

Isabelle Alfandary\*

## An Irresistible Death Drive?

In *Civilization and its Discontents*, published in 1930, Freud acknowledges the resistance with which the death drive or destruction drive immediately met, “even in analytic circles”<sup>1</sup>. He admits to having defended himself against this idea when he first read it in Sabina Spielrein’s 1912 article entitled “Destruction as the Cause of Coming Into Being”. Freud explains such a defense mechanism by the difficulty that everyone has in admitting the thesis of an “inborn human inclination to ‘badness’, to aggressiveness and destructiveness, and so to cruelty as well.”<sup>2</sup>

However, the underlying hypothesis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not that of a philosopher who might have sought to bring to light the roots of the banality of evil, but that of a psychoanalyst, clinician and theoretician. Before involving the human in its totality, the death drive puts into play and calls into question nothing less than the whole of the psychoanalytic theory and the sense of its technique.

In general, the question of the drive is undoubtedly one of the trickiest and most destabilizing ones that Freud has had to theorize. Indeed, the drive forces him to reconfigure, or at least modify, as a result of a double economic and energetic point of view, the metapsychological edifice as well the successive topics, even leading him to make an exception to the thesis of the dream as fulfillment of a wish. In this sense, it is not surprising that what Freud called the general theory of drives gave rise to so many successive developments and to several significant revisions on his part.

The hypothesis of the death drive, formulated in 1920 in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to which Freud returns in detail in *Civilization and its Discontents* ten

---

<sup>1</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London 1961, p. 107.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 108.

\* Université Sorbonne-Nouvelle

years later, was also widely criticized and challenged. However, Freud maintained and insisted on it, because, according to him, it provides an explanatory schema to precise clinical content, which he believes remain otherwise inexplicable.

The question of the drive, its articulation with the hypothesis of the death drive, did not cease to animate and agitate the founder of the nascent analytic science.

In what he identifies as the third phase of the theory of drives, Freud makes the death drive the pivot of the economy of drives. The end of the dominance of the pleasure principle, and the taking over by the death drive, remain no less profoundly puzzling. It is precisely the question of death in the death drive that I would like to address, by taking and following to the letter, as much as possible, Freud's hypothesis-turned-thesis.

The presentation that is about to follow is concerned with examining the status of the death drive within the Freudian economy of drives, in order to ultimately establish the signification and the sense of death—or at least what Freud means by “death”—in his theory of drives. What I will try to outline in the meanders and reversals of the general theory of drives, and especially in its phase III, is the place of death, in order to bring to light the role played by death in the drive. To this purpose, I will have to return to the dualism claimed by Freud to define and characterize the economy and energetics of drives.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud defined the drive in terms that are immediately disconcerting, and even contradictory: “a drive is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life.”<sup>3</sup>

This definition seems to me to reveal a hesitation—even “shilly-shallying,” I would say, and I will explain this term in a moment—that surrounds the conception of the drive defined by means of seemingly opposite notions: elasticity

---

<sup>3</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, trans. James Strachey, W. W. Norton & Company, New York and London 1961, p. 43.

and inertia. We tacitly grasp that the elasticity in question is to be understood as relative inertia. Why this difficulty to characterize the drive? Because the phenomenon that Freud seeks to define is of a complex and fundamentally counter-intuitive nature: “This view of drives strikes us as strange because we have become used to see in them a factor impelling towards change and development, whereas we are now asked to recognize in them the precise contrary—an expression of the *conservative* nature of living substance.”<sup>4</sup>

The drive causes Freud difficulties in grasping and conceptualizing, which explains, at least in part, that he relies on—despite his guarding himself against it—the resources of intuition and even of fiction, something which he has been violently reproached with. Not that the drive responds to specific determinations, but as a phenomenon, it largely escapes our understanding. What Freud refers to as “the nature of the excitatory process that takes place in the elements of the psychical systems,”<sup>5</sup> creates on him the effect of an unknown that he cannot, however, give up conceptualizing: “We are consequently operating all the time with a large unknown [X] factor, which we are obliged to carry over into every new formula.”<sup>6</sup> In section VI of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he goes so far as to declare: “If, therefore, we are not to abandon the hypothesis of the death drives, we must suppose them to be associated from the very first with life drives. But it must be admitted that in that case we shall be working upon an equation with two unknowns.”<sup>7</sup>

### The Elementary structure of the drive

Two basic questions—that of the number of drives and that of their differences in nature—seem not to have ceased to challenge Freud. The drive, for that matter, raises the question of the elementary, of the element, if not originary, at least archaic, at the articulation between soma and psyche. On closer reading, the famous episode of the reel from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in which Freud recognizes the assumption of the compulsion to repeat, implicitly contains such a questioning about the supposed duality of the drive hypothesis:

---

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

“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.”<sup>8</sup> The incidental, and no doubt far too little commented upon remark about the “first act” conceived as a “game in itself”, could be reinterpreted in light of the hypothesis of the death drive that is yet to be formulated.

