

² [Added in 1917.]

fairly badly—especially the instep, which was not protected by the open slipper.—Everyone naturally put this accident down to her understandable “nerves”. For the first few days after this burnt offering she was particularly careful with anything hot, but this did not prevent her some days later from scalding her wrist with hot gravy.’¹

¹ [Footnote added 1924:] In a very large number of cases like these of injury or death in accidents the explanation remains a matter of doubt. The outsider will find no occasion to see in the accident anything other than a chance occurrence, while someone who is closely connected with the victim and is familiar with intimate details has reason to suspect the unconscious intention behind the chance occurrence. The following account by a young man whose fiancée was run over in the street gives a good example of the kind of intimate knowledge that I mean and of the type of accessory details in question:

‘Last September I made the acquaintance of a Fräulein Z., aged 34. She was in well-to-do circumstances, and had been engaged before the war, but her fiancé had fallen in action in 1916 while serving as an officer. We came to know and become fond of each other, not at first with any thought of marrying, as the circumstances on both sides, in particular the difference in our ages (I myself was 27), seemed to rule that out. As we lived opposite each other in the same street and met every day, our relationship took an intimate turn in course of time. Thus the idea of marriage came more into view and I finally agreed to it myself. The betrothal was planned for this Easter; Fräulein Z., however, intended first to make a journey to her relatives at M., but this was suddenly prevented by a railway strike that had been called as a result of the Kapp Putsch [an attempted counter-revolutionary *coup d'état* in Berlin in March, 1920]. The gloomy prospects that the workers' victory and its consequences appeared to hold out for the future had their effect for a brief time on our mood, too, but especially on Fräulein Z., always a person of very changeable moods, since she thought she saw new obstacles in the way of our future. On Saturday, March 20, however, she was in an exceptionally cheerful frame of mind—a state of affairs that took me quite by surprise and carried me along with her, so that we seemed to see everything in the rosiest colours. A few days before, we had talked of going to church together some time, without however having fixed a definite date. At 9.15 the next morning, Sunday, March 21, she telephoned to ask me to fetch her to church straight away; but I refused, as I could not have got ready in time, and had, besides, work I wanted to finish. Fräulein Z. was noticeably disappointed; she then set out alone, met an acquaintance on the stairs at her house and walked with him for the short distance along the Tauentzienstrasse to the Rankenstrasse, in the best of humour and without referring at all to our conversation. The gentleman bade her good-bye with a joking remark. [In order to reach the church] Fräulein Z. had

If a furious raging¹ against one's own integrity and one's own life can be hidden in this way behind apparently accidental clumsiness and motor inefficiency, it is not a very large step to find it possible to transfer the same view to mistakes that seriously endanger the lives and health of other people. What evidence I have to show that this view is a valid one is drawn from my experience with neurotics, and thus does not wholly meet the demands of the situation. I will give an account of a case in which something that was not strictly a faulty action but that rather deserves the name of a symptomatic or chance action gave me the clue which subsequently made it possible to resolve the patient's conflict. I once undertook the task of bringing an improvement to the marriage of a very intelligent man, whose disagreements with his fondly attached young wife

only to cross the Kurfürstendamm [the main street in West Berlin] where it widened out and one could have a clear view along it; but, close to the pavement, she was run over by a horse-drawn cab. (Contusion of the liver, which led to her death a few hours later.)—We had crossed at that point hundreds of times before; Fräulein Z. was exceedingly careful, and very often prevented me from being rash; on this morning there was almost no traffic whatever, the trams, omnibuses, etc. were on strike. Just about that time there was almost *absolute quiet*; even if she did not see the cab she must at all events have heard it! Everybody supposed it was an “accident”. My first thought was: “That's impossible—but on the other hand there can be no question of its having been intentional.” I tried to find a psychological explanation. After some considerable time I thought I had found it in your *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*. In particular, Fräulein Z. showed at various times a certain leaning in the direction of suicide and even tried to induce me to think the same way—thoughts from which I have often enough dissuaded her; for example, only two days before, after returning from a walk, she began, without any external reason at all, to talk about her death and the provisions for dealing with her estate. (She had not, by the way, done anything about this!—an indication that these remarks definitely did not have any intention behind them.) If I may venture on an opinion, I should regard this calamity not as an accident, nor as an effect of a clouding of consciousness, but as an intentional self-destruction performed with an unconscious purpose, and disguised as a chance mishap. This view of mine is confirmed by remarks which Fräulein Z. made to her relatives, both earlier, before she knew me, and also more recently, as well as by remarks to me up to within the last few days; so that I am tempted to regard the whole thing as an effect of the loss of her former fiancé, whom in her eyes nothing could replace.’

¹ [This paragraph dates back to 1901.]

could undoubtedly be shown to have a real basis, but could not, as he himself admitted, be completely accounted for in that way. He was continually occupied with the thought of a divorce, which he then dismissed once more because of his warm love for his two small children. In spite of this he constantly returned to his intention and made no attempt to find a way of making the situation tolerable to himself. Such inability to deal with a conflict is taken by me as proof that unconscious and repressed motives have lent a hand in strengthening the conscious ones which are struggling against each other, and I undertake in such cases to end the conflict by psychical analysis. One day the man told me of a small incident which had frightened him extremely. He was romping [*'hetzen'*] with his elder child, who was by far his favourite; he was swinging him high in the air and down again, and once he swung him so high while he was standing at a particular spot that the top of the child's head almost struck the heavy gas chandelier that was hanging there. *Almost*, but not quite—or perhaps just! No harm came to the child, but it was made giddy with fright. The father stood horrified with the child in his arms, and the mother had a hysterical attack. The peculiar adroitness of this imprudent movement and the violence of the parents' reaction prompted me to look for a symptomatic act in this accident—one which aimed at expressing an evil intention directed against the beloved child. I was able to remove the contradiction between this and the father's contemporary affection for his child by shifting the impulse to injure it back to the time when this child had been the only one and had been so small that its father had not yet had any reason to take an affectionate interest in it. It was then easy for me to suppose that, as he was getting little satisfaction from his wife, he may at that time have had a thought or formed a decision of this kind: 'If this little creature that means nothing at all to me dies, I shall be free and able to get a divorce.' A wish for the death of the creature that he now loved so dearly must therefore have persisted unconsciously. From this point it was easy to find the path by which this wish had become unconsciously fixated. A powerful determinant was in fact provided by a memory from the patient's childhood: namely that the death of a small brother, for which his mother blamed his father's negligence, had led

