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Jacques Nassif and the Return to Freud

Edited by Holden M. Rasmussen and Tadej Troha

Jacques Nassif

Fantasy in “A Child is Being Beaten”¹

Keywords

castration, fantasy, Sigmund Freud, psychoanalysis, sexual difference

Abstract

This article is a translation of Jacques Nassif’s 1967 reading of Sigmund Freud’s “‘A Child is Being Beaten’: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions.” The text appeared in *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, a Paris-based, student-led journal that published articles related to psychoanalysis and epistemology. This article offers a rereading of Freud’s “A Child is Being Beaten,” shifting the focus from perversion to the role of fantasy, as if the elaboration of fantasy were Freud’s manifest project. Nassif’s reading yields insight into the centrality of castration and castration fantasies to the overall structure of fantasy and subjectivity. Furthermore, he proposes that his reading offers an “archaeology of the subject” as opposed to a case-historical or model-based theory of the subject. The full elaboration of this methodological approach is left open. This text remains an underexplored resource for researchers in the psychoanalytic field and contributes significantly to ongoing inquiries into the interplay between sexual difference, science, fantasy, and subjectivity.

Fantazma v »Otrok je tepen«

Ključne besede

kastracija, fantazma, Sigmund Freud, psihoanaliza, spolna razlika

¹ J. Nassif’s text is taken from his talk given at the seminar “Compter avec psychanalyse” on 2 March 1966. [This article was originally published in volume 7 of the *Cahiers pour l’Analyse* in 1967. Translations, facsimiles, synopses, and materials related to the journal are hosted on the web archive: <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/>. The web archive was created by researchers at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP). The editors would like to thank the author for granting permission to publish this translation. All bracketed notes are the translator’s.]

Povzetek

Članek je prevod branja Freudovega spisa »'Otrok je tepen': prispevek k poznavanju nastanka seksualnih perverzij«, ki ga je leta 1967 za *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, pariško študentsko revijo, ki je objavljala prispevke, povezane s psihoanalizo in epistemologijo, prispeval Jacques Nassif. Prispevek ponuja ponovno branje Freudovega spisa, pri čemer fokus s problema perverzij prestavi na vlogo fantazme, s čimer nakaže, da je bil prav to Freudov osrednji namen. Nassifovo branje razpre uvid v središčno vlogo kastracije in kastracijskih fantazij za strukturo fantazme in subjektivnosti. Poleg tega trdi, da s tem ponudi »arheologijo subjekta«, ki se zoperstavlja teoriji subjekta, osnovani na popisih primerov in modelih. Polna razčlenitev tega metodološkega pristopa ostaja odprta. Besedilo ostaja spregledan vir za raziskovalce v polju psihoanalize in pomembno prispeva k potekajočim raziskavam o prepletu spolne razlike, znanosti, fantazme in subjektivnosti.



As is often the case for Freudian texts, it seems that the technique of interpretation that Freud himself proposes should be applied in order to gather the greatest fruit from them. This is the case with “A Child is Being Beaten,” whose subtitle “A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions,” is surely of greater weight in Freud’s thinking. There is no doubt that in the author’s manifest project the fustigation fantasy is exposed and detailed only to provide an example of perversion, the veritable focus of interest. What we would like to do is properly decenter the subject to shift the spotlight and focus it on a precise sequence of the theoretical field that Freud works on; in short, to act as if the problem of fantasy, at the level of a latent project, were being approached for its own sake through this text.

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But, before moving in this direction, we need to note an ambiguity in the concept of fantasy, which generates misunderstandings that can only impede the reading of this text and provoke all kinds of undue projections in its reprisal. In the most elaborate elaboration that has been given,² fantasy first appears as inscribed in the particular structure of an individual neurosis and thus as linked

² See Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis, “Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine du fantasme,” *Temps Modernes* 215 (April 1964): 1833-68 [See also the more available

to the history of a body or to certain significant parts [*parties significatives*] of that body. It seems then that we can infer from the description of many individual fantasies that the verbalization of fantasy takes place according to a binary structure where two terms (subject and complement) are articulated by a scansion. Is this not precisely the point that Freud suggests to us through such an evocative title, which one could easily consider as the template of all fantasies, like a *bona fide* linguistic schema?

That's just it! It's there that the misunderstanding arises. Firstly, because the child's body is not detailed. In this text it is undoubtedly on the bottom that the child is beaten; yet, in the cases of the Rat-Man and the Wolf-Man, it seems that, as this same fantasy becomes more specific, the child is beaten elsewhere, on the penis, for example. So, it does not involve the fantasy of an individual neurosis, but the metaphorical presentation of a fundamental fantasy. In this case, as we shall see later, it is a castration fantasy whose role is to express the origin of the difference of the sexes.

What's more, the title is mistranslated; it should simply read: "A child is being beaten [*Un enfant est battu*]."³ This impedes, lacking the third term, that freedom in substitution through which we characterize the verbalization of an individual fantasy, in addition to the precise anchoring to the body and to floating signifiers taken up by the registers of "the seen" [*du "vu"*] or of "the heard" [*"l'entendu"*].

Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine du fantasme (Paris: Hachette, 1985); Serge Leclair, "Fantasme et théorie (Compte-rendu)," *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* 1 (February 1966): 79–88.

³ [Nassif is criticizing a French translation that does not retain the passivity of the German phrase that Freud examines: *Ein Kind wird geschlagen*. The mistranslated yet official title in French was *On bat un enfant*, which literally means, in English, "One beats a child" or in a screwy, potentially provocative rendering, "We beat a child." Thus, Nassif does not cite or quote that French translation and instead cites and quotes his own translations of James Strachey's English from the *Standard Edition* cited below. It seems that he also consulted German editions of Freud's texts, but he does not provide citations for these; he leaves only a hint that he did so by specifying that *le tableau* should be read as *Bild* or "picture" rather than as *Tafel* or "table" in a lengthy quotation from "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes" included below in note 28.]

We will therefore need, in light of Freud's text, to go against recent elaborations and revisit the problem of the articulation of an individual fantasy, such as it has been described with one of the three original fantasies (of the primal scene, of seduction, of castration), and above all the necessity or not of this articulation. Such is the horizon under which our analysis will unfold.

I

As to whether this may involve a fundamental fantasy, reading the first sentence of the text—if in the domain which we occupy inference is well-founded—suffices to convince us of it:

It is surprising how often people who seek analytic treatment for hysteria or an obsessional neurosis confess to having indulged in the fantasy: "A child is being beaten." Very probably there are still more frequent instances of it among the far greater number of people who have not been obliged to come to analysis by manifest illness.⁴

So, this fantasy, despite Freud's original intention, is not only characteristic of the pervert, but is common to all possible cases of neurosis. Indeed, Freud worked on material composed from six cases: four women and two men (the Wolf-Man, whom Freud was following in the same period, would be a third), and he added that he had others up his sleeve "which have been investigated less thoroughly."⁵

In all of the cases, this fantasy is presented as a "typical occurrence" of a species so common that Freud asks himself all the same whether he is not unduly generalizing (given the paucity of his statistical material) and whether he is not

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⁴ Sigmund Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten": A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 17:179. [I mostly quote from Strachey's translation in the *Standard Edition* to the letter, marking where I or Nassif, as the case may be, have amended or abridged Strachey's translation. I have always altered Strachey's "phantasy" to the now more common "fantasy." I have also changed "beating-phantasy" to "fustigation fantasy," since this (a) matches Nassif's *fantasme de fustigation* more closely and (b) is not an invented compound word in English, making use of the versatility of the English lexicon.]

