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# Holocaust Memory and the Inhuman: Traumatic Repetition between Freud and de Man

> Uns geht es anders, uns lassen sie nicht locker, die Gespenster, mein ich. Wir erwarten, daß Ungelöstes gelöst wird, wenn man nur beharrlich festhält an dem, was übrig blieb, dem Ort, den Steinen, der Asche. Nicht die *Toten* ehren wir mit diesen unschönen, unscheinbaren Resten vergangener Verbrechen, wir sammeln und bewahren sie, weil *wir* sie irgendwie brauchen: Sollen sie etwa unser Unbehagen erst beschwören, dann beschwichtigen? Der ungelöste Knoten, den so ein verletztes Tabu wie Massenmord, Kindermord hinterläßt, verwandelt sich zum unerlösten Gespenst, dem wir eine Art Heimat gewähren, wo es spuken darf. Ängstliches Abgrenzen gegen mögliche Vergleiche, Bestehen auf der Einmaligkeit des Verbrechens. Nie wieder soll es geschehen. Dasselbe geschieht sowieso nicht zweimal, insofern ist alles Geschehen, wie jeder Mensch und sogar jeder Hund, einmalig. Abgekapselte Monaden wären wir, gäbe es nicht den Vergleich und die Unterscheidung, Brücken von Einmaligkeit zu Einmaligkeit. Im Grunde wissen wir alle, Juden wie Christen: Teile dessen, was in den KZs geschah, wiederholt sich vielerorts, heute und gestern, und die KZs waren selbst Nachahmungen (freilich einmalige Nachahmungen) von Vorgestrigem.
>
> Ruth Klüger, *weiter leben*

Ruth Klüger writes that the ghosts of the Holocaust never let her relax (70). She gathers and preserves these "unseemly residues" of past crimes, not because she honors the dead, but because she needs them. The traces left behind by the breaking of taboos against mass murder including the murder of children metamorphose into a "restless ghost" [*unerlösten Gespenst*] which she grants a kind of homeland [in the mind] "to haunt as it may."

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Klüger's reflections invite us to pose a difficult question. What are we to make of a survivor's seemingly masochistic need to revisit ghastly images either remembered or imagined? Dominick LaCapra observes that "[t]hose traumatized by extreme events, as well those empathizing with them, may resist working through because of what might almost be termed a fidelity to trauma, a feeling that one must somehow keep faith with it." LaCapra adds:

> Part of this feeling may be the melancholic sentiment that, in working through the past in a manner that enables survival or a reengagement in life, one is betraying those who were overwhelmed and consumed by that traumatic past. One's bond with the dead, especially with dead intimates, may invest trauma with value and make its reliving a painful but necessary commemoration or memorial to which one remains dedicated or at least bound. (2001, 22)

Yet Klüger denies that her hauntings serve to memorialize her father and other intimates even as her written testimony affirms over and over again the irredeemable brutality that terminated the lives of her friends, neighbors, and relatives. What seems to be at stake for Klüger is the way in which the dead also embody dimensions of her former life and identity. Mourning their murders is intimately connected with the idea of lost selves.

The experience of surviving the death camps was dominated by the urgent necessity of remaining vigilant against imminent starvation, fatal weakness, and murder. This crucial self-preservative vigilance continues to goad the survivor as she defends the traumatic meaning of bereavement on a genocidal scale against the disbelief and insensitivity of outsiders. In this respect, the silence of survivors may be sometimes understood as a historical symptom of a "wound culture," as Mark Seltzer (1998) has called it, wherein disbelief is merely the flip side of a salacious fascination with the transgressive horror of mass murder. In the face of this disbelief and this intrusive fascination, a survivor's traumatic memory becomes charged anew with self-preservative anxiety. This anxiety is a *somatic force* behind a survivor's compulsively repeated reconstructions of the murdered and her own experiences of persecution. When traumatic images are charged with belated self-preservative anxiety, they may become over-valued and fixed; in this

idealized form, they orient an impossible mimetic desire to regulate and reconvene the affective presence of the past.[1] In the 1990s, analysts of

1 Ruth Leys makes a valuable critical intervention when she problematizes the mimetic and anti-mimetic models that vex trauma studies. See in particular her "Introduction" to *Trauma: A Genealogy*" and her chapter on Caruth, "The Pathos of the Literal: Trauma and the Crisis of Representation" (1-17, 266-97). Leys notes that, in the beginning, when it was theorized via hypnosis, "trauma was understood as an experience that immersed the victim in the traumatic scene so profoundly that it precluded the kind of specular distance necessary for cognitive knowledge of what had happened" (Leys 9). Proponents of the "antimimetic" model on the other hand tend "to regard trauma as if it were a purely external event coming to a sovereign if passive victim" (10). Her discussion touches on Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen's substitution of the term *mimesis* for imitation in his reading of Freud in *The Freudian Subject* (1988). She also analyzes Borch-Jacobsen's critique of Freud's concept of trauma in her chapter, "The Hysterical Lie: Ferenczi and the Problem of Simulation" (153-89). See also in this connection Borch-Jacobsen's *The Emotional Tie: Psychoanalysis, Mimesis, Affect* (1993). In *The Freudian Subject: From Ethics to Politics* (15-35), Borch-Jacobsen criticizes Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis for a tendency to "interpret narcissistic desire along the same lines as desire; they subscribe to a certain autointerpretation of desire, whereas desire is precisely a *desire to be a subject*, a desire to be oneself for oneself." He goes on to claim that the "submission" of psychoanalysis to the paradigm of the subject is itself narcissistic in character. This is to suggest that "psychoanalysis in its essence is deeply narcissistic and that it reinstates, sometimes in the forms of a caricature, the old but always new question of the subject" (24). Though my own model is, perhaps, guilty of reanimating this narcissistic circularity, it is in the name of understanding how the traumatized themselves remain ideologically governed by it. Critical distance from this paradigm in the form of a critique of the critique of the subject should not be made into a ground for dismissing the power of this ideology (in other words, it is not merely theories, but individuals who narcissistically invest in idealized notions of subjective mastery). In extrapolating from Freud's understanding of repetition, I nevertheless reject the assumption that mimetic identification with an idealized memory is necessarily conscious or that it can successfully propel "catharsis." Instead, I want to emphasize what I am calling a "mimetic cathexis" among some traumatized subjects in order to enunciate primary and secondary narcissistic identifications with and investments in the *idea* of a lost memory presence — the presumed key to "recovering" an equally ideal subjective wholeness and autonomy. In this model, compulsive repetition of traumatic images is