The hypothesis of the compulsion to repeat, posited out of what Freud identifies as the first game of the child, is well-known: “But if a compulsion to repeat *does* operate in the mind, we should be glad to know something about it, to learn what function it corresponds to, under what conditions it can emerge and what its relation is to the pleasure principle—to which, after all, we have hitherto ascribed dominance over the course of the processes of excitation in mental life.”<sup>9</sup>

In the *fort-da* episode are already sketched the terms of Freud’s questioning on the elementary structure of the drive. The child’s game appears to be a two-step mechanism, even if the question of knowing whether these two steps are indeed separate or only a split step is the immediate question:

It may perhaps be said in reply that her [the mother’s] departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending.<sup>10</sup>

The pleasure principle, as Freud reminds us as a preamble to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, is deduced from the principle of constancy,<sup>11</sup> or rather, Freud—who does not skimp on reversals—tells us: “The pleasure principle follows from the principle of constancy: actually the latter principle was inferred from the facts which forced us to adopt the pleasure principle.”<sup>12</sup> The pleasure in question in the pleasure principle is not simply synonymous with the quest for happiness that the author of *Civilization and its Discontents* declares as characterizing each

10

---

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

individual.<sup>13</sup> The pleasure in question here is of an energetic nature. Similarly, the death that is at stake in the death drive must also be tirelessly understood and translated in dynamic terms—I will come back to this. In this respect, and as counter-intuitive as it may seem, the death drive and the pleasure principle, considered in the energetic terms that characterize them, are not without maintaining astonishing affinities with one another.

Freud interprets this throwing of the reel as being able to “satisfy an impulse of the child’s, which was suppressed in his actual life, to revenge himself on his mother for going away from him.”<sup>14</sup> The clinician recalls the propensity of the child to throw away objects in lieu and place of the adults who annoyed him, and supports this by quoting the article “A Childhood Recollection from *Dichtung Und Wahrheit*” in which the little Goethe had, like a patient of Freud’s, distinguished himself in this characteristic Oedipal sport.

Freud had also noted in his fine observation that his grandson

had an occasional disturbing habit of taking any small objects he could get hold of and throwing them away from him into a corner, under the bed, and so on, so that hunting for his toys and picking them up was often quite a business. As he did this he gave vent to a loud, long-drawn-out ‘o-o-o-o’, accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction. His mother and the writer of the present account were agreed in thinking that this was not a mere interjection but represented the German word ‘*fort*’ [‘gone’]. I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play ‘gone’ [*fortsein*] with them.<sup>15</sup>

The gone [*fortsein*] seems to be more than simply the first step of the game: it is a game in itself—a process of symbolization that will certainly only be completed by the second step consisting of an initial aggressive motion. If we consider this step I on its own, it seems to be part of a destruction drive that satisfies itself, at least to begin with. This remark made in passing which Freud neither

---

<sup>13</sup> “The programme of becoming happy, which the pleasure principle imposes on us, cannot be fulfilled, yet we must not—indeed, we cannot—give up our efforts to bring it nearer to fulfillment by some means or other.” Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 15.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 13–14.

develops nor comments, nonetheless seems to me to bear heavy consequences with regard to the general theory of drives.

Let me note here, before getting back to it soon, that the dualism that Freud affirms on the subject of the economy of drives is not as easy to conceive, or even to argue, as it would seem. The example of the reel reveals a structure that is admittedly binary, but unbalanced, and somehow asymmetrical and unrelenting.

We have to keep in mind that all organic drives are, to Freud's mind, "conservative."<sup>16</sup> It is from this law of the living that he deduces the compulsion to repeat: "to pursue to its logical conclusion the hypothesis that all drives tend towards the restoration of an earlier state of things."<sup>17</sup> It is because he clings to the characterization as conservative that he rejects the possibility of other configurations of the drive. Although it is seriously posited, the hypothesis of other drives—of drives of another kind than that of death drives and life drives—is quickly dismissed. Thus, Freud considers at the end of section V of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—but only to give it up right away—the possibility of other drives that "aim at a state of things which has never yet been attained."<sup>18</sup> And he goes on to say: "We shall be met by the plausible objection that it may very well be that, in addition to the conservative drives which impel towards repetition, there may be other which push forward towards progress and the production of new forms. This argument must certainly not be overlooked."<sup>19</sup> The hypothesis of what he refers to as a "universal drive", in other words, of a drive that could be qualified as "progress drive" in evolution, is abandoned on the grounds that it is hardly plausible.

Let me note incidentally in that regard that a Hegelian reading of the death drive as the negative moment seems difficult to me to hold and argue. Freud finds the explanation to the theory of evolution in the consequence of the adaptation to external forces. The idea of a "drive towards perfection" is even deemed by Freud in these pages as being "a benevolent illusion."<sup>20</sup>

12

---

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 43.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

## The goal of all life is death

The thesis that subtends *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and on which the hypothesis of the death drive is based, finds its formulation—as gnomic as it is disturbing—in the acknowledgment that the goal of all life is death:

[It] must be an *old* state of things, an initial state from which the living entity has at one time or other departed and to which it is striving to return by the circuitous paths along which its development leads. If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for *internal* reasons—becomes inorganic once again—then we shall be compelled to say that ‘*the aim of all life is death*’ and, looking backwards, that ‘*inanimate things existed before living ones*’.<sup>21</sup>

The death in question in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is not metaphysical finitude: Freud calls death the state of return to inorganic matter—a death of a biological kind. According to Freud, the appearance of life is almost contemporaneous with—slightly earlier and, so to speak, a reaction to—the emergence of the first drive understood as the death drive. The idea that life could be identified with a first and fundamental drive, just as the hypothesis that the appearance of life is synonymous with a thrust of drive must, according to Freud, be abandoned for good.