⁵ Freud, 17:191.

himself isolating his object too far from the field where it inscribes itself. This induces him to write—all while making attenuating and skeptical formulae following and preceding it—this sentence: “[The psychoanalyst] is obliged to admit to himself that to a great extent these fantasies subsist apart from the rest of the content of a neurosis, and find no proper place in its structure.”⁶

One can precisely examine this assertion, which is of great import for our own purposes, in the “Wolf-Man,”⁷ where the fustigation fantasy is mentioned several times but comes along with other pathological manifestations more directly linked to the core [*nœud*] of the neurosis.

Nonetheless, in this last text [the Wolf-Man case-history], Freud seems to us much less free in the face of his material, entangled as he is in the problem of the reality or not of the traumatic “scene.”

II

On the contrary, in “A Child is Being Beaten,” it is fantasy which is the sole reality, or rather, it seems that fantasy has its own status as reality, different from both the Real and the Imaginary (despite German having at its disposal only one term to designate the phantasmatic and the imaginary, we shall see that the thesis is based on the description of different mechanisms and not on a description of the purely semantic order).

A—Firstly, regarding the Imaginary, Freud observes that behind the conscious formulation “A child is being beaten” there is the influence of an anterior phase which remains unconscious and which we can go so far as to act on the

⁶ Freud, 17:183. [My insertion.]

⁷ [Sigmund Freud, “À partir de l’histoire d’une névrose infantile,” in *Cinq psychanalyses*, trans. Patrick J. Mahony (Paris: Quadriges, 2008), 553–54; “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 17:62–63. In an in-text, parenthetical note, Nassif writes “Cf. p. 339 of the French translation *et passim*.” I am unable to determine with certainty which edition of which French translation Nassif is referring to, but I believe it to be Marie Bonaparte’s translation included in earlier editions of the famous *Cinq psychanalyses*; this was originally published in 1935 by Denoël and Steele. The citation to *Cinq psychanalyses* that I provide is the translation updated under the scientific direction of Jean Laplanche.]

“character,” being at the basis and in the center of a paranoia, for example. Indeed, he writes,

People who harbor fantasies of this kind develop a special sensitiveness and irritability towards anyone whom they can include in the class of fathers [and their substitutes]. They are easily offended by a person of this kind and in that way (to their sorrow and cost) bring about the realization of the imagined situation of being beaten by their father. I should not be surprised if it were one day possible to prove that the same fantasy is the basis of the delusional litigiousness of paranoia.⁸

The fantasy, in these patients who want to realize “the imagined situation” of being beaten, thus structures the imaginary reality itself, which comes to superimpose itself on the real reality [*la réalité réelle*], providing material for the imaginary interpretation. In this way, the Real furnishes its elements for “the imaginary ingredient,”⁹ which is in its turn recaptured by a “structural binder”¹⁰ that is not of the same order. The hard kernel of the fantasy is thus rebound to a register itself underpinning the imaginary.

B—In order to define this “reality” of fantasy in relation to the Real itself, we must now describe the most original discovery of this text: The fantasy itself has a history that permits explication of certain essential permutations within its structure.¹¹

To speak of reality in Freud’s *œuvre* is to immediately situate it in time, and thus to confront problems of genesis. Fustigation fantasies, as one might have expected, only appear in these cases at the end of the Oedipal period or after it; Freud therefore hypothesizes that they represent “an end-product and not an initial manifestation.”¹² To support this interpretation, Freud begins by composing,

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⁸ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:195. [My insertion, which is based on Nassif’s translation from English into French.]

⁹ Laplanche and Pontalis, *Fantasme originaire*, 62.

¹⁰ Laplanche and Pontalis, 62.

¹¹ We have chosen to reserve the term “permutation” for changes in the structure of the fantasy that can be explained by the history of the subject, as opposed to the term “substitution,” which will be linked to free imaginative activity within this structure.

¹² Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:184.

with care and finesse, an anamnesis in the classical style. I quote cursorily from pages 179 and 180:

Eventually it becomes possible to establish that the first fantasies of the kind were entertained very early in life: certainly before school age, and not later than in the fifth or sixth year. [. . .] In my patients' milieu it was almost always the same books whose contents gave a new stimulus to the fustigation fantasies: those accessible to young people, such as what was known as the "*Bibliothèque rose*," *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, etc. [*Les malheurs de Sophie* and, in general, books by the Comtesse de Ségur are said, in a footnote in the *SE*, to be the most widely read.] The child began to compete with these works of fiction by producing his own fantasies and by constructing a wealth of situations and institutions, in which children were beaten, or were punished and disciplined in some other way, because of their naughtiness and bad behavior. [. . .] The individuals from whom the data for these analyses were derived very seldom [were] beaten in their childhood, or were at all events not brought up by the help of the rod. Naturally, however, each of these children was bound to have become aware at one time or another of the physical strength of its parents or educators[.]¹³

This passage, which establishes the object of the article, shows on the one hand, how little the fantasy in its first formulation is linked to reality and, on the other hand, how much "the imaginary ingredient" appears to be already structured by the underpinning fantasy, since daydreaming is presented as indissociable from unconscious fantasy. So far, nothing new for us.

However, the true history of fantasy begins precisely before this period, which we will henceforth call "phase C," since this last state of fantasy is preceded by two phases brought to light and clearly elucidated in analysis.

It is evidently apropos the earliest phase that the problem of the relations between the fantasy and reality arises since phase B is always reconstructed in analysis and belongs more to the register of truth than to that of reality. As for phase A, it only comes to light in girls who present—we will see why—the classic form of the fantasy. Nonetheless, Freud does not despair of tracking down this

¹³ Freud, 17: 179–80. [Nassif's insertions and abridgements; translation modified.]

preliminary phase (of a sadistic nature) in the boy as well, “for,” he says, “I can readily see the possibility of meeting with more complicated types.”¹⁴

Be that as it may, in phase A, the beaten child is never the author of the fantasy. It is always someone other, more often a brother or a sister. There is thus no constant relation between the sex of the patient and that of the beaten child. Therefore, the fantasy is certainly not masochistic. It might be tempting to present it as sadistic, but, as Freud notes, we cannot neglect the fact that the child producing the fantasy is never the batterer; it is always an indeterminant adult who is later recognized clearly as the little girl’s father.

