

THE SUBTLETIES OF A FAULTY ACTION

(1935)

I was preparing a birthday present for a woman friend - a small engraved gem for insertion into a ring. It was fixed in the centre of a piece of stout cardboard and on this I wrote the following words: 'Voucher for the supply by Messrs. L., jewellers, of a gold ring . . . for the attached stone bearing an engraved ship with sail and oars.' But at the point at which I have here left a gap, between 'ring' and 'for' there stood a word which I was obliged to cross out since it was entirely irrelevant. It was the little word 'bis'. Why should I have written it at all?

When I read the short inscription through, I was struck by the fact that it contained the word 'für' twice in rapid succession: 'for the supply' - 'for the attached stone'. That sounded ugly and should be avoided. It then occurred to me that 'bis' had been substituted for 'für' in an attempt to escape this stylistic awkwardness. No doubt that was so; but it was an attempt that made use of remarkably inadequate means. The preposition 'bis'

was quite out of place in this context and could not possibly be substituted for the necessary 'für'. So why precisely 'bis'?

But perhaps the word 'bis' was not the preposition determining a time-limit. It may have been something totally different - the Latin 'bis' - 'for a second time', which has retained its meaning in French. 'Ne bis in idem' is a maxim of Roman law. 'Bis! bis!' cries a Frenchman if he wants a performance repeated. So that must be the explanation of my senseless slip of the pen. I was being warned against the second 'für', against a repetition of the same word. Something else must be put instead of it. The chance identity in sound between the foreign word 'bis' which embodied the criticism of the original phraseology and the German preposition made it possible to insert 'bis' instead of 'für' as though by a slip of the pen. But this mistake gained its purpose not by being made, but only after it had been corrected. I had to cross out the 'bis' and in so doing I had myself, so to speak, done away with the repetition which was disturbing me. A variant, not without interest, of the mechanism of a parapraxis!

I felt very much pleased with this solution. But in self-analysis the danger of incompleteness is particularly great. One is too soon satisfied with a part explanation, behind which resistance may easily be keeping back something that is more important perhaps. I related this little analysis to my daughter, and she immediately saw how it went on:

'But you gave her a stone like that for a ring once before. That's probably the repetition you want to avoid. One doesn't like always to be making the same present.' I was convinced by this; the objection was obviously to a repetition of the same present, not of the same word. There had been a displacement on to something trivial with the object of diverting attention from something more important: an aesthetic difficulty, perhaps, in place of an instinctual conflict.

For it was easy to discover the further sequel. I was looking for a motive for not making a present of the stone, and that motive was provided by the reflection that I had already made the same (or a very similar) present. Why should this objection have been concealed and disguised? Very soon I saw clearly why. I wanted not to give the stone away at all. I liked it very much myself.

The explanation of this parapraxis was found without raising any great difficulties. Indeed, a consoling thought soon occurred to me: regrets of this kind only enhance the value of a gift. What sort of gift would it be if one were not a little bit sorry to part with it? Nevertheless the episode enables one to realize once more how complicated the most unobtrusive and apparently simplest mental processes may be. I made a slip in writing out some instructions - put in a 'bis' where a 'für' was needed - I noticed it and corrected it: a small mistake, or rather attempt at a mistake, and yet based upon this large number of premisses and dynamic determinants! Indeed, the mistake could not have occurred if the material had not been particularly favourable.