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*On Oblivion as a Symptom**By Hagit Aldema*

Heidegger's frequent claim concerning the oblivion of Being raises the idea of oblivion as a symptom; the symptom of philosophy. Thinking of oblivion as a symptom requires its consideration as a formation of the unconscious, that which is simultaneously being disclosed and concealed by language.

The primary concern of the present lecture will rest on two known claims regarding the relation between language and Being; one is Heidegger's claim relating Being to the place in which it dwells: 'Language is the house of Being', and the other is psychoanalysis' supposition of the Subject as a 'speaking being' (*parle être*). The Subject's being dwells in language, and this appears in Lacan's oft quoted saying that 'the unconscious is structured like a language'.

So what precisely does it mean that oblivion is the symptom of philosophy? The use of the psychoanalytic premise regarding the symptom as structured by language has significant implications to this effect. The crucial implication being that as a symptom, oblivion does not signify a hidden illness. Oblivion does not mean that there is something 'wrong' with philosophy and that 'something' should be fixed or cured in it - so that philosophy may stop

forgetting and exist in the realm of pure remembering. That is, philosophy's oblivion of its core question, the question of Being, is structural. This means that as a symptom it may seem contingent but its constant repetition reveals it as unavoidable, a 'solution' which philosophy cannot but be 'pushed' towards upon encountering the structural impossibility of the question of Being.

A Symptom

The entanglement of Being and language which creates oblivion as its symptom .1 requires that we first articulate what the symptom is; following Freud, Lacan's understanding of the symptom is in linguistic terms: 'The symptom resolves itself entirely in an analysis of language, because the symptom is itself structured like a language'.¹ This definition of the symptom is crucial because it defines the symptom in its relation to the structure (of language) rather than in terms of surface and depth; the symptom isn't the perceptible manifestation of a hidden illness (as it is referred to by medicine for example) but is a formation of the unconscious. As such, the symptom cannot or actually should not be treated as one which can simply be removed or 'hushed up' since it is a product of the Subject's (*parle être*) particular encounter with language. It cannot be conceived of as pre-pared set of neurosis indexed and catalogued, for it is constructed as such by the Subject's speech; the Subject speaks his symptom but he doesn't know what he says by it. Indeed, it is the dialectic of analysis that constructs the symptom as such.² Therefore, the symptom is an enigmatic and opaque message delivered to the Other which neither the Other nor the Subject himself know what is being 'delivered' by it. This Subject possesses an object of knowledge that he does not know how to know and this *not knowing how to know* binds the Subject's being to language. As such, the Subject's being is not present in what the Subject as speaker says, since the ego or the "I" is not the only authority that determines the Subject's being. It is for this reason that psychoanalysis reveals the existence of a structural split between what the Subject knows or says

concerning being and being 'itself', a split that is embodied in the very fact of speaking.

The symptom, which is structured like a language, represents the unbearable for the Subject. It constitutes a solution, an unconscious and a failed one, for an impossible kernel of the Subject's psychic life; the impossibility to bear being (*se faire a être*).³

Language and Being

We know by now that it is the interweaving of language with Being that unavoidably creates oblivion as a symptom. To this effect I turn us to Heidegger's claim that: 'We are within language, at home in language, prior to everything else.'⁴ which raises the question of why we need to find our way to language? as he demands from us.

We will need to recall Heidegger's discussion of idle talk in order to try and answer this question.⁵ Idle talk conceals from the Dasein 'the word's primordial belongingness to Being'.⁶ This concealment necessitates a way. But, at the same time, the concealment of 'the word's primordial belongingness to Being' appears as unavoidable, since Dasein is thrown to the discourse of idle talk (as we all are). 'Language is the house of Being', Heidegger writes there and it is the belongingness of the word to Being that is being concealed from Dasein. But this concealment 'is peculiar to language [...] itself' as he will write later.⁷ We therefore remain in need of way to language that will unveil this very fact of concealment. Thus, the always-already being- at-home in language is a formulation that actually unveils our being guests. In other words it unveils the ontological fact of our being-at-home (in language) as semblance. Relative to the discursive mode of idle talk, Being appears a guest in language, a guest which overly feels at home, a guest who isn't aware of his status as such. It is Heidegger's demand of a way to language that reminds us of our being guests, reminds us of the primordial fact that constitutes us; our being 'within language, at home in language, prior to everything else'.⁸

