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Feeling the Words

Neuropsychoanalytic understanding of memory and the unconscious

Mauro Mancia

Translated by
Judy Baggott

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Feeling the Words

Feeling the Words incorporates a thorough review of essential psychoanalytic concepts, a clear critical history of analytical ideas and an assessment of the contribution neuroscience has to offer.

Mauro Mancia uses numerous detailed clinical examples to demonstrate how insights from neuroscience and infant development research can change how the analyst responds to his or her patient. Major topics such as the transference, the Oedipus complex, the interpretation of dreams and the nature of mental pain are reviewed and refined in the light of these recent developments. The book is divided into three parts, covering:

- Memory and the unconscious
- The dream: between neuroscience and psychoanalysis
- Further reflections on narcissism and other clinical topics

Feeling the Words offers an original perspective on the connection between memory and the unconscious. It will be welcomed by all psychoanalysts interested in investigating new ways of working with patients.

Mauro Mancia is Professor Emeritus of Neurophysiology, University of Milan, Italy and Training Analyst of the Italian Psychoanalytical Society. His interest is in the link between neuroscientific knowledge and psycho-analytic theories of mind and he has written extensively on the subjects of narcissism, dreams, sleep, memory and the unconscious.

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General Editor Dana Birksted-Breen

The New Library of Psychoanalysis was launched in 1987 in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London. It took over from the International Psychoanalytical Library, which published many of the early translations of the works of Freud and the writings of most of the leading British and Continental psychoanalysts.

The purpose of the New Library of Psychoanalysis is to facilitate a greater and more widespread appreciation of psychoanalysis and to provide a forum for increasing mutual understanding between psychoanalysts and those working in other disciplines such as the social sciences, medicine, philosophy, history, linguistics, literature and the arts. It aims to represent different trends both in British psychoanalysis and in psychoanalysis generally. The New Library of Psychoanalysis is well placed to make available to the English-speaking world psychoanalytic writings from other European countries and to increase the interchange of ideas between British and American psychoanalysts.

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To the composers and musicians of all times
who have taught me to "feel the words"

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Foreword

One hundred and fifty years after Freud's birth, we are in the midst of one of the great epochs in psychoanalysis. On every continent, there seems to be a lively ferment of psychoanalytic ideas and a new freedom to explore again the legacy that we have inherited from Freud. Old issues of loyalty, hegemony, or schism seem to have spent their force. Many of the most creative minds, both in psychoanalysis and in allied disciplines, are devoted now to developing new ways of thinking and applying what we have learned from Freud.

Mauro Mancia has written a remarkably comprehensive book in which he presents a review of major psychoanalytic domains and areas of interest, bringing to bear an extraordinary knowledge of scholarly and scientific contributions from throughout the world. Psychoanalysis has developed on many fronts in many directions and these are part of the knowledge base of this volume. But while Mancia provides an extensive review of essential psychoanalytic concepts, and a clearly presented critical history of analytic ideas, his major interest is in the new perspectives offered by empirical research in infant development and neuroscience. His emphasis is on how the cutting-edge new scientific information available to us today can change and expand the ways in which analysts hear and respond to their patients' productions. He is less interested in presenting us with new theories than in demonstrating to us, through many detailed descriptions of clinical encounters, how analysts' listening capacity and their range of responsiveness is hugely enlarged by this new knowledge.

Mancia reviews major topics such as the transference, the earliest infant–parent relationship, a re-examination of the Oedipus complex, the sources and interpretation of dreams, Klein and Bion, ethology and sleep, the nature of mental pain and more. In each area he not only has new and interesting things to tell us, but also carefully illustrates his ideas with detailed clinical examples, showing a master clinician at work. Mancia is

one of the pioneers in helping us to review the corpus of psychoanalytic knowledge, attempting to retain what is best, modify what no longer suits our current state of knowing, and integrating new kinds of knowledge which were not available only a few years ago.