to violent quarrels between the parents and threats of a divorce. The subsequent course of my patient's marriage, as well as my therapeutic success, confirmed my conjecture.

Stärke (1916)¹ has given an example of the way in which creative writers do not hesitate to put a bungled action in the place of an intentional action and to make it in this way the source of the gravest consequences:

'In one of Heijermans' (1914) sketches there occurs an example of a bungled action, or, more precisely, of a faulty action which the author uses as a dramatic *motif*.

'The sketch is called "Tom and Teddie". They are a pair of divers who appear in a variety theatre; their act is given in an iron tank with glass walls, in which they stay under water for a considerable time and perform tricks. Recently the wife has started an affair with another man, an animal-trainer. Her diver-husband has caught them together in the dressing-room just before the performance. Dead silence, menacing looks, with the diver saying: "Afterwards!"—The act begins. The diver is about to perform his hardest trick: he will remain "two and a half minutes under water in a hermetically sealed trunk".—This is a trick they had performed often enough; the trunk was locked and "Teddie used to show the key to the audience, who checked the time by their watches". She also used purposely to drop the key once or twice into the tank and then dive hurriedly after it, so as not to be too late when the time came for the trunk to be opened.

' "This particular evening, January 31st, saw Tom locked up as usual by the neat fingers of his brisk and nimble wife. He smiled behind the peep-hole—she played with the key and waited for his warning sign. The trainer stood in the wings, in his impeccable evening dress, with his white tie and his horse-whip. Here was the 'other man'. To catch her attention he gave a very short whistle. She looked at him, laughed, and with the clumsy gesture of someone whose attention is distracted she threw the key so wildly in the air that at exactly two minutes and twenty seconds, by an accurate reckoning, it fell by the side of the tank in the middle of the bunting covering the pedestal. No one had seen it. No one could see it. Viewed from the house the optical illusion was such that everyone saw the key fall into

¹ [This final example was added in 1917.]

the water—and none of the stage hands heard it since the bunting muffled the sound.

‘“Laughing, Teddie clambered without delay, over the edge of the tank. Laughing—Tom was holding out well—she came down the ladder. Laughing, she disappeared under the pedestal to look there and, when she did not find the key at once, she bowed in front of the bunting with a priceless gesture, and an expression on her face as if to say ‘Gracious me! what a nuisance this is!’.

‘“Meanwhile Tom was grimacing in his droll way behind the peep-hole, as if he too was becoming agitated. The audience saw the white of his false teeth, the champing of his lips under the flaxen moustache, the comical bubble-blowing that they had seen earlier, when he was eating the apple. They saw his pale knuckles as he grappled and clawed, and they laughed as they had laughed so often already that evening.

‘“Two minutes and fifty-eight seconds . . .

‘“Three minutes and seven seconds . . . twelve seconds . . .

‘“Bravo! Bravo! Bravo!

‘“Then consternation broke out in the house and there was a shuffling of feet, when the stage hands and the trainer began to search too and the curtain came down before the lid had been raised.

‘“Six English dancing-girls came on—then the man with the ponies, dogs and monkeys. And so on.

‘“It was not till the next morning that the public knew there had been an accident, that Teddie had been left a widow. . . .”

‘It is clear from this quotation what an excellent understanding the author must himself have had of the nature of a symptomatic act, seeing that he demonstrates to us so strikingly the deeper cause of the fatal clumsiness.’

CHAPTER IX

SYMPTOMATIC AND CHANCE ACTIONS¹

THE actions described so far [Chapter VIII], in which we recognized the carrying out of an unconscious intention, made their appearance in the form of disturbances of other intended actions and concealed themselves behind the pretext of clumsiness. The ‘chance’ actions which are now to be discussed differ from ‘bungled’ actions merely in the fact that they scorn the support of a conscious intention and are therefore in no need of a pretext. They appear on their own account, and are permitted because they are not suspected of having any aim or intention. We perform them ‘without thinking there is anything in them’, ‘quite accidentally’, ‘just to have something to do’; and such information, it is expected, will put an end to any enquiry into the significance of the action. In order to be able to enjoy this privileged position, these actions, which no longer put forward the excuse of clumsiness, have to fulfil certain conditions:² they must be *unobtrusive* and their effects must be slight.

I have collected a large number of such chance actions from myself and from others, and after closely examining the different examples I have come to the conclusion that the name of *symptomatic acts* is a better one for them. They give expression to something which the agent himself does not suspect in them, and which he does not as a rule intend to impart to other people but to keep to himself. Thus, exactly like all the other phenomena which we have so far considered, they play the part of symptoms.

The richest supply of such chance or symptomatic acts is in fact to be obtained during the psycho-analytic treatment of neurotics. I cannot resist quoting two examples from this source

¹ [The earlier portion of this chapter, up to p. 195, dates back to 1901.]

² [In 1901 only: ‘a certain condition’.]