

Guy Le Gaufey

The title *Bé-voir*, to the English speaking reader, might seem to be yet another French term, one perhaps brought to prominence in psychoanalysis by Jacques Lacan. To the French speaker, however, this word might resonate even more strangely than it does in English. The reason for this is that this term does not exist in French and it will not be found in any dictionary. As it emerges through a reading of this paper, this word is an invention by Le Gaufey himself. *Bé-voir* is the form of the verb that could be derived from *bévue*, as pointed out by our translator Nicole Chavannes. *Bévue* is the blunder by which Lacan comes to define the unconscious.

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The *bévue* [blunder] as linguistic good fortune [*bonheur de langue*]

If the matter stopped at the word *bévue*, it would easily be dealt with, and to our advantage. We could agree to put it to generalised use, for example to translate an English expression which has its own reason and logic, the Freudian slip, which fails when translated literally as *lapsus freudien*. For a Freudian slip is not only a *lapsus*: it is the slippage, the faux-pas, the error due to lack of attention, the oversight, in short, the *bévue*. Yet the reason why the English invented the Freudian slip is exactly the same as the one which in French led to the success of the expression *manifestations de l'inconscient* [manifestations of the unconscious]. Whatever language one speaks, one needs, it seems, a generic expression to designate the cohort of modes according to which the unconscious is said to intervene in our existence, all the more so because that list is inherently not closed. If it were closed I could, simply by enumerating it, exhaust it [*en venir à bout*]: but because it is not, we need an expression that subsumes that diversity to the point of embedding the “etc” which robs it of its closure. That is what the Freudian slip does: it encompasses the *lapsus linguae et calami*, the forgetting of words and names, the bungled actions, the joke or witticism [*mot d'esprit*], etc. They are all Freudian slips, even if each is also designated by a particular word (the dream retains a place apart, slightly outside this designation). And since a *slip* is *ein Slip* in German, let us not doubt that this dizzying return towards the most crudely genital sexuality would have pleased Freud: *der Freudian (freudig?) Slip*.

For their part, the Americans, always careful to distinguish themselves [*se singulariser*] on the English language scene, have pushed the British *slip* to the *slip-up* which somewhat overdoes the phallic side of this operation of fall-rise up [*chute-redressement*] to the point that the *Robert and Collins* dictionary kindly warns us that it is a colloquial word: *There has been a slip-up*: there was a muddle somewhere. But with the slip-up, however perfectly audible for any subject of her British Majesty, we remain within the blunder, the gaffe, the error.

This little visit over the English Channel and over the Atlantic completed, let us plunge back into the French *bévue*, perhaps armed with the information that it may well be a generic term capable of replacing our very heavy-handed *manifestation de l'inconscient* which supposes, by itself, a kind of epiphany of an obscure god, the Unconscious, which, here and there, shows itself to its astonished subjects. And what would it do the rest of the time? Be immersed in a big sleep, the “*Freudian sleep*”. No, one has to get back to *bévue*, armed this time with the *Littré* dictionary: the *bévue*, it tells us straight away, is “an error committed by ignorance or oversight”. Precious distinction! Whether my knowledge on a particular point where my speech ventures is non-existent or just unavailable, I will be equally prone to a *bévue*. And having written this, *Littré* feels obliged to take a heavily didactic tone to which it is unaccustomed:

Synonyms of *Bévue*: Mistake [*méprise*], Error [*erreur*]. Error is a general term; it indicates any kind of failure [*manquement*], whatever its character. The *bévue*, in which there is the word *vue* [view, sight], indicates that one has mis-seen [*mal vu*]. The *méprise* in which there is the word *prise* [take], indicates that one has mis-taken [*mal pris*]. To mis-take, or not to take well, not to choose well, can be the fault of the objects presented to me as much as my own; consequently the *méprise* does not necessarily imply my being guilty of inattention or lack of seriousness. But to mis-see implies that it is I who has failed to see as I should have; *bévue*, therefore, supposes in me oversight, passion, blindness.