The advances in neuropsychiatry have been startling – so much so that increasingly psychiatrists and researchers tend to talk about what the brain is doing rather than what the person is doing, providing a new mode of Cartesian dualism. Neuroimaging techniques have revealed the extraordinary degree of localization in the brain that corresponds with specific cognitive and affective tasks. Cellular biochemistry has discovered an array of chemical cascades involved in mental activity and together these sciences have begun to map the ways in which memories are laid down and changed – areas of critical interest for psychoanalysis. Eric Kandel was awarded a Nobel Prize for his work on the neurobiology of memory in 2000, and he has carefully related his reductionist scientific strategy to the larger purposes of psychoanalysis (Kandel 2006).

Psychoanalysts have responded in several different ways to the excitement of neurobiology. One group continues to insist that the activities of the brain may be an interesting topic, but it is unrelated to psychoanalysis. For this group, psychoanalysis is interested solely in the unfolding interaction of analyst and analysand in the traditional analytic setting in which the patient's free associations are the focus of the analyst's attention, and the analyst's aim is to provide interpretations that will help to unmask and undo the resistances that hide the conflicts and their neurotic resolutions that date back to childhood experience. In this view events occurring before the age of 3 are not of interest to the psychoanalyst.

Another group of psychoanalysts, at the opposite pole, eagerly embraces these new findings of neuroscience, coining the term neuropsychoanalysis, with the hope that blending analysis and neuroscience will give psychoanalysis the scientific objective and empirical base that has eluded it until now. In this view Freud's project, abandoned for lack of data at that time, can now be successfully resumed and psychoanalysis can join the family of empirical sciences.

I believe that both these positions are misguided. Surely neuroscience and infant observation have alerted us to possibilities that psychoanalysis has previously tended to be unaware of or to ignore. Clearly, we can no longer ignore what neuroscience might teach us about the nature of learning, memory, and forms of unconscious processing, topics at the core of psychoanalysis. Implicit memory, or the unrepressed unconscious, a focus of Mancia's interest, is prominent among these findings. But the effort to create a single field of neuropyschoanalysis implies the notion that we

relinquish our focus on the person or the self in favor of crediting the brain as the locus of initiative and action. This seems like too much to give up at this point in our knowledge. Following Freud's lead, we have learned an extraordinary amount about how individuals function in society and about the hermeneutic, narrative base of the self, and it would be premature to abandon this focus at this time.

Mancia takes a third route. He is interested in all that neuroscience has to teach us, but his aim is to use this new knowledge in the service of what we know about attachment, desire, fantasy, pain and terror. As he illustrates in his many vivid clinical examples throughout this volume, the concept of the unrepressed unconscious – implicit memory – is an essential one for him in understanding his patients' lives and their relationship to their analyst. Implicit memory is the name given to the category of memories that have never been verbalized – those procedures or habits that are learned before language acquisition or which encode bodily activities that do not depend on verbal representation for their retention in memory. Using this concept of the unrepressed unconscious, Mancia succeeds in greatly enlarging the domain of the apparent content of free associations and dreams, and also focuses our attention on the music of the transference–countertransference relationship – the ways in which posture, tone of voice, the atmosphere of the analytic setting, are critical to understanding the relationship of patient and analyst and thus ultimately to understanding the patient. Mancia convincingly demonstrates how the earliest preverbal period of patients' lives may lay down relational and affective patterns of response that will enduringly determine the depth and emotional coloring – negative and positive – of relationships throughout adult life. He emphasizes that this domain of implicit memory – unrepressed and yet unconscious, not subject to verbal recall – requires construction on the part of the analyst as well as reconstruction, and is communicated, often without words, in the patient's dreams and in the transference–countertransference interactions of the analytic couple.

Mancia's emphasis on the music (and I might add, the dance) of analysis, highlights aspects of relatedness that are non-conscious, automatic, and are not caught up in inner conflict or instinctual repression. This tremendous expansion of the domain of psychoanalysis opens up new arenas for analytic understanding and intervention. In order to take advantage of these new sources of information, analysts must adopt new attitudes regarding their attention to non-language expressions, mastering the techniques for attending to the silent footprints of habitual early learned forms of relating that are critical in the lives of their adult patients. The dream analyses presented in this volume are vivid and masterful examples of how this is

done. The experienced clinician will also be particularly informed by the detailed discussion of transference and reality and the nature of transference-love, that hybrid that is one of the motors of psychoanalytic technique.