In Freud’s hypothesis, death dominates the general economy of drives: not only is the death drive the final drive, but significantly the first: “The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavoured to cancel itself out. In this way the first drive came into being: the drive to return to the inanimate state”.<sup>22</sup> Once again, what we call “life”, insofar as it comes into being, is not at all considered by Freud as instinctual energy, or even charged with any energy that is instinctual in nature. In his hypothesis, Freud conceives of life as *ex nihilo*—pure given whose origin remains mysterious:

The attributes of life were at some time evoked in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception. [...] The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavoured to cancel

---

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45–46.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

itself out. In this way the first drive came into being: the drive to return to the inanimate state.<sup>23</sup>

In Freud's elaboration—an elaboration that at this precise point turns into a speculation—that falls in the realm of the discourse of fables and tales (“at some time”—to the gift of life understood in the sense of donation responds the originary drive in reaction: that of putting an end to it. The first drive is therefore literally deadly and reactive in the sense that it carries death, it strives to return to a previous state. The death drive returns to the origin. As a result, drive is defined as that which cannot detach, divest or undo itself—hardly let itself be temporarily diverted—from the origin. Because of its originary tendency to dislocate itself, the death drive marks the drive process and the resulting general economy of drives. As such, and if we follow Freud's reasoning all the way through, all drive insofar as it is conservative is marked by its return to the inorganic. Let me specify that when Freud mentions “drive” insofar as it is “given”, he takes care not to specify the drive that is in question, and does not qualify it as “death drive”. The life drive emerges, insofar as it progressively and incrementally extracts itself, as it operates out of the bond from the very process of unbinding, as it silently splits itself. It is from the drive as the drive towards death that the possibility of a life drive exceeds and excludes itself. Derrida's notion of “*lavie-lamort*” – a seminar of 1975–1976<sup>24</sup> just to be published – no doubt echoes this indecisive and this inextricability of the origin. Nevertheless, the death drive can be said to be originary in at least two ways: it is first, previous, but at the same time, is marked by the origin and the return to a prior state. In these pages of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the drive is entirely understood as the death drive, identified by a regressive movement towards a primitive state.

<sup>14</sup> Freud's hypothesis of the emergence of life—inseparable from the fiction of origins—is guided by death, wholly reaching out towards it, like an irresistible catabasis: life is the deferral of the moment of destruction, the resistance to the ineluctable movement of return to a prior inorganic state. Life is a negative force insofar as it is a defense against the irresistible pull of death. It insists by creating *in extremis* the conditions of a pure present, unceasingly renegotiated, trimmed, and conquered on nothingness. It fights to the death against death.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La vie la mort (Séminaire 1975–1976)*, Seuil, Paris 2019.



For Freud, life is survival (*Überleben*). Freud leans on an evolutionist conception of life considered as resilience to death: “It was still an easy matter at that time for a living substance to die; the course of its life was probably only a brief one, whose direction was determined by the chemical structure of the early life”<sup>25</sup>. Once again, what justifies the pertinence of the hypothesis of the drive fable of origins, is, according to Freud, “the exclusively conservative nature of drives”<sup>26</sup>. The drive is not only linked to the archaic, but also to the archive in the double etymological sense of commencement and commandment of a proto- or sub-life. This thesis of an “archivolithic” drive, to call it by a Derridian name,<sup>27</sup> that affirms itself in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* will not be refuted in *Civilization and its Discontents*, which nonetheless revisits the general theory of drives, to partly support it and nuance it.

Regardless, these final pages of section V of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that rely on an anthropomorphic fictionalization and a dramatized casuistry of the drive conflict are among the most astonishing that Freud has written, especially when he takes up the question of an infra-conscious intentionality of the soma:

What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion. Thus these guardians of life, too, were originally the myrmidons of death. Hence arises the paradoxical situation that the living organism struggles most energetically against events (dangers, in fact) which might help it to attain its life’s aim rapidly—by a kind of short-circuit. Such behaviour is, however, precisely what characterizes purely instinctual as contrasted with intelligent efforts. But let us pause for a moment and reflect. It cannot be so.<sup>28</sup>

In the instinct law, and the fable that introduces it here, Freud takes the risk of going astray in conjectures where the hypostasis of the death drive seems to give way to hypotyposis. The quest for the origin of the drive triggers a fable of origins coupled with a fiction of instinctuality that leads Freud to deliberate, not without some *hubris*, on the will-to-live of the pure somatic, of life itself.

<sup>25</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 46.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.* “If we firmly maintain the exclusively conservative nature of instincts, we cannot arrive at any other notions as to the origin and aim of life.” *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans. Eric Prenowitz, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London 1996, p. 10.