Freud concludes with an expression of the fantasy in the form, “My father is beating the child *whom I hate*,” but he asks himself right away “whether the characteristics of a ‘fantasy’ can yet be ascribed to this first step towards the later fustigation fantasy. It is perhaps rather a question of recollections of events which have been witnessed, or of desires which have arisen on various occasions.”¹⁵

He may well add that these doubts are of little importance; for us, these scruples clearly outline the necessity, at the very least, of inscribing the fantasy in “the signifying order,” the space in which it is inscribed being supposedly distinct from and primary to those in which memories or desires come to inscribe or express themselves. Moreover, in his interpretation of this first phase, Freud very simply explains the origin of the significant connection [*la connection signifiante*] between hating and beating: “One soon learns that being beaten, even if it does not hurt very much, signifies a deprivation of love and a humiliation. [. . .] [This is why the] idea of the father beating this hateful child is therefore an agreeable one, quite apart from whether he has actually been seen doing so.”¹⁶

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This absence of “the seen” [*du “vu”*] clearly shows that it is the signifying order that Freud assigns as the space for fantasy, despite the apparent naivete of his tone. The decisive argument is the following: the verb (to beat) permits this as-signation. It is the hardest kernel of fantasy, and it is the verb that supports the entire *mise-en-scène*. Throughout the permutations of the different phases we

¹⁴ Freud, 17:198.

¹⁵ Freud, 17:185. [Freud’s emphasis; translation modified.]

¹⁶ Freud, 17:187. [Nassif’s insertions and abridgement.]

are going to study, the verb "to beat" remains in its place, unchanged. It seems that one might generalize and let it be the case for all fantasy: at its core [*à son nœud*] there will be a verb as signifier of a "movement pleasing or displeasing to the body."¹⁷ Being beaten, needless to say, is an arduous bodily experience for the child, and it could well be, more generally, that "to beat" means "to fuck" [*baiser*] for him, since in any case he has no word at his disposal to recount a strictly amorous relation, and that is what it is all about really.

III

The moment has come to ask ourselves what status Freud attributes to the verbalization of fantasy in our text. While, in fact, no mention is made here of "the heard" [*l'entendu*], Freud does employ the concept of verbalization on several occasions (which I have found expressed in English by the term "wording").¹⁸ In this context, and in support of our preceding interpretation (beating—fucking), Freud remarks, apropos the mystery that the sexual act represents for the child, that intimacy between parents is thought of in terms of relations of another order, such as sleeping together, undressing oneself in front of the other, etc. He adds that "material of [this] kind can be more easily apprehended in verbal images than the mystery that is connected with the genitals."¹⁹

Verbalization here is thus a simple form of transposition that does not involve any imbrication in a process of ego-defense. It concerns nothing more than the verbal expression of signifiers already known and immediately interpretable where a kind of "secondary elaboration" comes into play at the level of the vocabulary available to or, rather, lacking in the subject. Nonetheless, is there, on the basis of different "verbalizations" of the fustigation fantasy (conforming to its "phases"), a ground on which we could build a general grammar of fantasy?

We do not believe so, but we are going to try to see everything that one can draw out in this respect, and at the least determine to what extent one can make Freud say, on the basis of this text, things that he does not actually say, full-stop.

¹⁷ Serge Leclair, "Les éléments en jeu dans une psychanalyse. A propos de l'analyse, par Freud, de l'homme aux loups," *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* 5 (November–December 1966): 7–40.

¹⁸ ["Wording" in English.]

¹⁹ Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten," 17:188.

To begin, in phase C the syntactic form is the passive. It is not an active verb preceded by a neutral (and interchangeable) subject, as has been too quickly translated (or inferred). From the form “a child is being beaten” [*un enfant est battu*] we can only deduce one thing: the absence of the subject of the action whereas the object is specified, i.e. the child. One can also suppose that the batterer will be the father by drawing this word [“father”] from the semantic definition of “the child” as a begotten being and by making the words of the fantasy autonomous, as a language [*langage*] without speech, from which everything must be drawn.

This is not what Freud does, who permits himself to forge a linguistic fiction in order to give verbal support to the reality of the procedure of displacement that he has observed in the passage from phase A to phase C. He writes, “It appears as though in the phrase, ‘my father is beating the child, he only loves me,’ the stress has been shifted back on to the first part after the second part has undergone repression.”²⁰

Yet, this skillful presentation aims, if one refers themselves to the context, to demonstrate above all how the fantasy of phase C is sadistic in its form and masochistic in the satisfaction that derives from it, but not to elucidate some sort of verbal sedimentation. In contrast, the passage from phase A to phase B, described in a genetic fashion, offers some basis for linguistic speculations. This phase B, which is essentially masochistic, is moreover reconstructed in the analysis, but Freud underlines its transition from the active to the passive; it is he, in fact, who includes the second sequence of this novel verbalization in parentheses: “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father);”²¹ and, repression, working more specifically on this latter sequence, gives the monolithic, “A child is being beaten” [*Un enfant est battu*].

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Now, while this material makes it possible to say interesting things about the function of the passive in language [*langue*], it contributes little to the investigation bearing on the fantasy itself; the latter might be perhaps advanced, if, for example, the masculine or the feminine (of the subject or the complement) were expressed in some manner in the morpheme of the verb “to beat,” but this is not

²⁰ Freud, 17:190.

²¹ Freud, 17:189.

the case, and the most complex permutations—that which in the case of the boy goes from “I am loved by my father” to “I am beaten by my mother”—can in no manner, to our knowledge, be formalized with the aid of a linguistic schema. Above all, nothing permits saying that there is any relation to be established between the subject, or rather the author of the fantasy, and the grammatical subject of its verbalization (always the child as passive subject), (between the subject of enunciation and the subject of the statement), because in the permutations brought to light it is neither a matter of metonymic transformation through “contiguity” nor a matter of metaphoric transformation through “similarity.” This is precisely why we employ the term “permutation” which is more neutral in terms of linguistic connotations. In order to round off the debate without closing it, why not recall—which would return us to the text—that Freud is not working, here at least, on linguistic “signifiers” but on “representations”?

IV

The three paths followed thus far—the place of “A child is being beaten” [*Un enfant est battu*] in a typology of fantasy [I]; the status of the reality of fantasy [II]; the possibility of constructing a grammar of fantasy [III]—all while showing the originality and the importance of the text in Freud’s *œuvre*, have above all enabled us, in a critical reflection, to pinpoint what one can and cannot make this author say, purely as a matter of good policy, in order to underline the difference that entails each of its reprisals.

We would now like to embark on a more positive path, on which we will perhaps have to follow Freud rather than rework his text according to what has become of the theory after him. In fact, his vision is one of the freshest yet, as he unfolds what is not unreasonable to call an “archaeology of fantasy.” He writes at the beginning of the text:

A systematic application of [psychoanalysis] shows that fustigation fantasies have a historical development which is by no means simple, and in the course of which they are changed in most respects more than once—as regards their relation to the author of the fantasy, and as regards their object, their content and their significance.²²

²² Freud, 17:184. [My insertion; translation modified.]

By “content,” I think that it is necessary to hear in this sentence the clinical manifestation of which the fantasy is only a symptom; by “object,” the person or rather the sex of the beaten subject in the fantasy; by “signification,” the connection between beating and loving or hating established by the subject. At minimum these translations will enable me to organize my reading along different tracks that will eventually plot a network in which the term “archaeology” will find its place and function.