German post-Holocaust discourse such as LaCapra and Eric Santner often drew on Freud's theory of trauma to evaluate the extent to which various representations work through the Nazi crimes; however, their analyses tended to focus on the conscious aspects of remembrance and mourning as venues of critical reflection about the past. My analysis will return to Freud in order to foreground their unconscious dimensions and to understand the role of compulsive repetition in ameliorating post-traumatic anxiety.

In *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* (1990), Santner plots the vicissitudes of inherited repression, mourning, and melancholia in West German representations of post-war memory. His analysis revises and extends the principal observations of Alexander and Margarete Mitscherlich's famous 1967 study of prevailing West German attitudes and behavior in the first two decades following the fall of the Third Reich. *The Inability to Mourn* offers a critical ego-psychology of German post-war repression. They observe that Third Reich Germans identified with the *Führer* as an ideational anchor for their investment in a unified, self-contained German *Volk*. After the war, however, Germans repressed their complicity with the mass deportation, internment, and murder of European Jews and the Romany. This repression disabled moral reflection about their fate while blocking mass depression over Hitler's defeat and suicide. What is crucial in the Mitcherlichs' as well as Santner's analysis is their shared insight into the narcissistic impetus of a widespread German failure following the war to reflect on the moral significance of the Final Solution. In this respect, their diagnosis keeps faith with Theodor W. Adorno's excoriating condemnation of postwar German attempts to derealize the Nazi atrocities, to draw a line between themselves and the past in the interests of national ego redemption (89-103).[2]

Santner adopts Adorno's hierarchical opposition between "short-circuited" and "critical" modalities of remembering for the purpose of evaluating German representations of their war-time past. He coins the term

> nonvoluntary. It unconsciously enables a potential decathexis (affective divestiture) rather than catharsis since the compulsive successive failures to produce such a memory alienate and thereby diffuse the affective investment in it.

2 See also Pickford's notes (Adorno 337-43).

*narrative fetishism* to describe "the way an inability or refusal to mourn emplots traumatic events" (Santner 1992, 143-54; 144). *Emplotment*, in this instance, refers to "the construction and deployment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place."[3] Like mourning, narrative fetishism responds to a loss "that refuses to go away due to its traumatic impact"; however, it bypasses "proper" mourning "by simulating a condition of intactness."

The psychoanalytic antecedent of Santner's distinction between bereavement and narrative fetishism echoes Freud's opposition between mourning and melancholia. In his 1917 essay on these moods, Freud identifies the object of mourning as a conscious and actual loss in contrast to the unconscious object that orients melancholia. The problem with this opposition is that it does not acknowledge the implications of Freud's considerations elsewhere of the role of fantasy and censorship in mediating memories of empirical loss, which may come to serve as the object of an unconscious and narcissistic investment.

The narcissistic reluctance to relinquish psychic objects suggests another explanation for narrative fetishism. In these instances, a particular memory assumes the aura of a charged "piece" of substantive self because it has been invested with the force of physical tensions: the auto-erotic and self-preservative energies in the body that Jean Laplanche identifies as the "source" of the drives, which require an object to orient them.[4] An idealized

3 Santner's use of the term *emplotment* explicitly draws on Hayden White's critical work on the poetics and rhetoric of historiography as well as his "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth," which White delivered at the 1990 conference "Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the 'Final Solution'," where Santner presented "History Beyond the Pleasure Principle."

4 See Laplanche's *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Laplanche addresses the question of the *source* [*Quelle*] of the drive (in relation to the other three elements in Freud's anatomy — the *pressure* [*Drang*], *aim* [*Ziel*], and *object* [*Objekt*]). The source is of particular interest for Laplanche because it is the "point of articulation between instinct and drive" (13). In a "strictly physiological" sense, the source is understood an "erotogenic zone," i.e., the oral, anal, urethral, or genital. More broadly speaking, any organ or body part

memory-image of loss or pain might thereby become the focus of a libidinal investment. This captivation with lost or painful objects spurs a *mimetic attitude* among traumatized subjects who then seek an image or idea that could match the force of their affective experiences. This attitude is mimetic inasmuch as it misrecognizes the possibility of adequation — of recapturing the experiential plenitude of an "originary" event. Of course, adequation as such is impossible because of the contingencies of signification and embodied experience that not only alter the meaning of an event, but also its affective valuation in various contexts of representation. Shifts in physical and social positionality effect corresponding shifts in the form and psychic value of memory as a sign. On a phenomenological level, the spatio-temporal alterity of a moving body controverts the anxious impetus to fix an event in space and time; the differential ways in which the present mediates the past entails that memory-images will never succeed in reproducing the event that precipitates them nor the libidinal tensions that animate them. Compulsive repetition manifests an urge to override these alterations that simultaneously fracture an experiential referent in the very act of [re]constituting it.

Freud famously cites evidence of this urge in his analysis of an infantile game played by his one-and-a-half-year-old grandson.[5] In Freud's reading,

that becomes the vehicle of stimulation is a source. Hence the term *erotogenic* may refer to physical tension in general.