The way, which is to say, the state of being in need of formulating a way, attests to the discontent that is built-in into our 'being at home' in language (we may add, in being 'at home'

in general), a discontent that idle talk aims unconsciously to hush up. It appears that to be at-home is actually to be a guest without knowing it. And it is Heidegger who tells us:

'Homelessness is the symptom of oblivion of Being. Because of it the truth of Being remains unthought [...]. This homelessness is specifically evoked from the destiny of Being in the form of metaphysics, and through metaphysics is simultaneously entrenched and covered up as such.'⁹

Homelessness as symptom can be explicated also in light of the way in which Heidegger draws the primordial status of the mood of 'uncanniness' in its relation to the mood of the 'at-homeness': 'From an existential-ontological point of view, the "not at-home" must be conceived as the more primordial phenomenon.'¹⁰ Heidegger emphasizes that despite its primordiality, 'uncanniness' is a mood that is left concealed, forgotten from us who mostly lacks an ontological understanding of it.¹¹ Moreover, as primordial mood, uncanniness draws the impossibility of the "at-homeness" for it discloses the being 'at-home' as semblance that in the greater context of *Being and Time* protect Dasein from another primordial mood, that of anxiety.¹²

The ontological primordiality of uncanniness, 'whether it is understood or not', actually transgresses the possibility of Being to dwell in language, unless we consider the 'dwelling' as embodied through and through by the subverting status of 'being a guest'. Meaning, the always-already dwelling in idle talk, the embodiment of 'being at-home' is not the Other pole of uncanniness. Idle talk which represents the being at-home as semblance is a structural and necessary blindness for protecting us from anxiety. Protecting us from the fact of our being guests: 'That kind of Being-in-the-world [everyday manner] which is tranquillized and familiar is a mode of Dasein's uncanniness, not the reverse'.¹³

The primordiality of the mood of uncanniness is embodied in the primordiality of the discourse of silence. This primordiality to which we are thrown is interweaved through and through in the projective function of language. But it is this projective function of language

(as house, as that of 'being-at-home') which creates a split between Being and 'itself' ; a split which is rooted in the very fact of speech. This fact locates Being within the liminal topos of language, as a conditional resident, that is, a guest. The unbearable of this ontological fact that is disguised by being at-home pushes us to forget. It means that to dwell in language is nothing but to dwell in oblivion.

Oblivion of Being

The fact of our being a guest in language is the cause of the split between Being and language, a split which is structural and inherently present in the Heideggerian dictum: 'what is peculiar to language thus conceals itself'.¹⁴ The persisting testimony of this split is the very fact of oblivion. Therefore, oblivion cannot be negated on the basis of the relation between Being and language.

Within the context of psychoanalytic thought that may offer us an explication of oblivion as an unavoidable symptom, namely as what enables, from the start to ask the question of Being, let us consider Lacan's words in Seminar 17 in this light: 'The lack of forgetting is the same thing as the lack in being, since being is nothing other than forgetting.'¹⁵

This puzzling citation refers to something that goes against our "intuitive" understanding regarding the relation between Being and its oblivion; here, being appears as identical to forgetting. But if we are to return to Heidegger's claim concerning the oblivion of Being we are required rather to remember. The equation of forgetfulness and being as it is referred by Lacan undermines this understanding; since 'being is forgetting', namely, its necessary consequence is the subversion of thinking about remembering and forgetting as opposing terms. Within the psychoanalytic context, (as well as within the Heideggerian context) we always-already dwell in forgetfulness, and as such we always already dwell in Being 'since being is nothing other than forgetting'.