<sup>28</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 47.

The conservative nature of the drive from which Freud infers the law of the living leads him to face the facts, no matter how disconcerting and counter-intuitive they may be: those of the logical and chronological precedence of death over life. The aim of life considered from the standpoint of the drive is death; the tendency of all life is to return to a state of non-life. Freud decides, at least in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, that there is a beyond, beyond the pleasure principle, not a predominance of the death drives, but on the originary predominance of death within the general economy of drives, which is not exactly the same thing.

In a slightly later essay entitled “The Ego and the Id” (1923), Freud takes up again explicitly the thesis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and generalizes it to the point of suggesting that the shared or even combined goal of erotic drives and the death drives is the return to the inorganic state: “Acting in this way, both the drives would be conservative in the strictest sense of the word, since both would be endeavouring to re-establish a state of things that was disturbed by the emergence of life”<sup>29</sup>. In this very chapter entitled “The Two Classes of Drives”, Freud observes the difficulty he has in grasping “the manner in which the two classes of drives are fused, blended, and alloyed with each other.”<sup>30</sup>

### The trajectory of the drive

Let me pause for a moment to measure the trajectory of the drive on the scale of Freud’s work, and of the path traveled by this notion: considerable and remarkable is its fate, when we know that Freud resorts for the first time to the notion of *Trieb* in 1905 in the *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, precisely to describe human sexuality and acknowledge the singularity of the libido:

16

The fact of the existence of sexual needs in human beings and animals is expressed in biology by the assumption of a ‘sexual drive’, on the analogy of the instinct of nutrition, that is of hunger. Everyday language possesses no counterpart to the word ‘hunger’, but science makes use of the word ‘libido’ for that purpose.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id. Freud – Complete Works*. Compiled by Ivan Smith. Web. 31 March 2019, p. 3974. [https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud\\_Complete\\_Works.pdf](https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf).

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3975.

<sup>31</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality. Freud – Complete Works*. Compiled by Ivan Smith. Web. 31 March 2019, p. 1464 [https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud\\_Complete\\_Works.pdf](https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf)

Since 1905, we can argue that the whole of Freudian psychoanalysis is posed and proposed as a revision of the doxa on the drive:

Popular opinion has quite definite ideas about the nature and characteristics of this sexual drive. It is generally understood to be absent in childhood, to set in at the time of puberty in connection with the process of coming to maturity and to be revealed in the manifestations of an irresistible attraction exercised by one sex upon the other; while its aim is presumed to be sexual union, or at all events actions leading in that direction.<sup>32</sup>

The commonly accepted idea of a sexual drive endowed with a single purpose and a single object is demolished by the thesis of *Three Essays*. The sexual drive, as Freud conceives of it, multiplies and breaks up the unitary and monolithic character of purpose and object, and ultimately contributes to suspending the opposition between the normal and the pathological: the drive is thought of as a polymorphic force, vicarious, and interstitial.

Freud's invention of the category of the "sexual" is indistinguishable from the notion of the drive and of the economy from which it stems: the drive that Freud brings to light is plural, and if necessary, partial; it carries an energy that is the economic and dynamic condition of the psyche. In 1915, in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes", Freud qualifies it as "the demand made upon the mind for work"<sup>33</sup>: the drive animates as much as it agitates the individual.

Freud's conception of sexuality that is thus deduced from the general theory of drives inaugurated in 1905 will not cease to be repeated until at least 1930. Let us note in passing that it is of course "the nature and the characters of sexual drive" that Freud will not cease to ponder from *Three Essays* (1905) to *Civilization and Its Discontents* (1930), as if he were unable to be satisfied with a definitive conception on these basic points that deal with the articulation and conjugation of drives, as if the successively advanced and argued theses were

---

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes." *Freud – Complete Works*. Compiled by Ivan Smith. Web. 31 March 2019, p. 2960 [https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud\\_Complete\\_Works.pdf](https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf).

always likely to be called into question by the novelty of the clinical or anthropological material considered.

The drive which thus makes a sensational entry into the Freudian lexicon to account for the libido as *il primo motore* will however be linked, from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* onwards to the instance of death, but not without contradicting nor excluding the reference to said libido. “*Il primo motore*” is the phrase that Freud uses to characterize the force of the drive in *Leonardo da Vinci and A Memory of His Childhood*<sup>34</sup>: a motor, if I dare say, with a double trigger. This becoming of the drive, which is not exactly a reversal, but an extreme complication of the initial conception, is neither simple nor obvious for its author. The bringing to light of death in the economy of drives to which he held does not seem to have left him alone. This probably explains why Freud did not cease to modify, amend, and balance his general theory of drives.

