REVIEW OF

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life by Sigmund Freud

Boris Sidis

Journal of Abnormal Psychology, 1906, 1, 101-103.

The Psychopathology of Everyday Life (Zur Psychopathologie des Alltagslebens).
By S. Freud. S. Karger, Berlin, 1904.

The perennial interest in the psychology of dreams has received a further stimulus in the little volume by Freud, whose previous work in the same field is already well known. Amplifying the idea contained in many of his papers, and more especially in his "Traumdeutung" (Vienna, 1900), Freud enters upon an analysis of the mechanism and an interpretation of the meaning of dreams, whose fons et origo he believes to be subconscious mental life. The dream, in Freud's view, is a manifestation of motives and desires, temporarily suppressed and submerged in the subconsciousness. There is an upper primary consciousness,—a censor, as it were,—which prevents these suppressed states, these motives and desires, from rising to the surface. When in sleep, however, the upper consciousness is more or less in abeyance, such suppressed states assert themselves, but not without having undergone a metamorphosis,—hence the bizarre and oftentimes fanciful fabric of our dreams. Upon careful analysis,—a task not always easy,—each element of

the dream can be traced to co-existing subconscious states. This mechanism of the dream is not by any means unique, for it is similar to what we observe in the various forms of the psychoneuroses, hysteria, etc. A similar mechanism is shown to exist in the normal mind, manifesting itself in certain familiar processes of our daily life, such, for example, as the forgetting of well-known names, slips of the tongue and pen, the forgetting of important events which should be remembered, certain motor maladjustments, and apparently accidental and purposeless actions, none of which is merely fortuitous, since it is the expression of dominant suppressed motives. In our psychic life there is nothing arbitrary; no chance elements are to be found there, and all mental activity is predetermined by subconscious states.

The motives causing suppression of certain mental states are to be sought in moral training, in social environment, or in the painful nature of the states themselves. These suppressed states do not remain dormant, they will not down, but force themselves above the conscious threshold, the occasion of their manifestation being an association existing between them and the conscious content of the moment. Such suppressed state, during their manifestation interfere with the processes of consciousness and hence the resulting activity is a "compromise" between the two opposed states. The forgetting of a familiar name, for example, and the birth in the mind of many names which are immediately rejected,—a common occurrence,—is not a matter of mere chance, but is fraught with meaning. Freud analyzes at length several instances

of this sort and shows that at the time the name is forgotten, there are present in the mind certain states which we voluntarily suppress because of their disagreeable nature. When the name together with these states is suppressed, it is because of an association between such states and the name in question. The names, moreover, which occur to the mind when we seek for the forgotten name, are not merely names of chance, but are "compromises" between what we endeavor to recall and what we suppress; they contain elements of each.

The conditions underlying this process are the following:

First, a certain disposition to forget the name.

Second, a very recently executed process of suppression.

Third, the existence of an association between the suppressed state and the name.

In a similar fashion the forgetting of important events can be traced to a voluntary effort of suppression, for there is an universal tendency, varying with individuals, to forget unpleasant experiences. Here is a striking example from Freud's personal experience. While looking over his account books, he came upon a name which he did not recognize. Neither could he recall the patient, although his books showed that treatment had been recent and of long duration. Evidently there was some motive for his forgetting the name. Subsequently the patient proved to have been a young girl whom he had treated for hysterical symptoms, with great improvement in her condition.

A short time later the girl died of sarcoma of the pelvic organs, which the nervous symptoms had concealed and hence the organic disorder was overlooked. This was naturally a very unpleasant experience, and therefore the extraordinary loss of memory for such an important case.

Freud analyzes many cases of such familiar instances as slips of the tongue, maladjustments, and accidental and purposeless acts, all of which he interprets as manifestations of subconscious motives.

The subconscious is thus shown to exert a great influence upon normal mental life. In our psychic activity is nothing without import, and indeed it is impossible to make a meaningless combination. When, for example, we think of a chance name or of a chance number, the name or number that occurs to the mind will, on analysis, be found to be determined by motives which are entirely outside the field of consciousness.

Thus we observe the processes of normal life to be similar to those of dreams and the various psychoses. Between the normal and the abnormal there is no gap, the transition is gradual and imperceptible. Although perhaps not quite convincing, this little volume is interesting and timely.