5 Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (15). Freud hears his grandson's "o-o-o-o" as an infantile translation of the German *fort* ["gone"]. He subsequently interprets his grandson's pleasure in this ritual as a "great cultural achievement" insofar as it compensates the child for his "instinctual renunciation" in allowing his mother to leave without protesting:

> The child had a wooden reel with a piece of string tied round it. It never occurred to him to pull it along the floor behind him, for instance, and play at its being a carriage. What he did was to hold the reel by the string and very skilfully throw it over the edge of his curtained cot, so that it disappeared into it, at the same time uttering his expressive "o-o-o-o." He then pulled the reel out of the cot again by the string and hailed its reappearance with a joyful 'da' ['there']. This, then, was the complete game — disappearance and return. As a rule one only witnessed its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act.

the *fort/da* game stages his grandchild's anxiety about losing his mother, an event that cannot possibly be pleasurable for an infant. It is a game that, for Freud, clearly symbolizes the disappearance and return of the infant's mother. It therefore strikes Freud as peculiar that his grandson would be compelled to restage an event that causes him pain. More precisely, it is the child's "tireless" repetition of the game that fascinates Freud. For it indicates an infantile desire to master the vicissitudes of his maternal "referent." Freud's analysis of the *fort/da* game continues his discussion of compulsive repetition among war veterans as an economic and structural paradox that conjoins the pain of a traumatic memory with the pleasure of its defusion. It is a paradox that eventually propels him to investigate the evidence for a primary masochism beyond the pleasure principle.

The insistence of this unconscious masochism upon Freud's considerations of repetition suggests that mourning should not be theoretically reduced to a gradual process of conscious decathexis. Yet it is precisely this theoretical reduction which informs Santner's reading of the *fort/da* game as an "allegory" for mourning. In Santner's reading, this game stages the threat of maternal bereavement through a process of symbolic substitution that allows the child to experience this loss in a controlled and muted form.[6] The infant's symbolic mastery of this threat renews his sense of empowerment, which permits the pleasure that he derives from his

6 Santner writes:

> Bereft by the mother's absence, and more generally by the dawning of awareness that the interval between himself and his mother opens up a whole range of unpredictable and treacherous possibilities, he reenacts the opening of that abysmal interval within the controlled space of a primitive ritual. The child is translating, as it were, his fragmented narcissism (which might otherwise pose a psychotic risk — the risk of psychological disintegration) into the formalized rhythms of symbolic behavior; thanks to this procedure, he is able to administer in controlled doses the absence he is mourning. The capacity to dose out and to represent absence by means of substitutive figures at a remove from what one might call their "transcendental signifier" is what allows the child to avoid psychotic breakdown and transform his lost sense of omnipotence into a chastened form of empowerment. ( 146)

repetition of this game. This reading of the *fort/da* game leads Santner to view proper mourning as a homeopathic "strategy of elaborating and integrating the reality of loss or traumatic shock by remembering and repeating it in symbolically mediated doses." Homeopathic mourning "empowers" the bereaved to "master" the negative element through its gradual and diluted administration in small amounts. In short, it heals the individual through a controlled introduction of the very pain that "poisons" him:

> The dosing out of a certain negative — a thanatotic — element as a strategy of mastering a real and traumatic loss is a fundamentally homeopathic procedure. In a homeopathic procedure the *controlled* introduction of a negative element — a symbolic or, in medical contexts, real poison — helps to heal a system infected by a similar poisonous substance. The poison becomes a cure by *empowering* the individual to master the potentially traumatic effects of large doses of the morphologically related poison. In the *fort/da* game it is the rhythmic manipulation of signifiers and figures, objects and syllables instituting an absence, that serves as the poison that cures. These signifiers are *controlled symbolic doses* of absence and renunciation that help the child to survive and (ideally) be empowered by the negativity of the mother's absence. (Santner 1992, 144, 146, my emphasis)

Though he draws on Freud's account of the *fort/da* game, Santner's model of healthy homeopathic mourning flirts with voluntarism to the extent that he sidesteps the question of who or what "administers" or "dilutes" the poison. Because his analysis targets the perpetrator side of working through memories of the Third Reich and the Holocaust, Santner is committed to promoting the critically conscious ends of remembrance among post-war Germans. This emphasis elides the unconscious narcissistic aspect of trauma as theorized by Freud, which is hereby demoted to what Santner calls "narrative fetishism" as a short-circuited form of mourning. The question that this demotion raises is whether victim memory might also fall prey to "fetishism" and thereby challenge the moralism of Santner's distinction.

Klüger's *weiter leben* attests to the compulsive quality of recurring imagined constructions of her father's murder in the gas chambers.[7] She writes that she imagines him naked in the poisoned gas, his cramped search in vein for an exit. She also notes that this recurring image renders all the everyday childhood memories of her father meaningless to the point of invalidity. Yet she can neither replace, extinguish, nor synthesize them: something there remains unbridgeable [*da klafft etwas*].

In defiance of her own conscious inclinations, Krüger finds herself needing to imagine her father's murder by gas. Klüger herself acknowledges that the affective charge invested in such memories stems from nothing "higher" than self love [*Eigenliebe*], "love for one's own roots" (29). Her reflections also seem to confirm Freud's thesis concerning a masochistic tendency that forces the traumatized to return to painful scenes. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud connects the repetition compulsion with the death drive as a systemic, primal, and potentially destructive urge to neutralize unbound tensions. By implication, working through may be inextricably bound up with death-driven repetition as a means of defusing the belated anxious force of a traumatic breach in the psyche's defenses.