Etymology: *Bé*, prefix with a pejorative sense, and *vue*; properly speaking: false view, bad eyesight.

This pejorative prefix does indeed exist but poses considerable difficulty. The same dictionary, the *TLF*² to not name it, gives us in its explanation of the etymology of the word *bévue* and as an example of the pejorative function of *bé-*, *bes-*, or *bis-*, the word *balourd* [clumsy, oafish] which might come from *beslourd*. But under *Balourd* we learn that “the hypothesis according to which *balourd* may come from *beslourd* poses a difficulty given the disparity of the meanings”. Would we then have more luck with the other example of the *TLF*, in the same place, which is none other than *berlue* [*j'ai la berlue*: I must be seeing things] possibly formed from our pejorative prefix *bé-* having become *ber-* in the current circumstance and by *lue* which comes from *lucere*, *luire* [to shine]: the *berlue*, the false light? Nonsense, the *TLF* (not afraid to contradict itself) and Bloch and Wartburg say at the same time: *berlue* comes from *binette* [little spark], itself derived from the ancient Provençal *beluga*, itself yet another deformation of *famfaluca* as, from the time of the Bas- Empire³ onwards, the prefix *famfa* got slowly transformed, according to a strange alchemy, into *bi-* or *bis-*.

Therefore, without being able to totally invalidate the fragile hypothesis of the pejorative prefix *bé-*, I will allow myself to present another one: a *bévue* [fastidious person] is not someone who has a *sale gueule* [ugly face], it is someone who *bée de la gueule* [has their mouth wide open/ whose jaw dropped] – and *gueule* [mouth, face] having become quite vulgar nowadays (which it was not in the Middle Ages), we have to say with *Littré*: “*Bévue*: woman with mouth agape, attitude which, it is true, expresses amazement, but

also stupidity, therefore *bévueulerie*". Why then is Littré so reticent to admit that astonishment and stupidity are sometimes indistinguishable?

The question remains: is the *bé-* of *bévue* so different from the *bé-* of *bévueule*? The *bévue*: *la vue qui bé* [the view/sight that gapes], the *vue béante* [gaping view]. It can happen that one gapes with something other than the mouth, and with the eyes in the first instance. But at the same time a *vue béante*, the eyes wide open, is also sometimes a way of not seeing, of missing; of that we have a clear indication in the German word *Übersehen*, formed by the (non-pejorative) prefix *über* [over] and the verb to see: *übersehen* is primarily to embrace with one's gaze, to dominate. The *Übersicht* is the overview, the summary. With this semantic family one can soon imagine being in the middle of a vocabulary of mastery. But opposite meanings not being the privilege of primitive words, *übersehen* is also: to not see, to not notice, to miss, neglect, omit. Only a nuance of accent – very audible to the natives of course – makes the difference in which the foreigner errs and commits... his *bévue*. Similarly, *Übersichtlichkeit* is order, clarity of exposition, whereas *Übersichtigkeit* is long-sightedness.

Littré, him again, points out that there is only one form of the verb *bayer* [to look up in the air stupidly with one's mouth open] not to be confused with *bâiller* [to yawn], to such an extent that our great lexicographer recommends a different pronunciation to mark the disparity between the two verbs: "it would be desirable that the pronunciation of this verb (*bayer*) be *bé-ier* and not *ba-ier*, as much because of the analogy with *payer* [pronounce as the English 'pay'] and of the ancient spelling and pronunciation *béer* as to distinguish it from *bâiller*". The first meaning of *bayer*, "to keep one's mouth open *while staring at something*" [in italics in French] might retain our interest as much as the second meaning: "to desire something with great avidity". But I could have done without the detour via the German verb *übersehen* since the old French verb *bayer* has also been able to sustain contradictory meanings. Indeed we are indebted to it for the word *baie* [bay], "indentation of a coast whose entrance is narrow (the bay of Mont Saint-Michel)", but also: "opening in a wall or a building framework to make way for a door, a window"; we are also indebted to it for "*balise*" [beacon] which comes directly from the ancient French *bail*, a word which at the time designated "he who gazes attentively", out of which also came "*baliveau*", name given to the tree marked by the woodcutter to delimit a cut. Do not see in this any *baliverne* [twaddle], although this latter word, via slightly convoluted paths, also comes from *bluette* [witty little piece – of writing].