A. The “content” of the fantasy: at the threshold of “archaeology”

The content is what the fustigation fantasy presents most concretely or most apparently. In this passage of no slight theoretical importance, Freud employs the term “scar” to refer to it: “What remains of the [Oedipus] complex in the unconscious represents the disposition to the later development of neuroses in the adult. In this way the fustigation fantasy and other analogous perverse fixations would also only be precipitates of the Oedipus complex, scars, so to say, left behind after the process has ended . . .”²³

Starting thus from this definition of fantasy as the “scar” of Oedipus, while noting that, right away, Freud assimilates it to a perverse fixation, because his explicit aim, let us not forget, is to determine the aetiology of perversions. However, if we shift the focus onto fantasy and leave perversion in the blurred margins, it becomes clear that this term “scar” takes on a less metaphorical meaning: beneath the scars of Oedipus, there will be the scar of castration. We can then reread the text and find that the fustigation fantasy does not originate, as the previous quotation may lead one to expect, in a hatred for the mother or overcompensatory affection for her, but in hatred for those with whom the father’s affection must be shared.

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Let us go further: if we had only perversion and its relationship to the Oedipus complex as a scale of reference, we should logically expect to find the opposite situation in the little boy (hatred for those whom he must share the mother’s affection). Yet, this is not the case, and it is perhaps no coincidence that Freud is unable to find in boys an A-phase equivalent to that in girls. It is only for the sake of clarity, moreover, that he initially speaks only of the feminine fantasy that presents the classic form. After a fairly long development, he is obliged to

²³ Freud, 17:193; translation modified.

note that there is no point of correspondence, and, while pointing to the place that posits fantasy in its unity of "content" ("*In both cases the fustigation fantasy has its origin in an incestuous attachment to the father*")²⁴ he discovers the point at which neurotic fantasy differs from perverse fantasy: "In the case of the girl the unconscious masochistic fantasy starts from the normal Oedipus attitude; in that of the boy it starts from the inverted attitude, in which the father is taken as the object of love."²⁵

The fantasy thus has a different "content" depending on the sex of its author, which is to say, it presupposes a turmoil of a different structure. Yet, at this level, there is only horizontal "modification," and it is still difficult to speak of the "historical development" of fantasy. This initial track allows us only to see that the fustigation fantasy has as its bedrock the "fundamental fantasy" of castration, or that the "scar" of being beaten originates in the structures established by the difference of the sexes.

B. The "object" of the fantasy: from doxology to archaeology

We said that by "object" we would mean the quality of the person beaten in the fantasy. Now, its author has opinions on this that form a field where analysis describes fullness and emptiness, allows for the observation of continuities and breaks [*coupures*]. It is precisely by shaking this doxology of the subject that one accesses the archaeology that allows for thinking about breaks in a succession of phases. This is exactly what Freud does through this text.

He first lets his patient fill the field he has isolated. He listens for what the fantasy he has pointed out consists of, notes that it is confessed with much reluctance, that it initially has a monolithic formulation, and that it is impossible to know who is beaten and especially whether it is the subject or someone else. But this subject confesses that it is he who is responsible for the substitutions in the daydream, as well as the reproduction of this same fantasy from a period to be determined. From then on, this period can be situated as the terminal phase from which the substitutions must be identified and analyzed according to a fixed combination. Indeed, it is always substitutes for the father (or the mother in the case of boys) who are the batterers, and an indefinite number of boys who

²⁴ Freud, 17:198. [Freud's emphasis.]

²⁵ Freud, 17:198–99.

are beaten (in the case of girls). Freud also notes that, in the most refined fantasies, it is only a matter of humiliation or punishment.

All this, which is indispensable, leaves us at the level of doxology. It is then that Freud observes that the “content” differs according to the sex of the author of the fantasy. And we have seen how it can be related to an archaeological foundation: the castration complex. But above all, it turns out that the analysis, pushed as far as possible, exposes breaks: the characters in the drama change sex. Each break allows us to distinguish two phases: we have moved to the level of archaeology.

The foundation was constituted by the structure implied by the difference of sexes. But now, the child, the father, and the mother, the only actors in the scenario, begin to change sex, as if at the level of the fantasy they were not objects separate from the order of the signifier, but primary signifiers not yet cleaved.

Let us take a closer look. Freud notes that the fantasy can, in women, be reconstructed in analysis following a form that shows the girl beaten by her father, whereas in phase C, now considered posterior, it is always boys who are beaten. So, there is not only a substitution of person, but a change of sex: there is a break, and we can posit an earlier phase B.

But now it is necessary to explain the transition from B to C, to find the necessity of this permutation. Freud rejects both the interpretation by way of the rivalry of the sexes and the one relating the break between B and C to that between A and B. One would then have to suppose that the child, envied by his sister and beaten by the father, was male and consider phase C as a return of the repressed from phase A. Freud adheres to the classical explanation of Van Ophuijsen and prefers to rediscover here a typical manifestation of the “virility complex”: “When they turn away from their incestuous love for their father, with its genital significance, they easily abandon their feminine role.”²⁶

The permutation in the case of girls thus results in the batterer and the beaten being of the same sex. However, in the case of boys, we know that what happens in phase B, which is here the initial phase, is obviously to be repressed: In phase

²⁶ Freud, 17:191.

C, the batterer and the beaten will therefore be of different sexes. It is no longer the father, but the mother who beats the child. And it is by staying as close as possible to the described state of affairs that Freud can write: "In the case of the girl what was originally a masochistic (passive) situation is transformed into a sadistic one by means of repression, and its sexual quality is almost effaced. In the case of the boy the situation remains masochistic and shows a greater resemblance to the original fantasy with its genital significance, since there is a difference of sex between the person beating and the person being beaten."²⁷

The fantasy thus well and truly has an *archaeological* destiny—and not only an *historical* one—since we are dealing with a *temporal-intemporal mix where the relationship to the origin is not thought of in terms of cause and effect, but in terms of resemblance and difference.*²⁸

²⁷ Freud, 17:199.