As the title suggests, the manifest aim of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is to account for the ways in which the psychic apparatus both is and is not captive to the thermodynamics of the pleasure principle [*das Lustprinzip*]. On a conceptual level, the principle is a derivation from G.T. Fechner's 1873 theses in *Einige Ideen zur Schöpfungs- und Entwicklungsgeschichte der Organismen* concerning the interrelations between pleasure, unpleasure, and the

7 Here are Ruth Klüger's reflections from *weiter leben* about mourning her father's murder:

> Ich erzähle diese Kindereien, weil sie alles sind, was ich von ihm habe, und obwohl ich sie beim besten Willen nicht zusammenbringe mit seinem Ende; weil ich mich, ohne in ein falsches Pathos zu geraten, nicht umstellen kann, auf das, was ihm geschehen ist. Aber auch nicht loslösen kann. Für mich war mein Vater der und der. Daß er schließlich nackt im Giftgas krampfhaft nach einem Ausgang suchte, macht alle diese Erinnerung belanglos bis zur Ungültigkeit. Bleibt das Problem, daß ich sie nicht durch andere ersetzen und auch nicht löschen kann. Ich bring's [sic] nicht zusammen, da klafft etwas. (28)

conditions of systemic stability. From these theses, Freud extrapolates his reformulation of the goal of homeostatic constancy. The pleasure principle is a systemic urge to maintain a balance of psychophysical energy. According to this hypothesis, any psychophysical motion "rising above the threshold of consciousness" produces "pleasure" when it approximates homeostatic stability and "unpleasure" to the extent that it deviates from this ideal. In this respect, the pleasure principle reiterates a physicalist hypothesis that the mental apparatus "endeavours to keep the quantity of excitation present in it as low as possible or at least keep it constant"(Freud 1955a, 9). From an economic standpoint, the pleasure principle is a gauge for regulating the quantity and force of unbound energies.

Freud's analysis of the pleasure principle implies that an important operation of the mental system is to convert freely mobile cathectic energy into mainly quiescent (or "tonic") cathexis. In short, the pleasure principle indicates a strong structural tendency to maintain constancy by regulating the degree and force of systemic tensions. This tendency is radicalized in the death drive as Freud's metapsychological figure for a primal and destructive urge to return to an originary state of inorganic calm. The death drive appears to serve the pleasure principle in seeking to neutralize "excess" stimuli; yet in a more radical destructive register, it also goes "beyond" the pleasure principle.

Borrowing from Barbara Low, Freud adopts the term *Nirvana Principle* to describe this primary self-aggressivity as the dominant action of the mental apparatus to reduce, keep constant, or remove internal tension (55-56). In this register, the death drive converges with the work of the pleasure principle to regulate systemic pressures; however, it also exceeds this function in its impetus to neutralize *all tensions* and thereby yield a state of Nirvana-like calm. The Nirvana Principle is, thus, a radicalization of the death drive as a derivation from fundamentally conservative instincts. These instincts pressure the psychic system to return to an inorganic (i.e., death-like) state. Defined in this way, the death drive is a "nostalgia for origins" at the roots of all organic life; it therefore attests to a destructive urge, a primal masochism, that both precedes and supersedes the pleasure principle.[8] The

8 This delimitation implies that the difference between pleasure and unpleasure is both qualitative and quantitative; in other words, so-called "organ pleasure" might produce "unpleasure" if it rises to an "untenable" level. Freud revises

radical register of the death drive suggests that the very forces animating living bodies also incite a destructive urge to extinguish them. In the throes of this aim to quell all corporeal tensions, the psyche seeks to neutralize both the basis and effects of staying alive.[9]

In this connection, it is worth revisiting Freud's phylogenetic allegory for the emergence of a functionally differentiated psychic economy and, specifically, for the division between the perceptual-conscious- and unconscious-systems. This allegory posits a homology between the perceptual-conscious as a system that selectively processes sensory inputs and a "deadened" cortical layer that protects the vulnerable vital "substance" of a basic unicellular organism from the barrage of external stimuli. Freud writes that this "little fragment of living substance" would be killed by the stimulation emanating from the outer world "if it were not provided with a *protective shield*." This shield is acquired when the organism's "outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some

his theses from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* respecting the relation between pleasure and unpleasure in "The Economic Problem of Masochism" (1924). In that context, Freud remarks:

> Pleasure and unpleasure, therefore, cannot be referred to an increase or decrease of a quantity (which we describe as 'tension due to stimulus'), although they obviously have a great deal to do with that factor. It appears that they depend, not on this quantitative factor, but on some characteristic of it which we can only describe as a qualitative one. If we were able to say what this qualitative characteristic is, we should be much further advanced in psychology. Perhaps it is the rhythm, the temporal sequence of changes, rises and falls in the quantity of stimulus. We do not know. (1955b, 160)

9 On a conceptual level, this radical version of the death drive reinforces the slippage between zero-tension and constancy as a measure of the aims of *Thanatos* in regulating vital energies. In this connection, it is worth briefly visiting Jean Laplanche's definition of the *source* of the drive as a general quantity of free-floating energy produced by the body and its organs. This definition suggests a more or less ongoing state of stimulation in the body; however, in the economy dominated by the pleasure principle, *unpleasure* refers to a quantitative level of unbound energy which pressures the psychic system. *Pleasure*, on the other hand seems to allude to the neutralization of tensions that threaten homeostasis.

degree inorganic and thence forward functions as a special envelop or membrane resistant to stimuli." By virtue of this shield, external forces "are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity." These layers can thus "devote themselves, behind the protective shield, to the reception of the amounts of stimulus which have been allowed through it."[10]

It is significant that death itself is proper to this organism in the form of a "deadened" protective barrier, which develops when the outer skin is "baked through" [*durchgebrannt*] by external stress. For it is by this death, as Freud notes, that "the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate"; however, a crisis develops when pressure arises internally rather than externally and thereby burdens the psychic apparatus. Freud remarks that while the perceptual-conscious buffers external sources of stimulation, the interior substance has no shield to protect it from internal excitations. His speculations about this interior vulnerability deepen Freud's need to conceptualize a death-driven repetition compulsion, which rises from the primal depths of the psyche to deaden the impact of a breach. Before I elaborate on this thesis, it will be necessary, first, to understand the disposition of this "breach" that results from a traumatic event.