### A dualistic theory of drives

The Freudian theory of drives “always remains dualistic”, as Laplanche and Pontalis write<sup>35</sup>. And this, be it the initial dualism that opposes sexual drives and ego drives or drives of self-preservation, or the one invoked in *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* between life drives and death drives. If the terms of the conflict did not cease to change, Freud rejected any monistic conception—the one with which he reproaches Jung at the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. The Freudian drive model retained in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* indeed has two terms: the articulation between these terms however is not dialectical but proves to be determined by a heavy tendency. The dualism advanced by Freud is more singular, more intricate than expected, due to the precedence of death and a tendency of its underlying drive to dominate. In section VI of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud returns to his previous conception which he revises

18

<sup>34</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood.” *Freud – Complete Works*. Compiled by Ivan Smith. Web. 31 March 2019. [https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud\\_Complete\\_Works.pdf](https://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf).

<sup>35</sup> Jean Laplanche, J.-B. Pontalis, *Vocabulaire de la psychanalyse*, Presses universitaires de France, Paris 2007, p. 361 [my translation].

and once again<sup>36</sup> marks his disagreement with Jung and his objection in principle to monism.

Our views have from the very first been *dualistic*, and to-day they are even more definitely dualistic than before—now that we describe the opposition as being, not between ego-drives and sexual drives but between life drives and death drives. Jung's libido theory is on the contrary monistic; the fact that he has called his one instinctual force 'libido' is bound to create confusion, but need not affect us otherwise.<sup>37</sup>

These lines, added in 1921, are not indifferent: perhaps we must re-read, at least partly, Freud's obstinacy to brandish the banner of dualism through the prism of his conflict with Jung. But that is undoubtedly more than a personal question for Freud. What he rejects is the idea of a single source of energy within the *anima*. As such, the death drive is not the only force, nor is it even the originary force. What dominates in the theory of drives however remains a model dominated by the dual tendency to release excitation and to maintain a constant level—two tendencies that, insofar as they are combined, gesture towards death, towards the state of non-life. The risk he runs of retaining only one of the terms, be it the decisive and irreducible term, can be deduced from the objection he makes to the Jungian thesis of the originary libido: a model consisting of one term loses sight of the role of Eros and of the sexual drive, or the life drive, and does not make it possible to account for a principle that for Freud is necessarily thought in economic and energetic terms. The reason why Freud holds to dualism towards and against everything is that it is the condition of the psychic conflict encountered since the first clinic of hysteria in *Studies on Hysteria* and which Freud does not want to and cannot give up.

---

<sup>36</sup> "C. G. Jung attempted to resolve this obscurity along speculative lines by assuming that there was only a single primal libido which could be either sexualized or desexualized and which therefore coincided in its essence with mental energy in general. This innovation was methodologically disputable, caused a great deal of confusion, reduced the term 'libido' to the level of a superfluous synonym and was still in practice confronted with the necessity for distinguishing between sexual and asexual libido." *Freud – Complete Works*, p. 3932.

<sup>37</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, pp. 63–64.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud takes care to qualify the relation that links life drives to death drives:

They are the true life drives. They operate against the purpose of the other drives, which leads, by reason of their function, to death; and this fact indicates that there is an opposition between them and the other drives, an opposition whose importance was long ago recognized by the theory of the neuroses. It is as though the life of the organism moved with a vacillating rhythm. One group of drives rushes forward so as to reach the final aim of life as swiftly as possible; but when a particular stage in the advance has been reached, the other group jerks back to a certain point to make a fresh start and so prolong the journey.<sup>38</sup>

At the end of this conception, which is straight in line with the fable of origins and which stages another scripted fiction, life drives are defined negatively: not as pure affirmation of life, but the diversion of death, the dismissal and deferral of deadly forces. The expression “vacillating rhythm” to translate “*Zauderrhythmus*” is particularly enlightening for it provides a model for the very principle of life conceived as discontinuous tension between opposite forces, as the power of syncope. In German, *Zaudern* means to hesitate, to be suspended. Life is a suspension between two times. The time in question is not the continuum of the consciousness of time, but implies a rhythmicity that alternates positions. Life conceived on this rhythmic modality is strangely consonant with what we call in prosody an iamb—an element of metrics that alternates an unstressed (weak) time followed by a stressed (strong) time. The rhythm Freud talks about is the result of an oscillation between two opposite, disjointed, and ultimately heterogenous tendencies—and this is despite the participation of the life drive in the originary tendency of all drive. Life is conceived as maintaining the possibility of a suspension, of a detour in the form of deferment, of a setback to the scheduled death. Its binding modality (*Bindung*) is at once inchoative and iterative in nature.

20

The work of the so-called life drives, according to the staging proposed by Freud in the passage I just quoted, consists in prolonging the path towards death by introducing an additional loop, a digression that takes the shape of a short circuit, a torn-out duration against a background of rhythmic difference. According

---

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 48–49.

to this hypothesis, life would be nothing more than a deferral of death, a time gained over and against death. Anything but *sponte sui*, life is thought as force of resistance conceived on the mode of recovery. Let me note that the metaphor to which Freud resorts at this precise point makes the life drive coincide with a process of repetition: “once again”, suspensive repetition of an ineluctable end, but repetition at the service of the prorogation of life, of an again [*encore*] of deferred *jouissance*. The “*Encore*” that Lacan turned into a signifier of *jouissance* is marked in Freud with the seal of the unshareable “*lavielamort*”. Life drives behave a bit, if we were to believe Freud, in the way in which Scheherazade, seeking to escape the promised death each night, tells the sultan a story whose continuation is postponed to each new sunrise.