If being is nothing but forgetting, it cannot be forgotten, we may say it is unforgettable. If so, the modes of Being's oblivion are the only ones that enable some accessibility to it. We may think of this in recalling Freud's claim when he writes about the analytic scene:

'Forgetting impressions, scenes or experiences nearly always reduce itself to shutting them off. When the patient talks about these 'forgotten' things he seldom fails to add: "As a matter of fact I've always known it; only I've never thought of it."' ¹⁶

Remembering appears to be realized in what could not be forgotten from the start; in the always-already known and yet the un-thought of. Therefore if we think of remembering, we are, in effect, remembering the repressed that which could not be forgotten. Indeed we must acknowledge that **the repression, as well as the forgotten, is actually a form of remembrance.** 'The forgotten' enables the construction of remembering ('I've always known it; only I've never thought of it'). Notice, the object that is remembered necessitates its being constructed, as that which cannot appear without the linguistic articulation, without the signifier.

Forgetfulness, it would seem, does not 'disappear' when replaced by remembering, but rather testifies the split within Being, within the known and the un-thought of. To know without thinking of the known is to forget. And to forget means nothing but to-be. ¹⁷

As represented within the psychoanalytic context, remembering actually serves as an affirmation of Being in the form of its denial, in the form of its oblivion. That is, it represents the place in which the Subject of the unconscious does not identify himself. Being isn't 'represented' by language but language appears at the moment it encounters being. It is the realm that comes to pass after this encounter which the analytic situation tries to trace.

There is a structural split between the 'speaking being', the Subject of the signifier (the one who remembers, the one whose 'case' is being constructed) and the place of Being. Therefore, we may claim that the construction does not bridge this split but draws to the limits of its truth: 'a truth that lies in oblivion'. ¹⁸

Freud presents the "construction" as a form of articulation for a forgotten chapter in the history of the analysand. The construction is not correspondingly a linguistic representation of the forgotten content, which neither the analysand nor the analyst has access to, but rather functions beforehand as a substitute for what *could not have been forgotten* (I've always known it; only I've never thought of it). The always-already known knowledge yet unthought-of locates the forgotten as that which cannot come to light without the construction.

It is for this reason that the "construction" in analysis, despite its structural incompleteness 'should nevertheless produce a complete result' as Freud tells us.¹⁹

But what is this 'complete result' which Freud speaks of? It is that which is analyzed in light of the construction's effects; if in proximity to the presentation of the construction by the analyst there is an appearance of 'lively recollections [...] which they themselves [analysands] have described as "ultra-clear"', dreams, 'states resembling fantasies' or day-dreams that relate directly or indirectly to the construction's content. In such cases the construction appears retroactively as true.²⁰ Which is to say, the construction's status as true or false is not determined by its correspondence to the historical facts, or by the correctness of the analyst's interpretations, but only in light of its effects.

It is the Freudian construction's structure which makes of it the subverting materiality which undercuts the dichotomy between the forgotten\ old and the remembered\ new. This subversion is crucial when taking into consideration the equivalency between being and forgetting, which reveals the 'remembered' as that which is 'always-already' 'there'. The undermining of the forgotten/remembered dichotomy drives us towards an understanding of the nature of the oblivion of Being. Since, to remember or to recollect the question of Being doesn't demand to invent something new. This clearly echoes Heidegger's formulation of the 'way' (to language); the 'way' is neither new nor old, it is a way which 'we are already at the place to which it is supposed to lead us'.²¹ A way, to language as well as to the forgotten,

which demands of us to approach the saying as *Sagan* ; that which 'let something appear, let it be seen and heard'.²²

Reading Heidegger's assertion concerning the oblivion of Being in juxtaposition with the identity psychoanalysis draws between being and forgetting leads up to these two positions: both claiming that being can be dealt with only through its modes of forgetfulness which are revealed by language.

When Heidegger claims that we have forgotten the question of Being he does not ask to exile oblivion but to disclose it as such. This is actually what characterizes his mode of argumentation when he writes that the way he raises the question of Being asks to be distinguished from the 'arrogant presumption that wishes to begin anew and declares all past philosophy false'.²³ Meaning, the very raising of the question of Being does not mean to negate its oblivion and replace it with remembering, or to refute metaphysics.²⁴ Rather, it means to draw or to construct the cause of oblivion with the weight on the operation of language that 'already hides in itself a developed way of conceiving'.²⁵