10 Freud writes:

> This little fragment of living substance is suspended in the middle of an external world charged with the most powerful energies; and it would be killed by the stimulation emanating from these if it were not provided with a *protective shield* against stimuli. It acquires the shield in this way: its outermost surface ceases to have the structure proper to living matter, becomes to some degree inorganic and thence forward functions as a special envelop or membrane resistant to stimuli. In consequence, the energies of the external world are able to pass into the next underlying layers, which have remained living, with only a fragment of their original intensity; and these layers can devote themselves, behind the protective shield, to the reception of the amounts of stimulus which have been allowed through it. By its death, the outer layer has saved all the deeper ones from a similar fate — unless, that is to say, stimuli reach it which are so strong that they break through the protective shield. *Protection against* stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception* of stimuli. (Freud 1955a, 27. Freud's emphasis).

Freud's speculations about unicellular organisms lead him to view trauma as an economic and a structural crisis for the psyche.[11] Trauma generates excessive tensions that pressure the system from within and interfere with its maintenance. Hence the wound that inaugurates a traumatized condition also mobilizes the inner world to concentrate on neutralizing this painful surplus of stimuli at the expense of other processing functions. Post-traumatic anxiety produces an overload and systemic convergence that endangers psychophysical health and must therefore be defused in the interests of life and death.

Generally speaking, *anxiety* is the psychosomatic effect of an instinctual "fight or flight" mechanism. In the second chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud postulates that a traumatic break occurs because of an absence of anxiety that would have prepared the individual for the impact of the wounding event. The intense anxiety that follows a traumatic event is structurally and paradoxically related to its absence beforehand; however, its presence afterward is temporally "improper" to the situation that produced it. It is this "anachronistic" post-traumatic anxiety that thereafter permeates a particular cluster of traumatic memory-images.

Compulsive repetition is the symptom of the traumatic cathexis that develops when the climax of a wounding experience is belatedly charged with anxiety. Cathy Caruth has argued that such repetition reflects an urge to redress the shock of a dangerous missed encounter.[12] Drawing on this

11 Accordingly, when internal excitations produce too much stress, there is "a tendency to treat them as though they were acting, not from the inside, but from the outside, so that it may be possible to bring the shield against stimuli into operation as a means of defence against them. Projection as such plays "a large part in the causation of pathological processes" including those associated with trauma as a crack in the protective shield (Freud 1955a, 29).

12 Hence when Freud's traumatized World War I veterans dream about the events that wounded them (physically and mentally), they are recreating the conditions for anxiously anticipating the threatening event. It is in this respect that post-traumatic nightmares express a wish to master the shock of a traumatic event after the fact. See Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Leys castigates Caruth for sustaining the idea that massive trauma leaves behind a literal registration of the event that is "dissocated from normal mental processes of cognition" and that returns belatedly in flashbacks

hypothesis, I want to propose that this urge impels a psychic interest in freezing the event in time and space as an anxious content that could be experienced and known only after the shock that occasioned it. Yet this interest cannot be fulfilled since compulsive repetition involves an *imaginary* return to the signs of the threat that "should have" produced anxiety. On a hermeneutical and epistemological level, as Caruth suggests, compulsive repetitions of the event in the form of acting out, dreams, or confessions comprise various attempts to replace post-traumatic anxiety with knowledge as the foundation for retroactive preparedness and mastery; however, on an economic and structural level, repetition also formalizes and alienates the investment in an event through desensitization. On this level, the repetition compulsion serves the aim of the pleasure principle to neutralize unbound stimuli that strain the psychic economy. Taking Freud at his word, this function suggests a two-fold impetus for the mechanisms that simultaneously compel and eventually break down traumatic fixation: on the one hand, the life and ego drives invest a traumatic memory with a self-preservative anxiety that endows it with the aura of vital substance; on the other hand, compulsive repetition defuses this aura by incrementally deadening a memory's force.

I have previously spoken of traumatic fixation as a cathected relation to a particular memory that obtains the status of a regulative ideal. This ideal is the by-product of a self-preservative investment in memory as a piece of psychic "property." Here it might be recalled that in Freud's 1914 *Introduction: On Narcissism*, the category of the ego drives already implied an ontological mediation of the biological self-preservative instincts. However, his 1915 essay, *Instincts and Their Vicissitudes* revises this opposition in demarcating the ego drives from the sexual or object drives which Freud associated with reproductive urges. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), he proposes still

(Leys 266) even as Caruth insists that "trauma stands outside representation altogether" (17). In Leys' view, this makes Caruth's model "an inadvertent parody" of the mimetic model (17). While I am critically committed to moving beyond the rhetoric of unrepresentability in trauma studies and while I share Leys' repudiation of the notion of "literal" registration, I am reluctant to throw out all aspects of the mimetic model, which may retain some pertinence for characterizing a subject's experience of his or her own affective investment in certain traumatic images.

another distinction between the life and death drives. The shift in 1920 from the object to the life drives permits Freud to link the urge to survive with the sexual urge to reproduce. It also suggests that the ego drives might be conceived as an ontological version of the more biological life and death drives. When I refer to the libidinal dimension of traumatic fixation, I am alluding to this ontological and biological convergence in the lineage of the drives.