The tendency of the drive, be it the life drive or the death drive—the key to the Freudian apparatus, its difficulty lies in the fact that the life drives are no less conservative, but of a previous state that is not death—is, according to Freud, invariably retrograde: it aims at the reinstatement of a previous state. Its path is teleologically oriented towards an end that is located upstream of the journey. Even if the repressed drive seems to tend towards its full satisfaction understood as “repetition of a primary experience of satisfaction,”<sup>39</sup> it ultimately only aims to reinstate an inorganic state. The quote from Goethe’s *Faust* borrowed by Freud must not deceive its reader: the “presses ever forward unsubdued”<sup>40</sup> [*ungebändigt immer vorwärts dringt*] of which the poet speaks must be interpreted as going back.

In *The Ego and the Id*, Freud mentions in support of his demonstration the case of lower animals that die after having performed the reproductive act:

The ejection of the sexual substances in the sexual act corresponds in a sense to the separation of soma and germ-plasm. This accounts for the likeness of the condition that follows complete sexual satisfaction to dying, and for the fact that death coincides with the act of copulation in some of the lower animals. These creatures die in the act of reproduction because, after Eros has been eliminated through the process of satisfaction, the death drive has a free hand for accomplishing its purposes.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 50–51.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>41</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 3981.

In this particular case, life drives are separated from death drives by the space of a sigh, of a tiny gap, an originary difference. The rhythmic model in this case—that of the return—is not iambic, but trochaic: it is a model in which a stressed (strong) time is followed by an unstressed (weak) time.

The case of the death of lower animals in the sexual act is not the only instance of the drive defusion at the service of an end of the discharge of excitation: *The Ego and the Id* as well as *Civilization and Its Discontents* insist on the model of drive defusion that is brought to light by sadism in which Freud recognizes that “for purposes of discharge the drive of destruction is habitually brought into the service of Eros.”<sup>42</sup>

### The case of the sadistic drive

From *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the sadistic drive holds a very special place in Freud’s argumentation, because it allows him to advance what he calls a hypothesis according to which “a death drive which, under the influence of the narcissistic libido, has been forced away from the ego and has [...] only emerged in relation to the object.”<sup>43</sup> Freud also notes that he has acknowledged since 1905 “a sadistic component in the sexual drive.”<sup>44</sup> The sadistic component of the sexual drive is paradigmatic of the tendency of the drive to “detach itself”, “to make itself autonomous”, promised as it is to a becoming that posteriorly makes its origin virtually unassignable. As early as 1915 in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”, Freud had already advanced the idea that all drive could be broken down into successive waves (“We can divide the life of each drive into a series of separate successive waves, each of which is homogenous during whatever period of time it may last, and whose relation to one another is comparable to that of successive eruptions of lava.”<sup>45</sup>

22

The sadistic drive that he reexamines in *Civilization and Its Discontents* condenses the double question related to the nature and characteristics proper to any drive: does it come from Eros, as one might be tempted to think at first,

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3975.

<sup>43</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 65.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>45</sup> Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” p. 2967.



or is it related to the death drive pushed out of the ego by the influence of the narcissistic libido? It is towards this second hypothesis that Freud leans as early as 1920, and one that he will confirm ten years later. In this respect, the sadistic drive is not one of the drives in the Freudian theory of drives: it enables us to identify the double character of entanglement and displacement, proper to any drive-type motion. In “the obscurity that reigns at present in the theory of the drives,” it shows the analyst the possibility of an instinctual destiny, that takes the form of an alloy. Earlier in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes” (1915), Freud had conceived of different outcomes for the sexual drives and the ego drives or the drives of self-preservation, that are: reversal into its opposite, turning round upon the subject’s own self, repression, sublimation.<sup>46</sup>

Eros may be noisy, it is threatened, including and especially in the *jouissance* that marks the satisfaction of the erotic drive to the exact point where it gives way to Thanatos. This example is not one among others: it reveals the logic that justifies the thesis of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. Erotic satisfaction is not first: it was preceded by a state no less struck by amnesia than the other, and whose power of repressed attraction is even more powerful. The possibility of Eros’s being put out of play is inherent in the structure of instinctuality for Freud, and ultimately of the libidinal economy.

In its pure state, the death drive, just as its corollary that is the compulsion to repeat<sup>47</sup> that can hardly be grasped “unsupported by other motives”, can only very rarely be seen, except in the case of melancholia in which the superego appears, according to Freud, as manifesting “a culture of the death drive”. What phenomenologically characterizes the death drive is its deafening silence. It is so mute that it could go unnoticed and make Freud doubt his own dualistic thesis:

Over and over again we find, when we are able to trace instinctual impulses back, that they reveal themselves as derivatives of Eros. If it were not for the considerations put forward in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and ultimately for the sadistic constituents which have attached themselves to Eros, we should have difficulty in holding to our fundamental dualistic point of view. *But since we cannot escape*

---

<sup>46</sup> Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” p. 2964.

<sup>47</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 24.