For all those excellent reasons – and a few more – I propose that *bévue* be indeed considered like a *mal voir* [a mis-seeing] but akin to the kind of distraction that is designated by the verb *bayer*: to remain open-mouthed while staring at something fixedly to the point of not seeing it. The present participle of the verb *béer*, which has remained solidly implanted in our current language with the adjective *béant* [gaping] (which itself has generated the so psychoanalytic and so Lacanian "*béance*") went as far as designating the army of those who *bayent*. Victor Hugo: "And the *béant* [gaping] populations could do nothing but remain silent". One therefore has to consider as a mistake the French expression "*rester béat d'admiration*" [to be struck dumb with admiration] and correct it with: "*rester béant d'admiration*" [to be agape with admiration]. The *Robert* dictionary writes as the second meaning of the word, after the obvious one of "wide open", "*Béant*: someone who has their mouth or eyes wide open". Our attention is drawn – last affectation – to an absolute use (without grammatical object) of that word found in Victor Hugo: "*les commères accouraient béantes*" [the gossipmongers were running up agape].

Bévue therefore suits us to the extent that it would be very worthwhile to include it in our terminology. With a slight regret regarding the fact that the French language has not thought

of producing the verb *bévoir*, and is content to refer us to the all too pejorative “*commettre*” [to commit]: the only thing I can do with a *bévue* is to commit it.

***L’Unebévue* as a “*bon mot*” [joke/witticism] of Jacques Lacan**

Such relative linguistic good fortune disappears almost totally with the term *unebévue* [oneblunder]. For now I will not say anything about the fact that it ensures, in Lacan’s eyes, the passage into French of the Freudian *Unbewusste*, as I am initially less interested in the operation that produced it than in the way in which it exists and engenders effects of meaning in the French language. “*Unebévue*” is indeed a neologism with a very unusual formation, notably in that it plays on the prefix not the suffix. In addition, when this prefix is itself an article, the problem of the alliteration immediately becomes an obstacle. The sound of the word is no more fortunate: except for unanimous [*unanime*] and words derived from it, we have almost nothing else that starts with “*une*” – the numerous “*uni-*” immediately sounding quite differently. Remaining close to these – it is unusual enough for it to be noticed – are the very Lacanian “unary” [*unaire*] and “unian” [*unien*]. One of the rare attractions of *l’unebévue* may be to signal from the start that a *bévue* can only ever occur one by one, in other words it emphasises the “act” aspect of the matter. Where the unconscious admirably endures, *l’unebévue* slips away almost by definition... to make room for the next one. The temporal dimension, the time elapsed, would be directly audible with the sole utterance of the word “*unebévue*”; but by the same token one has to admit that the word “*bévue*” achieves the same result. What is the point then of promoting the word “*unebévue*”? What is it that “*unebévue*” designates, signifies, effects in French that “*bévue*” would not?