The ego drives motivate an ideological investment in the value of a unified identity as a basis and proof of self-mastery. This mediation explains the aggressivity and paranoia of a narcissistic ego that jealously guards the conditions for continuing self-love (and self-preservation as such) against the threat of social devaluation. Such defensiveness extends to memory-images as "pieces of self" that must be protected from external attempts to diminish or revise them. At the same time, however, the interdependent relation between a primary narcissistic self-love and a secondary narcissistic desire for social acceptance perpetuates an unconscious "screening" of memory-images in keeping with changing societal norms and values. This screening pre-insulates the ego from the real or imagined threat of judgments that undermine the propriety of remembered scenarios involving passive, selfish, betrayed or betraying images of the self. Memories symbolize absent persons, objects, phenomena, and events; they therefore draw upon personal and collective image repertoires as well as the idiomatic and spatio-temporal registers of language that inscribe cultural imaginaries; however, given the social character of memories as signs, these images will not resist the flux of changing contexts of enunciation. Because symbolizations of the past are shaped by this flux, working through is imbricated in the movement between collective identifications and desire.

Memories become magnets of the ego-drives when they are narcissistically ontologized, which is to say, mourned as the stage of possible selves destroyed by a traumatic episode and/or guarded as the sacred justification of present attitudes. In this register, the urge to repeat is a compulsive mode of mimesis that paradoxically and impossibly seeks to convene and fix once and for all images of the past. Yet the traumatic "origin" can never be secured against a slippage of signifiers that introduces

*différance* into the process of remembering.[13] Maurice Halbwachs has observed that memories fluctuate in response to changing degrees and qualities of investiture in particular groups with their attendant expectations. Memory-images may be reinforced, attenuated, or displaced by the ebbs and flows of collective identifications that contingently produce the value of the past for the present. Memory-images are, in this respect, "socio-graphic" (to borrow John Mowitt's term) to the extent that their activation anticipates their virtual or real communication. This anticipation may objectify and estrange a memory in the eyes of actual or imagined others whose introjected gaze has the power to divide memories against themselves. This gaze is a superegoic composite of conventions and constraints that specularize memories as scenarios of self-surveillance. The imminence of judgment fractures the trauma's aura by introducing a sense of self-alienation or intensifies its charge of guilt and shame. This fracturing effect is exacerbated by the differential structure of language itself, the "inhuman" errancy of the signifier, as Paul de Man once characterized it, which inhabits and disperses a trauma's ontological and originary significance.

In *Stranded Objects*, Santner identifies a poetic and structural kinship between mourning and de Man's deconstructive analysis of translation in

13 It is not coincidental to my analysis here that Derrida himself has acknowledged the debt which deconstruction owes to Freud's analysis of the repetition compulsion in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. For this debt suggests a profound resonance between deconstruction and Freud's biologistic death drive which serves a primal urge to return the psychic apparatus to a state of inorganic calm. The inanimate state figures for an ossification of the psyche delivered of vital tensions; from a deconstructive standpoint, the compulsion to reach this state is parallel to the desire to achieve a closure of interpretation, to secure signs against the flux of interpretation. The death drive hereby figures for the paradoxical logic of a narcissistic, mimetic, and masochistic urge to recapture and fix a memory through repetitions that desensitize and disarticulate it in the process. In *Resistances: of Psychoanalysis*, Derrida writes:

> there is nothing fortuitous about the fact that the most decisive and difficult stakes between, let's say, "psychoanalysis" and "deconstruction" should have taken a relatively organized form around the question of the repetition compulsion. The great reference texts here are *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and Lacan's *Seminar on The Purloined Letter*. (32)

"Conclusions on Walter Benjamin's 'The Task of the Translator'." De Man's analysis focuses on the notion of an original work that could be linked to its translation through the medium of a "pure" language. His interest is in delineating how this ideal of pure language displaces and alienates the language of translation. For de Man, then, translation would be the canonization of this disjunction in the place of an original which is, paradoxically, the effect of translation rather than its foundation. What is important for de Man's argument as a whole is how this "originary" disjunction illuminates a fracture at the heart of every interpretative activity that marks its vulnerability to the violence of the signifier.[14]

De Man's deconstruction of the ideal of a pure and transparent language targets the ideological investment in a stable, extralinguistic, and originary meaning — an abiding referent beyond rhetorical contamination. In his reading of Benjamin, the signifier enacts this deconstructive principle as a non-phenomenal and non-volitional "errancy" that de Man characterizes as an "inhuman" movement within the structure of language itself. History is this "errancy of language which never reaches the mark" (de Man 92). It is, in short, a slippage of signifiers that transpires independently of cognition or will.

Santner cites this thesis in the course of remarking the elegiac dimension of de Man's own writings as a form of *Trauerarbeit*. According to Santner, these writings formalize mourning by converting it into a paradigm or heuristic for translation, reading, and speaking (27). In this manner, mourning is reduced to an abstract linguistic operation that disassociates its

14 De Man writes:

> All these activities — critical philosophy, literary theory, history — resemble each other in the fact that they do not resemble that from which they derive. But they are all intralinguistic: they relate to what in the original belongs to language, and not to meaning as an extralinguistic correlate susceptible of paraphrase and imitation. They disarticulate, they undo the original, they reveal that the original was always already disarticulated. They reveal that their failure, which seems to be due to the fact that they are secondary in relation to the original, reveals an essential failure, an essential disarticulation which was already there in the original. They kill the original, by discovering that the original was already dead. (de Man 84; Santner, 27. My citation adds a sentence that was paraphrased by Santner)

affective and social specificity (Santner 29). The "loss" that is mourned is neither "human" nor intentional since it reflects a structural "death" of the referent.