Mancia's appreciation of the multileveled nature of psychoanalysis takes him into the realms of philosophy, theater and art and the nature of reality – physical and psychic. Interested not only in neuroscience, Mancia's sophisticated knowledge of the philosophical and artistic underpinnings of psychoanalysis informs this volume. Mancia does not shrink from exploring some of the deepest enduring problems of human thought and feeling. What is happiness, for example? His fascinating discussion links happiness to our fears of death, implicit memories of the blissful moments with the mother before separation interfered, a sense of revelation of the fullness of the human possibility, and the wish for continued ecstasy. As if that were not enough, we are reminded that the wish for enduring happiness constitutes a danger, luring us to believe that we may attain it without self-examination, painful knowledge of one's self and enduring hard work. Much depends on the quality of the infantile experience of pain or satisfaction – experiences that are stored in implicit memory, intermixed with varying degrees of pathological defenses such as splitting, projective identification, denial and false idealizations, all of which provide the background for later misery. The analytic task is (p. 207)

> to help patients manage their negative parts better since these are a source of unhappiness, and to transform their internal figures so these are more tolerant and creative. The problem is not so much to free patients of a neurotic or psychotic symptom but to help them establish a different way of living.

I know of no better statement of the goals of analysis.

This book is notable for being stimulating and comprehensible to both the experienced psychoanalyst clinician as well as to anyone with an interest in the work of Freud and his followers, and the state of psychoanalytic research today.

Arnold Cooper

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INTRODUCTION

Beyond Freud: the twilight of Oedipus and the neuro-sciences' contribution to psychoanalysis

The twilight of Oedipus

Psychoanalysis was officially born with the "Dora case" (Freud, 1901), but it had been gestating in Freud's mind for a long time before this, when he shifted from identifying himself with Joseph Breuer, a severe guardian of the scientific method so dear to the natural sciences, to Wilhelm Fliess, who showed scant respect for orthodoxy and the scientific method, and was much more interested in his own biological "fantasies". It was Fliess who enabled Freud to think more freely about the mind's functions, detaching them from the brain's functions which served as the naturalistic "guarantee" that Freud felt he needed if he was not to wander too far beyond the borders of the Austrian and German scientists' positivist culture at the end of the nineteenth century (Mancia, 1983, 1985).

The *Project for a Scientific Psychology* (Freud, 1895) marks this change in Freud's thinking, as he tries to explain psychology in neurophysiological terms, proposing a model of the relation between mind and brain. However, he did not publish this because he was convinced that the medical and academic circles of Vienna – unlike Troy! – would never let this explosive Trojan horse through the gates of their university citadel. So he picked up the basic concepts laid out in the *Project* and incorporated them into a new, major oeuvre he was working on, *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Freud, 1900), in which, five years later, he illustrated his concept of the unconscious and the mind's Oedipal functions.

The idea of the unconscious certainly comes from the model described in the *Project*, where it appears as the repression of infantile (sexual) desire in the ψ system which is satisfied in dreams through regression – topical,

temporal, or formal – so that the wish can be fulfilled by pushing the gates of perception (the φ system) from within, thus creating a perception with no object, in other words a hallucination. The unconscious was subsequently described "dynamically" in metapsychological writings in 1915 and linked to an active process of repression. In the *Project* model Freud picks up the roots of his definition of the dream, as the hallucinatory satisfaction of a wish repressed in infancy.

Closely tied to the concept of the unconscious is the Oedipus complex, which Freud announced to Fliess in a letter dated 15 October 1897, a few months after the death of his father; it was subsequently defined in further works, as the pivot around which his whole theory of the mind revolved.

The use of the myth of Oedipus in relation to the theory of the mind's development is too important to be left behind without comment. It was triggered by a personal experience which Freud guessed had universal impact. It was also, however, the fruit of the dominant culture in Europe at the end of the nineteenth century, particularly of the Austrian middle class and Jews, with their attachment to the patriarchal family and much less weight given to the woman's maternal role, even though fairly recently the mother's importance in Freud's own education and choice of profession was highlighted (Speziale-Bagliacca, 2002).