SIDIS

Letter from Boris Sidis to William James

Monday, October 9, 1905

Dear Prof. James,

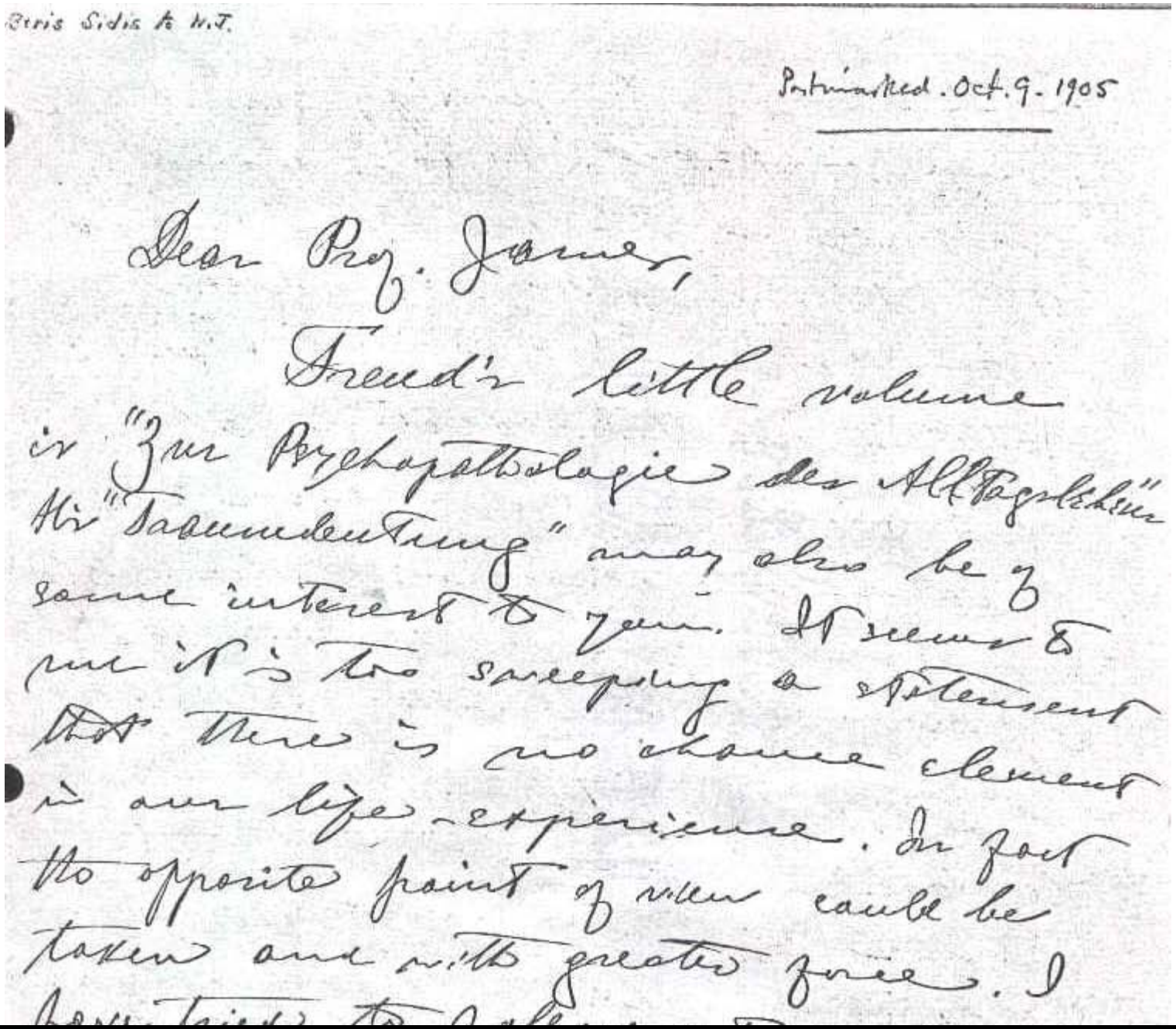
Freud's little volume is "The Psychopathology of Everyday Life." His "Traumdetung" may also be of interest to you. It seems to me it's too sweeping a statement that there is no chance element in our life experience. In fact, the opposite point of view could be taken and with greater force. I have tried to follow out some of its lines suggested—in thoughts and dreams—and it seems to me that the reasonable element is but an insignificant portion, a pin point, of our psychic life. Chance and not reason rules the world. Reason's function is often a kind of chance's handmaid to justify what has come to pass. In fact much of our "reason" in science is just this chance element locked into shape and form. Even the father of idealists, Plato, could not help finding an irreducible, irrational element in the world the matter of our . . . Unfortunately, its matter is quite bulky and weighty.

If, however, it's disheartening to "reason" to meet with so much chance, there is another redeeming side in regard to possibilities and liberty which the foreordained mathematical tables of "reason" would preclude. What value would we put on our life,

present and future, if one could calculate it and arrange the future happenings in some sort of nautical almanac? Everything would be calculated and forecast like the phases of the moon or the courses of the stars. But where would be our individuality, that chance element most dear to and most valued by us?