Santner criticizes de Man's disassociation of intentionality and affect in mourning because it "precludes the possibility of distinguishing one victim from any other" while derealizing empirical losses (29). For Santner, it is important to retain a sense of the historical victim as a thinking and feeling agent who suffers because of a "moral shortcoming or failure in the realm of empirical decisions and politics" (29). In Santner's view, de Man adumbrates this moral realm in converting mourning into a melancholic poetics that disenfranchises victims. Instead, de Man mourns the structural catastrophes "that are inseparable from being-in-language" (29, his emphasis).[15] Hence the formalization of mourning reifies history in distilling it to "a series of structural operations depleted of affect" (29). The responsibility for producing or mitigating historical suffering is hereby "overshadowed by an impersonal and apathetic 'dismemberment' at the violent hands of the signifier." To be a victim of history is, for de Man, to be the victim of a purely "linguistic complication" (Santner 29; de Man 92).

According to Santner, much of theory in the 1980s and 90s follows de Man's lead by privileging poetics over ethics in attending to the structures of signification at the expense of its subjective dimensions. In this respect, de Man's work is exemplary for a contemporary strain of post-humanist theory that treats "the appeal to human subjectivity" as evidence of a "lack of rigor" (Santner 29).[16] Santner's objection is presumably directed at post-humanist

15 As Santner suggests, these task "were substantial and complex" alluding, of course, to de Man's war time journalistic writings supporting Nazi rhetoric against the Jews. For a more redemptive elaboration of the connection between de Man's activities during the war and his post-war deconstructive writings see Shoshana Felman's "After the Apocalypse: Paul de Man and the Fall to Silence."

16 In targeting de Man's post-humanist view of language and history, Santner and LaCapra share an investment in critically rethinking the intellectual legacy of literary and cultural criticism after the linguistic turn. The Holocaust thus serves as a litmus test for the "rampant" liberties of an *an-archic* post-structuralist theory. By delimiting trauma and working-through proper, LaCapra and Santner seek to redress the conceptual injustices committed

critics who reject the Western ideal of unified identity as a [bourgeois] individualist mystification. From the standpoint of these critics, the appeal to subjectivity is a regressive, nostalgic and sentimental indulgence. Santner, in contrast, is committed to recovering the role of individual and collective agents in bearing witness to the reality of suffering. These agents can play a crucial role in offering empathetic solidarity with the traumatized or the

against the memory of historical victims through an "amoral" blurring of distinctions and identities. Their theoretical interventions represent an effort to rein in the "excesses" of deconstruction for the sake of a historically responsible criticism. To the extent that de Man's concept of "inhuman" history effaces the social dimensions of mourning, he extenuates his own fraught moral responsibility for acknowledging and mitigating historical suffering.

It should be stressed that LaCapra is not reacting to Derrida's and de Man's work *per se*, but rather to what he views as exaggerated strains in recent theories of trauma which have been heavily influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis and/or the linguistic turn. For example, Slavoj Zizek's "return" to Lacan prioritizes the traumatic *real*, which is at once a dialectical sublation as well as a transcendental condition of psycho-social existence. LaCapra argues that Cathy Caruth's work emphasizes the figurative dimensions of trauma in a manner that elides the difference between absent and lost objects. To my mind, her work is important for following through on Derrida and de Man's attention to the errancy of the signifier as well as the hermeneutical insight that the interpretation of the past is an ontological endeavor whose horizon is determined by present concerns.

LaCapra's moral grounds for separating empirical and structural trauma on the one hand, and lost and absent objects on the other, presumably authorize him to set the critical parameters for an evaluation of traumatic discourse; yet it should be recognized that this critical intervention also allows him to expropriate the psychoanalytic complexity of deconstructive readings such as Caruth's which highlight the reciprocity between historical and structural trauma. In 1994 and 1998, LaCapra relegates Caruth's work to footnotes which ultimately cast doubt on the critical rigor of her analyses of traumatic discourse. In this respect, his polemic does not simply serve to protect the moral specificity of the Holocaust as a traumatic object of inquiry; it also functions to defer the question of LaCapra's own disciplinary investment in instituting a "proper" interpretation of traumatic history. See LaCapra's *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (1994, 14n) and *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (1998, 208n).

bereaved. In the absence of this solidarity, Santner argues, "suffering will no doubt always be felt to be unreal, even inhuman, dissociated from the drama of human subjectivity" (28).[17]

17 It is worth remarking the symptomatic redundancy of Santner's recourse to the phrase "human subjectivity." For it is a redundancy which betrays anxiety about the paradoxical possibility of an "inhuman" subjectivity. The idea of an inhuman subjectivity moves in the direction of a "reason" in history that both precedes and conditions human agency. Santner's impulse to safeguard the human against this possibility is, thus, a symptom of a long-standing philosophical opposition between freedom and historical necessity.

To his credit, Santner does acknowledge the historical dimensions of the linguistic turn through his attention to the twin "posts" that unite the post-Holocaust era with postmodern thought. To historicize this juncture, I would like to comment on how the opposition between freedom and determinism played itself out in French critical philosophy following the war. This philosophy developed in the wake of the revelations about the Nazi atrocities and Stalin's terror as well as the subsequent military response to Algeria's call for independence from French rule. In the French context, the historically motivated anti-totalitarian impetus to move away from ideas which favored deterministic views of identity fostered a repudiation of the result-driven tendency of Hegel's dialectical logic, as well as Marx's revolutionary class narrative, and Freud's biological determinisms. At the same time, French thinkers were also responding critically to the legacy of structuralism *à la* Ferdinand de Saussure, Claude Lévy-Strauss, and the early Roland Barthes. Ludwig Wittgenstein and Bertrand Russell provided models for what would become a formal analytic attention to questions of language, meaning, truth, and knowledge.