All the central European literature of those years was centered on the father–son conflict, from Arthur Schnitzler to Franz Kafka, Otto Weininger and Robert Musil. Together with Freud, these writers found themselves faced at the end of the nineteenth century with a "mirror game" under the constellation of Oedipus (Dalle Luche, 2002).

Arthur Tatossian's *Oedipus in Kakania* (1988) (a word-play on the two Ks of *Kaiserlich* and *Königlich* which stood for the power of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) pans over this period from the point of view of the relationship between psychoanalysis and central European literature. Tatossian notes that we should hardly be surprised that Oedipus was "discovered" in Kakania in 1897. This was the year – a significant coincidence – when Emperor Franz Josef I received a group of Viennese painters, headed by Gustav Klimt, who announced they were rebelling against "academism" (symbolically killing their fathers) and founding the *secession* movement. All this happened a few months before Freud's letter of 15 October 1897 telling Fliess he had "discovered" Oedipus.

At that time the question of identity was becoming acute for the Austrian Jews. They could go for total assimilation, denying their original identity, or neutralize it through socialist ideology, or accentuate it by embracing Zionism. Psychoanalysis could be viewed, at this particular moment in history, as another attempt to sort out the question of the Jewish identity.

The KaKania writers did not take long to show interest in psychoanalysis – they were among the first. The cultured public at the end of the nineteenth century was familiar with the father–son conflict, from Henrik Ibsen's plays and Arthur Schnitzler's works describing a patriarchal world where the mother was constantly overshadowed first by her husband and then by her sons. Schnitzler's family setting was very similar to Kafka's and Musil's. All these authors presented the father figure in a bright light in their writings and diaries, so much so that Tatossian (1988) calls Kafka an "exemplary Oedipus". Kafka, in particular, expresses a "flight" from the father throughout his work, or at any rate takes the son's side against his father. Musil (1957) too in *The Man without Quality* has Ulrich say that any attempt at evasion leads in the end to the father.

Franz Kafka knows the basics of psychoanalysis and in *The Judgment* (*Das Urteil*, 1912) he tells the tale of a son who wanted to take his father's place, and was punished for it. It is inevitable to see the connection with the castration anxiety that Freud suggested was one of the reasons for the Oedipus resolution.

Kafka considered the unconscious something that belonged to the "spiritual world", so it cannot be described, and can only be lived. The disagreement with psychoanalysis peaks when he says the origin of psychogenesis is not individual, and is convinced that man is conditioned by the contingencies of his actual existence. Kafka – says Tatossian (1988) – certainly admits his suffering and his neurosis too, but denies that these mark him individually. They are the bad luck of his generation, meaning the generation of young western Jews, who were not just "four-day Jews", referring to the three Jewish high holidays and Franz Josef's birthday, who could not and did not want to transmit authentic Judaism. Kafka therefore allowed that there was some truth in psychoanalysis but it had to be seen against the background of his generation of Jews. He disagreed with Freud, paraphrasing Wittgenstein's idea that anyone who could only repeat what psychoanalysis said should shut up (Kafka, 1980). Like Kafka, Musil (1957) too found Freud's ideas of causality unacceptable, so from this point of view, both are closer to Wittgenstein (Mancia, 2002).

Kafka's (1975) *Letter to Father* is full of reflections that bring us back to Oedipus. The letters are not full of painful nostalgia, but offer a dual message – apparently contradictory – that the father sends his son, who should emancipate himself following his example, and become an adult, while asking him to be submissive for gratitude and remain a child.

Quite understandably, Deleuze and Guattari (1972) criticize the *Letter to Father*, because of its excessive emphasis on Oedipus, to the point of seeming almost a caricature. As a matter of fact, the incestuous desire for the

mother is not at all evident in Kafka's Oedipus, and the basic problem is a question of *power*.

Linked to the question of his neurosis is also the problem of sexuality, which Kafka certainly does not see as a source of pleasure. He talks of sex as a "punishment for the happiness of living together" (Kafka, 1954) and says he feels sick when he walks in front of his parents' bed. In *The Castle* (1926) he describes Agrimensore and Frida, both naked, having intercourse in a puddle of beer on the floor. A revolting scene that is anything but erotic! So all Kafka's writing suggests he is strongly inhibited when it comes to sexuality, as the whole series of his various "fiancées" confirms. In actual fact this abnormal attitude to sexuality is part of a more general personality disorder dominated by persecutory internal parents who he hates, but with incurable affective ambivalence.