²⁸ In "Instincts and their Vicissitudes," one can clearly read how Freud attempts to understand the possibility of coexistence despite and through the division into phases; and it is interesting, to justify the use of this borrowed model, to note how naturally the image of successive lava eruptions comes from his pen, which is in truth quite different and more dynamic than that of sedimentation layers. We translate as closely as possible and emphasize: "With regard to both the drives which we have just taken as examples, it should be remarked that their transformation by a reversal from activity to passivity and by a turning round upon the subject never in fact involves the whole quota of the instinctual impulse. The earlier active direction of the drive *persists* [*subsiste*] to some degree *side by side* [*à côté*] with its later passive direction, even when the process of its transformation has been very extensive. The only correct statement to make about the scopophilic instinct would be that all the *stages* [*étapes*] of its development, its auto-erotic, preliminary stage as well as its final active or passive *form* [*configuration*], *co-exist alongside one another* [*sus-sistent côte à côte*]; and the truth of this becomes obvious if we base our opinion, not on the *actions* [*actes*] to which the instinct leads, but on *the mechanism of its satisfaction* [*le mécanisme de leur satisfaction*]. Perhaps, however, it is permissible to look at the matter and represent it in yet another way. We can divide the life of each instinct into a series of *separate successive waves, each of which is homogeneous* during whatever period of time it may last, and whose relation to one another is comparable to that of *successive eruptions of lava* [*éruptions successives de lave*]. We can then perhaps picture the first, original eruption of the instinct as *proceeding in an unchanged form* [*se poursuit inchangée*] and undergoing no development at all. The next wave would be modified *from the outset* [*dès le début*]*—being turned, for instance, from active to passive—and would then, with this new characteristic, be added to the earlier wave* [*s'ajouter à la précédente*], and so on. If we were then to take a survey of the instinctual impulse from its beginning up to a given point, the succession of waves which we have described would inevitably present *the picture* [*le tableau*] [Nassif inserts in parentheses: *Bild* and not *Tafel*] *of a definite development*

Moreover, the recourse to the “object” allows us to better see the distinction to be made between neurotic fantasy and perverse fantasy. It is not useless to note in this regard Freud’s astonishment at the fact that phase B remained conscious in one of his patients. The pervert, in fact, does not repress his fantasy, but sets out to confuse the object with the meaning it has taken, and then to play with this confusion. In the fantasy of being beaten, for example, the boy’s attitude is clearly homosexual and feminine; however, phase C has this strange feature that the boy retains a feminine attitude without making a homosexual object-choice, since the person who beats is the mother or one of her substitutes. In fact, pushing the analysis further, Freud writes: “The boy, who has tried to escape from a homosexual object-choice, and who has not changed his sex, nevertheless feels like a woman in his conscious phantasies, and endows the women who are beating him with masculine attributes and characteristics.”²⁹

The pervert’s fantasy is thus as neatly structured as the neurotic’s fantasy, but it allows for more flexibility in permutations insofar as the object is completely overshadowed by the meaning, becoming, so to speak, a signifier at the subject’s disposal.

C. The “signification” of the fantasy: the subject in archaeology

The time has come to commence on our third track through the text, which this time will have as its reference point the signification, that is, the connection established by the subject between beating and loving or hating.

*of the instinct [d’un développement determine de la pulsion].” Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” in *Standard Edition*, 14:130–31. [Nassif’s emphasis. I have included Nassif’s French for every emphasized word or phrase, however the one exception to this is due to the fact that his French translation departs quite significantly from Strachey’s English. Nassif renders that sentence beginning with “We can divide . . .” as: On peut se figurer la vie de chaque pulsion comme décomposable en *poussées isolées, temporellement séparées* et, à l’intérieur de l’unité de temps (celle qui vous plaira) semblables, qui entre elles ont à peu près le même rapport que des *éruptions successives de lave*. I have italicized the words and phrases he emphasizes therein. One could, with some trepidation, retranslate Nassif’s rendering into English with the following: “We can imagine the life of every drive as divided into *isolated surges, temporally separated*, and, from the inside of the timeframes (whichever one you prefer), seemingly alike, which between them have more or less the same relationship as *successive eruptions of lava*.” I surmise he departed from Strachey’s translation in consultation with Freud’s German.]*

²⁹ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:200. [I have provided the unabridged quotation from the *Standard Edition* for ease of reading.]

Indeed, a subject is needed in the fantasy, or rather the fantasy allows us to see what function is assigned to the subject that we are now in a position to situate. If we take things at their simplest level, it is important to note that the bearer of the fantasy can never position themselves in relation to it as the subject of perception in relation to the perceived object, insofar as this fantasy is maintained, cherished, and reproduced with pleasure. Moreover, it particularly accompanies autoerotic masturbatory scenes, which at first "takes place voluntarily, but later on it does so in spite of the patient's efforts, and with the characteristics of an obsession."³⁰ Similarly, the sight of real scenes of children being beaten provokes in the subject who witnessed it "a peculiarly excited feeling," Freud emphasizes, "which was probably of a mixed character and in which repugnance had a large share."³¹ More clearly still, this subject, although totally absent from phase C of the girls, is nevertheless obliged to recognize that they are undoubtedly "looking on [at the scene]."³²

All these facts are clues of the unconscious formation [*la facture inconsciente*] of the fantasy, included in the order of the signifier that excludes the subject, provided they are invested by desire. It is therefore not by chance, when we go back to what could have been the first state of the fantasy, if the subject is absent from phase A (as from phase C). Freud indeed notes: "The child being beaten is never the one producing the fantasy," and further: "one cannot neglect the fact that the child producing the fantasy is never doing the beating herself."³³ It is precisely on this double absence (the subject being neither the batterer nor the beaten) that the fantasy and the significant connection [*connection signifiante*] at this level between beating and hating are built. It is the obligatory absence of the subject who cannot substitute themselves for the object of their desire (here the father), which is meaningful, which creates the signification.

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But this position of absence eventually generates a feeling of guilt that includes the subject in the process, placing them in a necessary position within the signifying chain they have formed and which they support. However, this does not

³⁰ Freud, 17:179.

³¹ Freud, 17:180.

³² Freud, 17:186. [The English actually has it "probably looking on" rather than "undoubtedly" as Nassif's phrase *sans doute* suggests. My insertion is based on Nassif's translation of the English into French.]

³³ Freud, 17:184, 185.

reach the level of signification without a notable modification. If the subject is present in phase B, it is as a beaten child. There is thus a passage from activity to passivity, but overall the subject has regressed in the unconscious from a genital position to a sadistic-anal position.

This is what Freud expresses in the language [*langage*] of overdetermination, which is actually the language [*langage*] of co-presence in the same archaeological disposition where being beaten itself continues to signify being loved; but let's return to the text: "My father loves me" was understood in the genital sense; the regression, in fact:

"My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father)." This being beaten is now a convergence of the sense of guilt and sexual love. It is not only the punishment for the forbidden genital relation, but also the regressive substitute for that relation, and from this latter source it derives the libidinal excitation which is from this time forward attached to it, and which finds its outlet in masturbatory acts.³⁴

If we stay close to the text, we also see that the diachronic phenomenon of regression is related to the synchrony of the signifier where the relationship remains the same between the father and the child despite the permutation of terms, [or, what is the same,] despite the absence and then the presence of the subject in the sequence of the fantasy.

But in any case, the break between A and B, which is the work of Regression [*sic*], brings notable changes at the level of signification, since we clearly move from the genital register to the anal register, which here specifies itself through masochism, while the break between B and C, which is the work of Repression [*sic*], brings the changes we have seen at the level of the object, but rejoins, in terms of signification, with phase A.

Indeed, we have seen how Freud forged what we then called a "linguistic fiction"³⁵ expressing phase A ("My father beats the child, he loves only me"), regarding which he assigned repression that, through a mechanism of displacement,

³⁴ Freud, 17:189. [Nassif's removal of Freud's emphasis.]