If we think of this in conjunction with Freud's concept of 'construction' we may come to see how the construction functions as unavoidable substitute for the forgotten, and so it remains. Since the construction is an invention which traces a psychic history not a factual history, its purpose is to unveil the cause of oblivion and not to function as a corresponding articulation of the forgotten. The forgotten, therefore does not disappear, excluded or negated, but rather becomes constructed. Freud's description of the structure of the construction as incomplete one which at the same time is expected to provide complete results, refers to the forgotten as a structural eclipse, an unavoidable one, which manifests its unavoidability in the relation drawn by Heidegger between metaphysics and the oblivion of the question of Being. In one of Heidegger's many characterizations of metaphysics he writes that: 'Metaphysics has not only failed up to now to ask this question [the question of Being], the question is inaccessible to metaphysics as such'.²⁶ What is meant herein is that metaphysics's structure always-already

prevents it from asking the question of Being. Awareness as to the oblivion of Being is concealed from metaphysics. However, Heidegger later adds:

'this concealment is not a defect of metaphysics but a treasure withheld from it yet held before it, the treasure of its own proper wealth.'²⁷

The structural inability to ask the question of being while simultaneously referring to Being as metaphysics' "own proper wealth" directly speaks to the unavoidability of oblivion. An unavoidability that reconstructs oblivion as its symptom. Thinking of oblivion as a symptom means that Heidegger's claim with regard to the oblivion of being may not refer the possibility to remember it. As a symptom, oblivion is nothing but a movement of forced repetition that philosophy cannot but constantly repeat.

Indeed, if we consider the symptom as it appears within the psychoanalytic thought; that which is not an interruption or an obstacle to an operation of a system but rather, the center of the neurotic's complaint, we may come to see how the symptom, how oblivion, 'represents' the impossibility of existence as experienced by the Subject of who asks analysis. Or, in line with Freud the symptom is also an invention, an unconscious attempt to handle the impossible: a coping mechanism that causes suffer but is also 'surprisingly satisfying' and therefore need not be 'removed' or cured but need be done with, need *savoir-faire* with.

The oblivion of Being is the invention of philosophy to deal with the structural impossibility that arises upon encountering the question of Being. For oblivion, as inherent to philosophy, which cannot raise from within it the question of being, has a positive function in the process of its becoming. Indeed, it is oblivion that enables the becoming of philosophy, from its very start.

¹ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits* (translated by Bruce Fink, Heloise Fink and Russell Grigg W.W.Norton & Company New York London 2006), 59

² Sigmund Freud, "The Sense of Symptoms": *Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis* (translated by Alix Strachey, Cox & Wyman Ltd 1975)

³ Colette Soler, "Transference.": *Reading Seminars I and II: Lacan's Return to Freud*, (ed. Richard Feldstein, Bruce Fink, and Maire Jaanus., Albany: State University of New York Press,

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- 1996), 58
- ⁴ Martin Heidegger, "The way to language": *Basic Writings* (ed. David Farrell Krell ,Harper Collins Publishers, New York 1993), 398
- ⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* (translated by John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, Harper Collins Publishers 1962), sec. 27, 35
- ⁶ Ibid, 222
- ⁷ Heidegger 1993, 418
- ⁸ ibid, 398
- ⁹ Martin Heidegger, "Letter on Humanism": *Basic Writings* (ed. David Farrell Krell ,Harper Collins Publishers, New York 1993), 242-243
- ¹⁰ Heidegger 1962,189
- ¹¹ ibid, 190, 277
- ¹² ibid, 192
- ¹³ ibid, 189
- ¹⁴ Heidegger 1993,413
- ¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis Book 17* (translated by Russell Grigg, W.W. Norton&Company Ney York London 2007), 52
- ¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through": Freud vol. 12 (The Hogarth Press 1995), 148
- ¹⁷ Lacan 2007, 52
- ¹⁸ Heidegger 1993,244
- ¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, "Construction in Analysis"(1937), 266
- ²⁰ ibid
- ²¹ Heidegger 1993, 'Way to Language', 398
- ²² Ibid,409
- ²³ Heidegger 1993, 240
- ²⁴ Ibid, 239
- ²⁵ Heidegger 1962, 157 and also Heidegger 1993, 223
- ²⁶ Heidegger 1993, 227
- ²⁷ Ibid, 235

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