In the eyes of an analyst today, the Kafka case seems to go well beyond Oedipus, expressing a poor primary relationship with the mother, which has the effect of shifting the "axis" from the father to the mother, involving both parents and the child's surroundings as he grows up. Quite possibly an early relational trauma, which we know little about, helped create Kafka's personality dominated by a suffering, persecutory part that became pivotal in the figures and situations represented in his writings. There might, on the other hand, have been a major lack of maternal care – with the threat of abandon – that prevented Kafka identifying with his father figure, or possibly his father himself, his absence or inadequacy, failed to help Franz dis-identify or separate himself from his mother. This affective situation was the cause of his neurosis, his difficulty separating himself from the family, but also his hatred and ambivalent feelings about the family.

Defensively, Kafka – and the same holds for Musil (1957) – preferred to acknowledge that the cause of his mental suffering was related more to power than to love or hatred of his parents. Tatossian's (1988) opinion was that Freud had preferred to formulate the questions facing him in terms of libido or love rather than power, and as a corollary attributed the primary role to an incestuous desire for the mother rather than competition with the father. It was fairly natural, therefore, for his interpretation to take more account of the individual and his life story than of society and its history. This privileged viewpoint was probably not based wholly on scientific reasons. We must not forget the complexity of Freud's own family and its multilayer genealogy – to say nothing of the intricate layers of its "geology" – which may even have been necessary for someone to discover the Oedipus complex, at least in the form Freud presented it. The "dissident" analysts, or Kafka and Musil, take a different angle on the question, at least partly because of their own different family backgrounds.

It is interesting that in Italy too, branching out first from Trieste, a city heavily influenced by central European literary trends and sensitive to the culture of "Kakania", the Oedipus idea was widely adopted in the literature, especially as a narrative organizer. Italo Svevo (1976), in *La coscienza di Zeno* (*Zeno's Conscience*), uses the father as a metaphor for the inexorable cycle of the generations. Zeno is working through his grief for the loss of his father, who was the object of profound identification and fantasies of prohibition and punishment which became more acute while he was dying (Dalle Luche, 2002). To paraphrase Svevo in this masterpiece:

> Dead! I did not realize he was dead but my heart shrank with the pain of the punishment that he, on his deathbed, had wanted to mete out to me. Crying like a child who has been spanked, I shouted into his ear: "It's not my fault!" . . . They had to drag me away from his room. He was dead and I could no longer prove my innocence!
>
> (Dalle Luche, 2002: 29)

After Svevo, Berto (1964) in *Il male oscuro* (*The Obscure Evil*) was drawn strongly to the Oedipus theory of the mind, and wrote that

> his unconscious knew full well that this father was an abominable creature who stole my mother every day while I was in the midst of my Oedipus crisis: I loved my mother to death and how could I, a little thing, defend myself against that omnipotent dog except by hating him, with the bottomless hatred of a child, who is capable of boundless love or hatred; I wished my father dead a million times over in my mind, so my unconscious is a million times parricidal. I don't know whether that's true; maybe it is if these people who explore the unconscious say so – they must have their reasons – so I have the impression that what I have to do now is get rid of this remorse for my numerous acts of parricide, as much as I can.
>
> (Dalle Luche, 2002: 30)

The life and writing of Pier Paolo Pasolini was certainly influenced by a strong Oedipal situation. He was always hostile towards his father, considering him

> an unfair rival, with whom there was no way of reaching agreement, unless he could completely win over his mother's love, restoring a pre-Oedipal dyad in adult life at the price of sexual dis-identification and compulsive homosexuality, tormented and hidden (from his mother).
>
> (Dalle Luche, 2002: 37)