³⁵ See above, 18.

preserved only the first part of the sequence ("My father beats the child"). However, the archaeological *tableau* now has two entry-points, and to rejoin with A, the fantasy must combine with B. "My father beats the child" thus becomes: "A child is beaten," the passive form expressing this passage through B, as well as the return to A. Freud, here, describes this process in energetic terms: "[The fantasy's importance] lies in the fact that it has taken over the libidinal cathexis of the repressed portion [phase B] and at the same time the sense of guilt which is attached to the content of that portion [phase A]."³⁶

For us, it would be the same to say that it suggests an archaeological schema where diachronic processes (Regression) and synchronic (Repression) amalgamate in a single, uniform arrangement [*une même disposition d'ensemble*] whose phases follow and interlock without replacing or obscuring each other. The force engendering the breaks is indeed desire, but these breaks occur along the dotted lines drawn by the base structure and the combination of its terms.

The fantasy is therefore no longer only mixed in its composition ("imaginary ingredient" and "structural binder"), but already, at the structural level, in the content of its phases whose significations are opposed. Freud clearly points this out when he notes that "the second phase [. . .] continues to operate through the agency of the phase that takes its place," which "arouses activities of the imagination which on the one hand continue the fantasy along the same line, and on the other hand neutralize it through compensation."³⁷

We must insist, as Freud does, on the importance of phase B, which brings about a transformation in the unconscious itself, and interpret this based on the fact that the subject, absent from phase A as from phase C, introduces themselves into the signifying chain through the sequence of the fantasy where they are a beaten child. And it is this presence of the subject in B that gives the fantasy its inverse signification.

If we were to now chart this history of the subject in the fantasy into some sort of evolutionary diagram, we would have to note the binary periodicity of its rhythm of appearance, so much so that we could suppose a phase D where the subject

³⁶ Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten," 17:191. [Nassif's insertions and amendments.]

³⁷ Freud, 17:195.

would necessarily be present and which would take, at the level of signification, the counter-point of phase C, all while rejoining [*en renouant*] with phase B. Without venturing too far, we could, for example, rediscover the subject in the fantasy, this time, as the batterer, and it would have to be assumed that beating one's child would unconsciously rekindle a feeling of pain, and this could be explained by the fact that—the child, being considered as a living work and, to put it bluntly, as a substitute for the phallus—to beat him would be to hate him.

And it is Freud himself who, in a return to the phase A of girls, which had remained mysterious until then, suggests to us six years later in “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” the interpretation we have deduced here. He has just considered that jealousy “plays a far larger part in the mental life of women,” as it represents a substitute by displacement of penis envy; and he writes:

While I was still unaware of this source of jealousy and was considering the fantasy “a child is being beaten,” which occurs so commonly in girls, I constructed a first phase for it in which its meaning was that another child, a rival of whom the subject was jealous, was to be beaten. This fantasy seems to be a relic of the phallic period in girls. The peculiar rigidity which struck me so much in the monotonous formula “a child is being beaten” can probably be interpreted in a special way. The child which is being beaten (or caressed) may ultimately be nothing more nor less than the clitoris itself, so that at its very lowest level the statement will contain a confession of masturbation, which has remained attached to the content of the formula from its beginning in the phallic phase till later life.³⁸

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On the basis of this interpretation, phase D would therefore only be a repetition of phase A *après coup*, by which the circle of the fantasy closes around this knot of castration which is in its center.

From the fustigation fantasy, we have thus recognized the place assigned to the subject in the order of the signifier. However, our initial concern was to situate the subject in archaeology; and this, as a totalizing system of interpretation, is

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes,” in *Standard Edition*, 19:254.

not purely and simply assimilable to the signifying chain, of which all that can be said is that it is intrinsically linked to the subject.

However, the subject also has the function of being the bearer of the bar of repression, and in its evanescence, it is almost clinging to the irreducible permanence of this bar. Moreover, we know that it is in the bar of the subject that the fantasy takes place, this bar being like the sensitive plate where the unconscious, structured *like* a language, communicates with the order of the signifier, which is, properly speaking, language. We can therefore assume that the various phases, wherein the subject is either absent or present, relate to the same archaeology where, although excluding each other in the conscious, they continue to act through one another in the manner we have described.

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Yet, it must be avowed, this text by Freud concerns repression as much as fantasy, for reasons that remain to be elucidated.

Freud, in his descriptions of fantasy, remarks, or implicitly admits, that repression engenders regression, or at least that these two processes are linked. This fact appears to me as the postulate allowing the fantasy to organize and structure itself according to an archaeology, such as we have arrived, after Freud, to reconstruct the breaks, then the phases.

However, it must be said that this postulate is hidden and that this last passage, which we will quote at length, places more emphasis on the difference between the two processes rather than their connection. But many other clues suggest that there is an originary repression of the fantasy which generates phase A and which, being prior to regression, ultimately constitutes its main principal motor. I therefore cite this particularly remarkable quote:

We are justified in assuming that no great change is effected by the repression of the original unconscious fantasy. Whatever is repressed from consciousness or replaced in it by something else remains intact and potentially operative in the unconscious. The effect of regression to an earlier stage of the sexual organization is quite another matter. As regards this we are led to believe that the state of things changes in the unconscious as well. Thus in both sexes the masochistic

fantasy of being beaten by the father, though not the passive fantasy of being loved by him, lives on in the unconscious after repression has taken place.³⁹

But the originary repression, as the bar of the subject constitutive of all archaeology, is the condition of this second difference between a diachronic process—that manages to change things in the timeless unconscious itself—and the synchronic process—guarantor of difference and repetition—[a condition] which is repression proper.

In any case, if the fantasy is rendered possible through its archaeological foundation, as a “scar of Oedipus,” it is indeed because of repression. And it is not by chance that Freud, several times in this text and explicitly in the end, enquires about its origins.

He discusses in this regard the theories of Fliess (whom he leaves anonymous) and Adler on this point; they have in common, he says, “a sexualization of the repression process.”⁴⁰ However, Fliess’s theory, which posits that the repressed unconscious in every man is what is contrary to his sex, does not hold up solely due to the existence of the fustigation fantasy in the girl, as phase A is entirely feminine (being loved by the father).

When it comes to Adler’s theory—which makes masculine protest, that is, the need to deviate from the feminine line, the reason in every case of repression—it more aptly renders the facts, since the fustigation fantasy, both in girls and boys, corresponds to a feminine attitude. But then, Freud points out: “If the masculine protest is to be taken as having satisfactorily explained the repression of passive fantasies (which later become masochistic), then it becomes for that very reason totally inapplicable to the opposite case of active fantasies.”⁴¹

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These two theories are presented as counterexamples of the theory that Freud proposes, which will allow us to resume with the problematic from which we started, handling the fantasy as linked to the history of a body and therefore attached to the structure of an individual neurosis.

³⁹ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:199–200.

⁴⁰ Freud, 17:200.

⁴¹ Freud, 17:203. [Nassif renders Strachey’s “masculine protest” to *protestation virile* which can be directly retranslated into English as “virile protest.”]