Yours as ever

B. Sidis



Boris Sidis to W.J.

Postmarked. Oct. 9. 1905

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So, Lawson, it's disheartening
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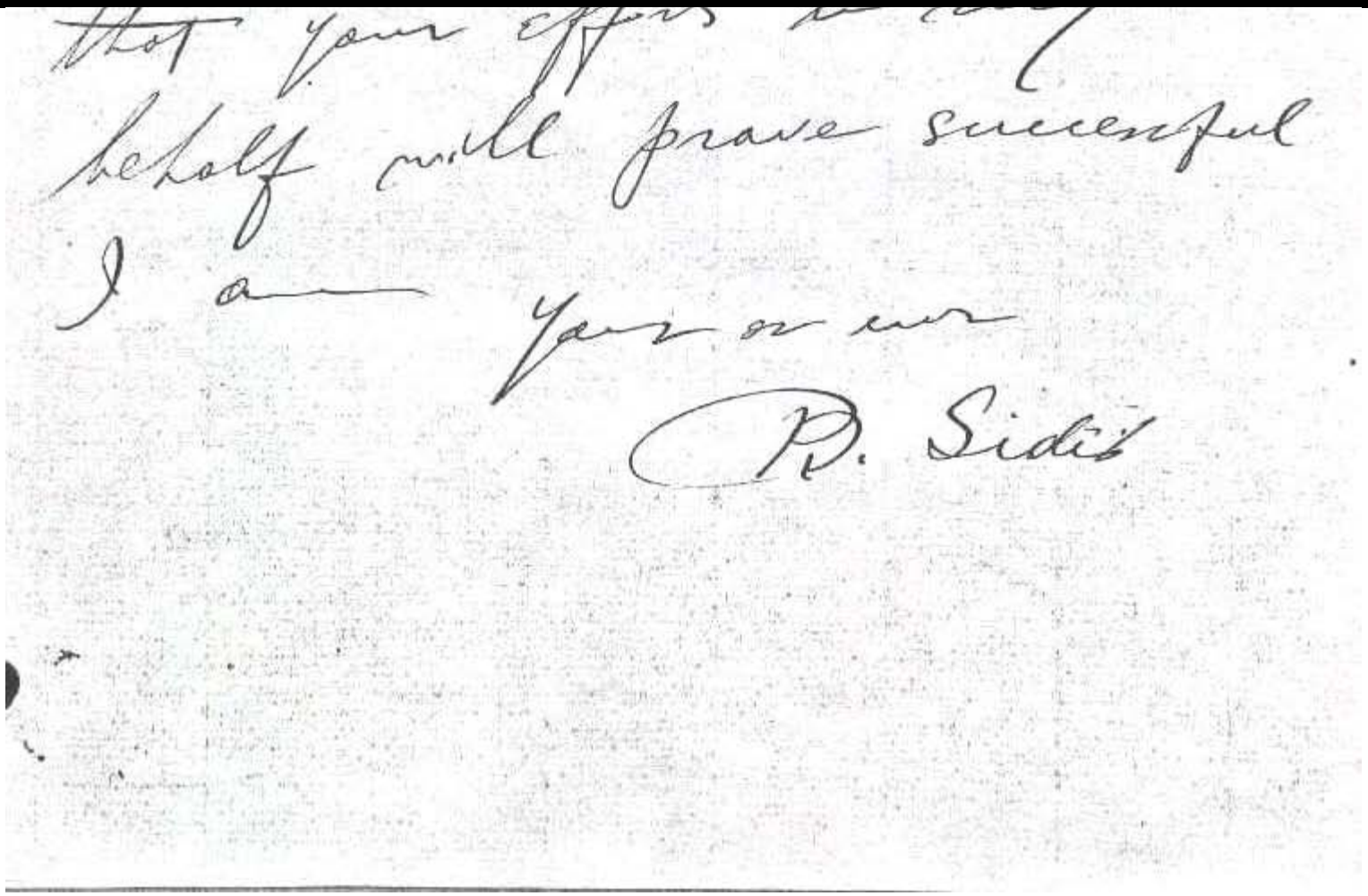
Boris Sidis to N.T. [Oct. 9, 1905]

While I write this letter I am in receipt of your postal card. I want to thank you very much for your kind interest which will no doubt be a great help to me.

With kind regards to Mrs. Sidis and with hope


that your efforts in my
behalf will prove successful
I am
Yours ever
B. Sidis

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