The confluence of structuralism, Russian formalism, and analytic philosophy contributed to a post-structuralist and post-Marxist thought that undermined voluntaristic, idealistic, and bourgeois conceptions of historical, linguistic, and ontological identity. They also provided a vocabulary for critiquing the idealist character of Marx's thinking on collective agents and labor as well Husserl's phenomenological emphasis on the foundational status of intention. The result was a nexus of theories that foregrounded the structural and systemic dimensions of language over and against the various idealisms, positivisms, and voluntarisms pervading modern philosophy.

The question remains as to whether the post-war philosophical turn toward language contradicted the political and moral desire to avoid a deterministic thought. Certainly, the desire to disarticulate determinisms resonated historically with the parallel desire to resist theories that assumed

In countering this derealizing tendency, Santner is right to foreground the necessity of an empathetic social environment in helping a traumatized subject to work through the trauma of bereavement. Yet there are also important insights to be retained from de Man's attention to the signifier as an "impersonal" force in the dismemberment of a particular meaning. As Santner acknowledges, the play of a disarticulating signifier is the principal trope of a discourse that favors a radically decentered subject. This decentered subject is perceived as a corrective to the narcissism and voluntarism of the "bourgeois individual" who unilaterally decides the content and effects of its beliefs and actions. The inhuman figures for de Man's turn toward the immanence of structure in order to divest signification and history of their ontological and moral value as properties of transcendentally unified agents with unified intentions. He identifies the inhuman with "linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tensions, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language — independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have" (de Man 96). Notably, this definition brackets out both the conscious and unconscious dimensions of subjectivity in order to emphasize the "impersonal" structure of language. In delimiting the inhuman in this manner, he seemingly rules out psychoanalytic accounts (most notably,

closed and totalizing systems of judgment. Such systems of thought were taken to be reiterating the instrumental logics of Hitler and Stalin's dictatorships or the Fordist tendencies of American capitalism. To resist this conceptual threat in their own work, theorists such as Derrida emphasized the errancy or play in acts of communication and interpretation which undermined any closed or total determination of identity. Paradoxically, then, the idea of arbitrary and amoral signifying structures paved the way for a moral and political affirmation of freedom against determinism. Ultimately, however, if deconstruction errs on the side of granting the conditions for "too much" freedom over and against the evidence of historical necessity, as its critics claim, then this freedom is impersonal and itself deterministic since it is a structural effect of the circulation of the signifier.

Lacan's and Kristeva's) that acknowledge a relationship between unconscious mechanisms and the slippage of signifiers.[18]

Freud's configuration of the drives as metapsychological figures for repressed instincts qualifies de Man's formal delimitation of the inhuman. For Freud, the drives are at once economic, structural, and *automatic* in character. Their uncanny relentlessness produces the effect of the *inhuman within the human* — the machine, structure, system, or apparatus that subtends the possibility of a unified intention and vexes primary and secondary narcissistic investments in a coherent ego as the ideational anchor of self-love and social acceptance. Like traumatically charged memory, de Man's dislocated original is a *transcendental fault*, a structural lack that spurs successive failed attempts to secure an adequate foundation against the "errancy" of the signifier. Insofar as this errancy is, at once, systemic and unintentional, it may be likened to the unconscious operations of the death drive. To return to trauma by way of de Man is to suggest that a mimetic cathexis with the ideal of a traumatic origin enjoins an alienating confrontation with this structural default, which belies and ultimately dissolves the suturing impetus of repetition.

A longing to recuperate and protect an original experience feeds a subject's investment in the event as a kind of ontological property. Nevertheless, it is the very impossibility of recuperation that spurs an "entropical" economy of successively failed realizations. These repetitions disintegrate its aura as a wound that could be closed through the adequation of a missed experience. Imagined returns to the anxious pivot of a traumatic event therefore serve a contradictory purpose: they reactivate and sediment it for the present (thereby keeping it "alive") while diminishing its status as a source of post-traumatic stress.

This extrapolation provides a ground to reconceptualize working through as a death-driven process, a mode of annihilating mimesis if you

18 It is worth pointing out that Julia Kristeva's formulation of the *semiotic* to speak about the ways in which the drives are not only excluded by language, but may also permeate and fracture it, effectively counters de Man's distinction here. In a conversation, Ewa Ziarek proposed an understanding of Kristeva's semiotic as the "hinge" between the pulsations of the drives and the demands of the symbolic. See Kristeva's *The Subject in Process* and *Revolution in Poetic Language*.

will. Once again, the death drive serves a systemic need to bind or quell excessive tensions. The urge to repeat responds to this need to neutralize the stress of a self-preservative cathexis with a particular image and/or event. Because of the imbrication between the symbolic and libidinal levels of traumatic repetition, it reanimates, but eventually diffuses a traumatic memory-image as a locus of belated adrenalized affect. Such repetition is, by definition, beyond the will in fulfilling an unconscious and masochistic aim to deaden post-traumatic anxiety through a process of affective divestiture and desensitization as such.

The unconscious motivation behind this eventuality negates the promise of a catharsis that could redeem an ethical perspective from traumatic fragmentation. Indeed, rather than propelling a critical integration of experiences, the "entropical" economy of compulsive repetition suggests that the subject will gradually become "bored" of her trauma. The question remains as to whether the repetition compulsion may, nevertheless, prepare the way for a healing distance insofar as it succeeds in deadening post-traumatic anxiety. My contention is that this anxiety constitutes the "active ingredient" in mourning conceived on Santner's model as a "homeopathic strategy wherein the poisonous element would be diluted through controlled doses in the interests of critical consciousness. Yet Santner's prioritization of conscious and reflective mourning does not allow for the prospect that the bereaved might not be able to regulate the repeated return of the ghosts who haunt them against their will. In contrast, I insist on recognizing the "amoral" agency of compulsive repetition which cannot be "strategically administered" since it is propelled by the unconscious. For if a critical consciousness is at all possible for the traumatized, then it is both limited and enabled by unconscious mechanisms.

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