Indeed, the body, although it can only be apprehended in its significant parts [*ses parties signifiantes*], is this entity that, as it develops, supports the temporalization of the subject, as is implied by repression. And one could therefore assume that the body constitutes in some way a repressive instance that bars the evanescent subject. In any case, one can interpret this meaning in the passage that we quote to conclude:

The theory of psycho-analysis (a theory based on observation) holds firmly to the view that the motive forces of repression must not be sexualized. Man's archaic heritage forms the nucleus of the unconscious mind; and whatever part of that heritage has to be left behind in the advance to later phases of development, because it is unserviceable or incompatible with what is new and harmful to it, falls a victim to the process of repression.⁴²

Would it be too much to assert that the body, which brings man into the world prematurely, constitutes this "archaic heritage" and engenders, provokes, and undergoes repression, becoming, properly speaking, the fantasy of all fantasies, forming this closed field where the "*mise-en-scène* of desire" is staged?⁴³

Hence, the problem is to know whether this archaeology that we have uncovered *interprets a domain or furnishes a model*; for, if it is on the structure exposed by castration that the fantasy of being beaten is grafted, it is obviously not the difference of the sexes that by itself makes the fantasy. Or one could ask oneself, could another fantasy not form, with a different verbalization, on the ground of this same structure, based on this same archaeological foundation, but according to the individual history of a particular body? It does not seem that the decentering of perspectives in the reading leaves any room for speculation that would permit responding to this specific question.

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Translated by Holden M. Rasmussen

⁴² Freud, 17:203–4.

⁴³ Laplanche and Pontalis, *Fantasme originare*, 75.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Jacques Nassif

Freud and Science¹

Keywords

Jean-Martin Charcot, epistemological break, Sigmund Freud, philosophy of science, psychoanalysis, repetition

Abstract

This article is a translation of Jacques Nassif's 1968 article "Freud et la science," which appeared in *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. Nassif assesses the compatibility of the psychoanalytic theory of repetition with the concept of the epistemological break. If epistemological breaks are ruptures with the past, then how does that apply in the case of psychoanalysis as both a general science and a clinical practice? As Nassif notes, the concept of repetition is fundamental to both registers of psychoanalysis: as a behavior outside the clinic and as an instrumental phenomenon within the clinic. Given the fundamentality of repetition, what is the status of the break in the field and function of psychoanalysis? Nassif's answer is that psychoanalysis breaks with the past by virtue of a repetition of a previous series of breaks in the psychological sciences. This series of breaks appears across the works of Jean-Martin Charcot, John Hughlings Jackson, Hippolyte Bernheim, and Josef Breuer. After a close-reading of Freud's engagement with Charcot's work, an examination of his tutelage under Charcot, and an assessment of the novelty of Charcot's methods and theories, Nassif suggests that epistemological breaks imply a subsequent "repetition of the break" [*répétition de coupure*]. However, how Freud makes his own inaugural break through the repetition of a previous series of breaks remains to be elucidated. Nassif's article thus attempts to "repeat" the origins of psychoanalysis, and to shed light on the applicability of the notion of the epistemological break in contested "sciences," like Marxism and psychoanalysis. The article ends with a note

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¹ [This article was originally published in volume 9 of the *Cahiers pour l'Analyse* in 1968. Translations, facsimiles, synopses, and materials related to the journal are hosted on the web archive: <http://cahiers.kingston.ac.uk/>. The web archive was created by researchers at the Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy (CRMEP). The editors would like to thank the author for granting permission to publish this translation. All bracketed notes are the translator's.]

that a sequel is to follow. Nassif later incorporated the material from this article into his major 1977 book *Freud, l'inconscient*.

Freud in znanost

Ključne besede

Jean-Martin Charcot, epistemološki prelom, Sigmund Freud, filozofija znanosti, psihoanaliza, ponavljanje

Povzetek

To besedilo je prevod članka Jacquesa Nassifa »Freud et la science«, ki je bil leta 1968 objavljen v *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*. Avtor v njem preučuje združljivost psihoanalitične teorije ponavljanja s konceptom epistemološkega preloma. Če so epistemološki prelomi prekinitve s preteklostjo, kako torej to velja za psihoanalizo kot znanost in kot klinično prakso? Kot poudarja Nassif, je pojem ponavljanja temeljnega pomena za oba registra psihoanalize: kot vedénje zunaj klinike in kot instrumentalni pojav znotraj nje. Kakšen je, upošteva temeljni značaj ponavljanja, status preloma v polju in funkciji psihoanalize? Nassifov odgovor je, da psihoanaliza s preteklostjo prelamlja na način, da ponovi predhodno serijo prelomov v psiholoških znanostih. Ta serija prelomov se pojavi v delih Jean-Martina Charcota, Johna Hughlingsa Jacksona, Hippolyta Bernheima in Josefa Breuerja. Po natančnem branju Freudovega ukvarjanja s Charcotovim delom, pregledu njegovega izobraževanja pri Charcotu in ovrednotenju novosti Charcotovih metod in teorij Nassif ugotavlja, da epistemološki prelomi implicirajo kasnejšo »ponovitev preloma« [répétition de coupure]. Odprto pa pri tem ostaja vprašanje, kako Freud izvede svoj lastni izhodiščni prelom prek ponovitve predhodne serije prelomov. Nassifov članek zato poskuša »ponoviti« izvor psihoanalize in osvetliti uporabnost pojma epistemološkega preloma v spornih »znanostih«, kot sta marksizem in psihoanaliza. Članek se zaključí z opombo, da bo sledilo nadaljevanje. Nassif je pozneje gradivo iz tega članka vključil v svoje osrednje delo *Freud, l'inconscient* (1977).

We only have a sieve. We do not yet have a granary to store our flour; and, it's quite possible that our wheat will continue to grow for a long time, wildly and in foreign soil.

It is better to speak in parables when pointing out a lack, which for psychoanalysis is an epistemology that would allow it to be designated as "science," thereby subjecting this very concept to the distortion implied by the psychoanalyst's practice and the domain it occupies: that of the unconscious.

But the situation is different, and far from this lack being a cause for concern, it is rather to the proponents of this discipline—deemed marginal—that one will calmly pose these seemingly simple questions: What is your science? Who are its scholars? However, being unable to refer to an institution which is, after all, still only one where doctors work, the only answer that will not be caught in their ideology is the one that consists of referring to the texts of its founder, where a science is still waiting to be formulated; and this task becomes increasingly urgent, because its rejection by almost the entire medical profession has not prevented it from reappearing in the real in the form of psychological ideology, stamped with the most suspicious concepts: those of "frustration" and "understanding," "adaptation," and "aptitude" . . .

It seems, in fact, that the most immediate characteristic of sciences like psychoanalysis or Marxism is their inability to enter the realm of the real until they are relegated to the symbolic; the mere writing of a theoretical text addressed to the consensus of scholars is no longer sufficient to confer upon them the criteria of "objectivity" or "universality," terms which, for these fields, are already part of that ideology of ideologies that constitutes the project of establishing a "universe of discourse."