As “*unebévue*” is not a very loquacious neologism, I now find myself obliged to go back to the time of its production when Lacan thought it right to thus rename Freud’s *das Unbewusste*. He said it, that’s for sure. But on the 5th February 1964, among other examples, the same Lacan was saying all at once: “But we can immediately give them, those *Wahrnehmungszeichen*, their true name: signifiers”. Must we then conclude that “signifier” translates *Wahrnehmungszeichen*, that one can be replaced by the other *salva veritate*? Certainly not, and the translation of *Wahrnehmungszeichen* by “signs of perception” [*signes de perception*] remains far preferable. This takes nothing away from Lacan’s remark, quite enlightening in itself, in this passage dedicated to a brief commentary of the letter called 52; but it is certainly not a matter of translation. If “*unebévue*” is also to be taken as the “true name” of what Freud may have been trying to say with the term *das Unbewusste*, can we so easily flow into the enunciative position that Lacan takes up all through the seminar *L’insu que sait de l’unebévue s’aile à mourre*?

According to the logic well outlined by Freud on the subject, the pleasure yielded from a joke [*mot d’esprit*] quite irresistibly leads the one who has listened to it to repeat it straight away. The joke, one could say, has no owner, only agents. However, the following also often occurs: you have heard x tell a joke, you can’t wait to spread it around, but at the moment of telling it to others you will be obliged to preface it with: “You know what x said?”. This can be due to the fact that the joke is strictly circumstantial and only valid within the specific context of its first utterance; or that the personality of x is such that it cannot be erased in the general economy of the joke (this is the case with numerous “*mots*” of De Gaulle). But there remain many cases in which the joke does not succeed, or only poorly, in gaining the enunciative anonymity which would give it a normal regime required for linguistic circulation; here we find ourselves on the border zone between *Witz* and witticism [*bon mot*]. *L’unebévue* is of that ilk, notably in that it is hard to see how it could become autonomous in relation to *das Unbewusste* which it attacks violently. Multiple examples of identical jokes are given by

Freud in the *Witz*; amongst others is one regarding a very anti-imperialist Italian poet who, in his later years, felt obliged to celebrate the merits of a German emperor, earning him this rude remark: “Since he could not eliminate the Caesars [*Césars*], he at least eliminated the caesuras [*césures*]”. What does it mean “eliminate the caesuras”? Not much! But when it is put together with “eliminating the Caesars”, the very poor signification of “eliminating the caesuras” triggers a kind of electric arc: that such close signifiers may carry such different significations, *as weak as each one is in isolation* [in italics in French], for us it is enough to ensure, this time *at the level of meaning* [*sens*], a bolt of surprise.

In this sense *l’unebévüe* is a good joke [*bon mot d’esprit*]. One can be convinced of it by simply looking at how it could be translated into another language – German for example. The signature of the *Witz* is very often its extreme resistance to translation. The fact that this same word *unebévüe* generates effects of sense in the language in which it is expressed, French in this instance, is therefore undeniable but only if it continues to be next to the word *Unbewusste*. The fact that we do not quite manage to bend this word *unebévüe* into a conceptual functioning – as can be done with that other neologism “unary”, it too being more or less translatable [*traductif*] – directly contravenes its autonomisation in the French language.

However, in the mid seventies *unebévüe* designated the mode of Jacques Lacan’s hate-love [*hainamoureuse*] proximity to this mass of statements that was called, for him as for us today, “Freud”. Hence we can study the term *unebévüe* and its surroundings as one can study a map before going on a trip. We shall gain much more from it than useful information: we may perhaps better approach [*cerner*] one of the rare questionings that Lacan made, to all appearance via Freud, of his own teachings of years past. But since no map is able to designate by itself where North is, neither magnetic nor geographic, its ultimate utility will depend on our capacity to orient it correctly.

Translated by Nicole Chavannes, Member of the Freudian School of Melbourne (many thanks to Michael Plastow, Analyst of the School, for all his helpful suggestions).

¹ http://www.lacaninireland.com/web/?page_id=129

References

- ² Translator’s Note: *Trésor de la Langue Française*: dictionary in 13 volumes of 19th and 20th century French.
- ³ T.N.: Period in Roman history (284-476) that followed military anarchy (235-284) and was marked by the restoration of imperial power, the coming apart of the Empire between Orient and Occident and the progressive victory of Christianity.