*that view*, we are driven to conclude that the death drives are by their nature mute and that the clamour of life proceeds for the most part from Eros.<sup>48</sup>

Freud is therefore on the lookout for instances where the death drives emerge, in his search for tangible proof to support his hypothesis. This is what is at stake in *Civilization and Its Discontents* and in the bringing to light of an instinct of destructiveness:

The manifestations of Eros were conspicuous and noisy enough. It might be assumed that the death drive operated silently within the organism towards its dissolution, but that, of course, was no proof. A more fruitful idea was that a portion of the drive is diverted towards the external world and comes to light as a drive of aggressiveness and destructiveness.<sup>49</sup>

In this book, Freud returns to the general theory of drives in order to clarify and support it. The model of what I would venture to call the “death principle” from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* continues to make Freud wonder after 1920, as he believes that his theoretical elaborations largely remain conjectures<sup>50</sup>—whether they be applied to cell biology—and still require tangible proofs to provide especially to the analytic community, to convince it of the validity of his hypothesis. *Civilization and Its Discontents* can be read as a continuation of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, as the attempt at an anthropological justification of the thesis of the death drive. Drawing from some of the conclusions of *Totem and Taboo* about the killing of the father of the horde and of the totem-feast, as well as from the developments of *Group<sup>51</sup> Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (1921), Freud intends to find in the social field the means of a demonstration whose stake ul-

<sup>48</sup> Freud, *The Ego and the Id*, p. 3980; my emphasis.

<sup>49</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 106.

<sup>50</sup> It does not escape Freud that “the assumption of the existence of the instinct is mainly based on theoretical grounds” *Ibid.*, p. 110—grounds that he attempts to apply to a practical context in order to render intelligible its operation and to demonstrate the relevance of the assumption: “Some readers of this work may further have an impression that they have heard the formula of the struggle between Eros and the death instinct too often. It was alleged to characterize the process of civilization which mankind undergoes but it was also brought into connection with the development of the individual, and, in addition, it was said to have revealed the secret of organic life in general.” *Ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>51</sup> Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. *Freud – Complete Works*. Compiled by Ivan Smith. Web. 31 March 2019. [www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud\\_Complete\\_Works.pdf](http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf).

timately is metapsychological in nature: in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the question is nothing less than one of founding the general theory of drives on anthropological grounds.

Even if in conclusion to *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud denies having sought to simply align the irreconcilable tendencies between Eros and the death drive on the one hand and the individual and the society on the other, and concludes that “it is a dispute within the economics of the libido”<sup>52</sup> that is not analogous to the conflict that governs the economics of drives brought to light in parallel, the fact still remains that a significant part of his intention consisted in accounting for the hostility towards culture, from an explanation of an instinctual kind, that is present all the way up to and including in the decisive argument of “instinctual sacrifice” that is characteristic of any cultural institution. The very notion of the economics of the libido that he mobilizes cannot be understood without the schema of the death drive.

### The case of the destruction drive

*Civilization and Its Discontents* reserves a special place for a particular drive: the destruction drive presented as an avatar of the death drive<sup>53</sup> whose analysis echoes the developments surrounding the sadistic drive. The category of the destruction drive as it is formulated in *Civilization and Its Discontents* is not without consequences on the entire theoretical edifice, and especially on the conception of the dominance of the death drive in the economy of drives. For Freud, it is an epistemological discovery, one that strategically supports his hypothesis of the death drive. Why? Because the destruction drive is recognizable among all the drives of the world. If, as Freud writes in conclusion of his essay, limping is not sinning, destroying is not exactly dying. The death under which the destruction drive falls is the death drive that deviates from its self-destructive course and turns against the outside world.

---

<sup>52</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 142.

<sup>53</sup> It may be noted in passing that the death drive is not the only one to split into a destruction drive : to respond to the objections that would not fail to be expressed, Freud winds up distinguishing the pleasure principle from the principle of Nirvâna, the economic principle of reduction of tensions to zero, entirely enslaved to the death drive.

The origin of the destruction drive is to be searched for in the ego. However, in 1914, in *On Narcissism: An Introduction*, Freud brings to light that the ego can be the object of investment of sexual drives. From the moment the ego ceases to be the exclusive seat of the drives of self-preservation, but becomes, as he writes in 1922 (1917), “a great reservoir from which the libido that is destined for objects flows out and into which it flows back from those objects,”<sup>54</sup> the general theory of the drives is disrupted. For this reason, the study of the ego constitutes the hub, the pivot point of the drive theory as the highlighting of the libido of the self-preservation drives as the narcissistic libido.<sup>55</sup>

The drive, as Freud discovers it, is fundamentally marked by the seal of impurity, of a vicissitude determined by a partial and mixed becoming. This is the sense of the notion of entanglement that he retains in order to characterize the vicissitude of the drive. The drive is doubly impure: firstly because as far as the death drive is concerned, it is silent enough so that it can hardly ever be revealed, and thus let itself be distinguished in its pure state. More fundamentally, because the destruction drive, that has affinities with the sadistic drive that do not escape Freud, is a drive that has undergone a shift, in this case a displacement in relation to the object, which results in the modification of valence which Freud recognizes is proper to all drives:

At the same time one can suspect from this example that the two kinds of drive seldom—perhaps never—appear in isolation from each other, but are alloyed with each other in varying and very different proportions and so become unrecognizable to our judgement.<sup>56</sup>

Let us note that for Freud, the turning outwards of the death drive into aggression drive, however, does not constitute an economic remedy for the self-destruction that threatens the ego: “Conversely, anything restriction of this aggressiveness directed outwards would be bound to increase the self-destruction, which is in any case proceeding.”<sup>57</sup>

26

<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud, “A Difficulty in the Path of Psycho-Analysis.” *Freud – Complete Works*. Compiled by Ivan Smith, p. 3610. Web. 31 March 2019. [www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud\\_Complete\\_Works.pdf](http://www.valas.fr/IMG/pdf/Freud_Complete_Works.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 142.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 106–107.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 106.

The destruction drive therefore conciliates two tendencies: that of death understood in the sense of a return to the inorganic, and that of hate of which Freud says, as early as 1915 in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”, that it is “older than love”: “Hate, as a relation to objects is older than love. It derives from the narcissistic ego’s primordial repudiation of the external world with its outpouring of stimuli. As an expression of the reaction of unpleasure evoked by objects, it always remains in an intimate relation with the self-preservation drives [...]”<sup>58</sup> What constitutes the motive of hate relies on the power of excitation, the force of the instinctual call derived from the object, the stimulus that pulls the individual from their homeostatic passivity, from their energetic quasi-nothing. It is from this defense against the object, against *das Ding* of which Lacan deduces the structural positions, that hate merges with the death drive.

In sadism, Freud seems to have recognized early at the level of the object of love an *analogon* and a prefiguration of the destruction drive: a partial sexual drive with which “we should have before us a particularly strong alloy of this kind between trends of love and the destructive drive”<sup>59</sup>. The one could, if we may say so, be understood as the translation of the other: in sadism, the death drive “twists the erotic aim in its own sense”<sup>60</sup>. Freud treats both drives as almost synonymous, as economic equivalents, translating one drive in the language of the other, qualifying the destruction drive as the death drive inhibited about the sexual purpose: “But even where it emerges without sexual purpose, in the blindest fury of destructiveness, we cannot fail to recognize that the satisfaction of the drive is accompanied by an extraordinarily high degree of narcissistic enjoyment, owing to its presenting the ego with a fulfillment of the latter’s old wishes for omnipotence.”<sup>61</sup>

In these conditions of alloying and vicariance, how can one explain why Freud supported against all odds the dualist thesis, despite the difficulty in identifying pure expressions of the drive? Because the entanglement and the displacement of the drive make sense only if they are of a distinct nature and of different origin, because only a dualistic model can account for the experience of life under-

<sup>58</sup> Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” p. 2974.

<sup>59</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 107.

<sup>60</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 110.

<sup>61</sup> Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, p. 110.

stood in the double sense of psychic life and somatic life, from what Freud calls in Laplanche's rephrasing and translation the "*pulsating factor*". The conflict remains the explanatory model of the drive economy and the psychic conflict requires the maintaining of the dualistic hypothesis. Freud insists on continuing to distinguish, in order to differentiate, what he calls "the energy of the death drive" and "manifestations of the power of Eros."<sup>62</sup> Eros is noisier, but in Freud's conception, even if the death drive is only ever perceptible as a trace, as "something in the background,"<sup>63</sup> it is nonetheless indisputably involved in an economy, which could not possibly be accounted for otherwise.

Of what kind of dualism is the drive economy a part? One might be tempted to regard it as a dualism with one prevailing term, or more accurately, a dualism dominated by a principle: that of death understood as tendency, as irreducible and irresistible temptation of a return to an inorganic state. The drive economy that Freud brings to light, proceeds from a dualism with one term prevailing without sublation.

There is, in the cold examination of the death drive, an almost Promethean gesture, a *hubris* of whose danger Freud is not unaware: this "third step in the theory of the drives"<sup>64</sup> made after broadening the concept of sexuality out of the drive and the examination of its participation in narcissism, is a decisive step and by far the more risky that he has ever leaped. As Freud acknowledges at the end of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the theory of drives is open to criticism, as is the case with any theory of "ultimate things": "Unfortunately, however, people are seldom impartial where ultimate things, the great problems of science and life, are concerned. Each of us is governed in such cases by deep-rooted internal prejudices, into whose hands our speculation unwittingly plays."<sup>65</sup>

28

Whatever may have been the nature for Freud of his insidious and idiosyncratic preferences, the fact still remains that in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, just as in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which slightly attenuates, as if to correct downwards, the beyond into a below, out of the hypothesis of drive entanglement and

---

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 109.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>64</sup> Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, p. 71.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 72.

the bringing to light of a struggle between drives, Freud wished to expose that with which and against which the clinic has to work, that to which the analyst has to do, whether he/ she likes it or not. In no way is it for Freud a question of discouraging clinic; rather, it is a question of reinforcing it with a knowledge that is necessary for the work of establishing a prepositional and syntactic – grammatical – relationship that the cure represents.