The year 1920 was important in Freud's thinking. The introduction of the dialogue between life and death instincts in determining human mental life seems to have reduced the importance assigned until that time to the Oedipus complex in an individual's development. We do not know why Freud turned onto this path. It might have been because of philosophical considerations linked to the theory of opposites, or to reflections on the drama of the First World War (1914–1918), in which Austria was defeated and the Austro-Hungarian Empire broken up; it might have been inspired by psychosocial ideas (which turned out to be true premonitions) related to the cultural and political climate in Austria and Germany in those years, where preparations for the advent of Nazism already seemed under way. Subsequently, in fact, Freud himself linked the conflict between the life instinct (Eros) and death instinct (Thanatos) to the human events of the moment, and the death instinct was introduced into clinical work: as a cause of negative therapeutic reactions, of an unconscious sense of guilt, and of narcissistic neurosis (in other terms, psychosis).

The second topic of *The Ego and the Id* (1922) enabled Freud to offer an idea of mental function controlled by the Id, out of which came the Ego and the Super-Ego. This latter, drenched with the death instinct, can harm the Ego and cause mental distress. It was perhaps pessimism that gave Freud the idea that the Super-Ego could take on itself the Ego's own ideal, left over from a (narcissistic) identification with the parents. This operation means the Ego ideal suffers the same fate as the Super-Ego, losing the ideal, positive characteristics needed if the interiorized parental figures are to allow smooth management of emotions and efficient thought. Humans will remain under the influence of the severe, punitive Super-Ego without the reassuring, illuminating support of the Ego ideal.

The second topic highlights the unconscious, focusing on the Id. Freud bases himself directly on the metapsychological work of 1915, particularly *Repression* (1915a) and *The Unconscious* (1915b). In these two fundamental works, Freud lays the foundations for defining the unconscious as a "dynamic" product created by repression. He uses the term *primal repression* (possibly referring to a child's earliest experiences with its parents), and *repression proper*, which comes later. Despite their different timing, both are still repression, and Freud seems to believe that the unconscious can originate only from repression, this being an active process of (temporarily) forgetting that can be achieved only through the structures needed for storing experiences in the autobiographic memory.

The 1915 metapsychological work can be seen as confirming and further extending the concepts related to memory that Freud deals with in *Screen Memories* (1899) and in *Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through* (1914b). In the first he talks about repression of certain facts and their shift onto contiguous facts. In the second he refers to recollections stored in the autobiographic memory which the subject under analysis can bring to the surface, in the appropriate circumstances, through free associations and dreams.

At that time Freud certainly had no means of referring to any other form of memory – such as implicit memory, which I shall discuss fully later in this book, but which was not yet known in Freud's days – which extends the concept of the unconscious and considers a possible non-repressive origin, linked to a child's earliest preverbal and presymbolic experiences that cannot be recalled but nevertheless influence the person's affective, cognitive and sexual life even as an adult. This unconscious can return to the surface in the analytical relationship through the transference, as we shall see further on, and can be represented in dreams.

In actual fact Freud himself, in 1922, mentions an unrepressed unconscious, deriving from the Id (for example, a part of the Ego and the Super-Ego) but his concept is different from our idea of the unconscious today, which is not the result of repression and is linked to the first significant experiences of early childhood. This unconscious is more passive than Freud's "dynamic" unconscious which is actively produced by repression.

In the 1930s psychoanalysis enjoyed an exceptional moment in its history, when Melanie Klein entered the international scene. She came from Hungary, where she had been analyzed by Sándor Ferenczi and subsequently by Karl Abraham, and she launched a whole new perspective on the theory of the mind. Her arrival led to the Oedipus complex losing ground as analysts gradually lost interest in a concept that no longer seemed central to the theory of the mind, its place taken by the importance of the pre-Oedipal phases in the development of the infant's mind.

Deleuze and Guattari (1972) accuse the Oedipus complex of being a "mousetrap" that generates double bonds. They were in fact ahead of various contemporary analysts who suggest "dis-Oedipizing" the unconscious so as to tackle the real problems, which are pre-Oedipal, rooted in the mother–child relationship, in which the father figure, though important, is more symbolic than real, as an internal representation of the mother.

The Oedipus complex did not in fact disappear with Klein, but moved forward to the child's first months when, in its primary relationship, it passes through what Klein calls the paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1928). This involves splitting and projective identification, and the child then projects