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In this regard, one must acknowledge Freud's astonishment and impatience, expressed in the postscript to Chapter I of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, written in 1909, where he justifies not updating his review of the dream literature, which was already nearly exhaustive in 1900:

For the intervening nine years have produced nothing new or valuable in either factual material or in opinions that might throw light on the subject. In the majority of publications that have appeared during the interval my work has remained

unmentioned and unconsidered. It has, of course, received least attention from those engaged in what is called “research” into dreams, and who have provided a shining example of the repugnance to learning anything new which is characteristic of men of science. In the ironical words of Anatole France, “*les savants ne sont pas curieux.*”²

Certainly, but they at least have the duty (and they may have failed in it) to keep abreast of something that will never fundamentally be “new” to them, since they cannot shake off (especially in the field of logic) the impression that, before any “discovery,” there was always a “subject supposed to know” that it already existed, but which will only be the “old” reformulated more generally and allowing for the interpretation of a greater number of facts.

And it is precisely to the extent that the concept of science thus structures knowledge that a science like psychoanalysis cannot find its place there, inasmuch as its practice simultaneously consists of instituting a “subject supposed to know” in the transference and leading the patient to recognize that this does not exist. This means that its theoretical space lies entirely within that of a break, that of a “psychoanalytic act,”³ from which there is precisely no accumulation of knowledge, but a necessity to repeat what instituted psychoanalysis as a science, namely the break itself.

Now, if we are to believe the most well-established theses in the history of science, an “epistemological break” is defined by the points of no return from which that science begins, that is, by the fact that it excludes repetition, that it does not need to be repeated, that it occurs only once. But what must be clearly understood is that this non-repetition, in the domain of the physical sciences themselves, is purely descriptive and by no means normative,⁴ and that

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² Sigmund Freud, “The Interpretation of Dreams,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 4:93. [French in original.]

³ The title of Lacan’s seminar at the E.N.S. for the academic year 1967–68. [Now published as the fifteenth book of Lacan’s *Séminaire*: Jacques Lacan, *L’acte psychanalytique* (Paris: Seuil, 2025).]

⁴ Here, we want to discuss the discourse *of* science, and we assume it would still be possible to distinguish it from a discourse *about* science in the style of Wittgenstein.

therefore, any connotation implying a founding subject must be erased from this term “break,” even if one claims to disregard proper names.

Thus, it is in no way possible to import this concept from the history of science into the fields established by Marxism or psychoanalysis, in order to found the scientificity of these sciences, even if “after” Marx and Freud “one can no longer think in the same way” about the objects “History” and “Fantasy.” [This] for the simple reasons that it is by no means evident at the level of facts (of institution) and that the battle is far from won at the level of effects (of regression); otherwise, one does not see what would prevent taking the “break” literally, and imperturbably supposing that, ideology being the mother, science is nothing other than the permitted woman, or *vice versa* just as well . . .

Psychoanalysis, from which we should have been more attuned to the fetishism of words, precisely offers us the term “act” to denote the paradox of a recurring break, and it is to the task of starting anew that it calls us. However, far from turning the “return to Freud” into an “equivocal, intrinsically ideological” endeavor that might indeed yield “scientific effects” but whose purpose would be “its own suppression,”⁵ this movement of rereading—or even simply reading, given how many texts still feel fresh—which undoubtedly had a polemical dimension, primarily serves as an act. This is because every psychoanalysis inherently involves a (quasi-theoretical) reevaluation of all Freudian concepts, and every reading of Freud should be understood as an enactment of these concepts upon the very text they construct.

In other words, these concepts possess a unique scientific status, having been mostly imported from related fields—or even from the “leading science” of the time, namely thermodynamics (!)—often functioning as metaphors, their precise meaning impossible to pin down, all bearing the stamp of arbitrariness and thus, throughout the texts, shifting from one meaning to its opposite: a strange science indeed!

However, we would like to show that these concepts, which are indistinguishable from those of classical psychiatry, neurology, or Herbartian psychology, nonetheless form a system, in the very precise sense that they functioned as a

⁵ See Michel Tort, “Freud et la philosophie,” *L'Arc* 34 (1968): 111–12.

“sieve” that allowed Freud to sift through the science of his time and steer it towards a specific practice.

Yet, this process unfolded unbeknownst to Freud himself, convinced as he was, until the end of his life, of the cumulative nature of Science and the assimilability of psychoanalysis: a “cornerstone,” perhaps rejected, but a building block, nonetheless.

Continuing with our metaphors, which are of a different kind, it is this illusion that we wish to expose as the “attic illusion,” by showing that all of Freud’s efforts to “store away” psychoanalysis were, in fact, meant to conceal from himself this “sieve” function, which it may not be ready to relinquish.

And perhaps the most compelling example would be that of dreams and the book he dedicated to them, considering it, until the very end, his most significant and robust work. However, while Freud genuinely did everything to ensure its content would be accepted by the scientific community as a mere contribution to a problem previously left unsolved, there is no doubt that this text stands apart, if only by its necessarily autobiographical bent, from the style of theoretical communications he begins by extensively quoting.

We now know that this book was practically negotiated page-by-page with Fliess, whose influence on its final form was considerable, since he obliged Freud to omit the analysis of an important and even central dream, in which Fliess himself was directly involved. We also know that its material was ready, according to Freud himself, as early as 1896, and we can confirm this by reading the *Project for a Scientific Psychology*. If its writing and publication waited so long, it is precisely because Fliess was, understandably, incapable of handling the “transference,” materialized, so to speak, in the sending of these book-leaves to Berlin, to the extent that Fliess himself dreamed of seeing it finished, and Freud himself marveled at this.⁶

But it was precisely this aspect, which is far from negligible for us, that had to be completely effaced without a trace; and it is for this very purpose that “Chapter I,” dealing with the literature on dreams, was intended: a chapter that “had

⁶ See Sigmund Freud, “Extracts from the Fliess Papers,” in *Standard Edition*, 1:274.

always been a bugbear” and was only completed in June 1899, thus last.⁷ Now, it will come as no surprise that this chapter subtly contains what could legitimately be called a “theory of the break,” as this passage can immediately convince us:

It is difficult to write a history of the scientific study of the problems of dreams because, however valuable that study may have been at a few points, no line of advance in any particular direction can be traced. No foundation has been laid of secure findings upon which a later investigator might build; but each new writer examines the same problems afresh and begins again, as it were, from the beginning.⁸

Is it different after Freud? One would be tempted, taking this text literally, to express doubts, since every individual who enters psychoanalysis is indeed forced “to examine the same problems firsthand and to start again from the beginning.” There is, of course, the distinction between “latent content” and “manifest content,” the theory of the “dream as guardian of sleep” (which can be said to have been verified retrospectively thanks to electroencephalography), the concepts of “condensation” and “displacement,” perhaps also the concept of “regression,” which are part of the scientific achievements that no “scholar” could dispute; yet the very heart of Freudian theory, namely that “the dream is the fulfillment of a wish,” remains a theoretical assertion impossible to record by a science whose knowledge would be structured on a cumulative model.

It should then be remembered that the dream is not an autonomous object that could be the subject of some “Science of Dreams” and that Freudian research has, in fact, constituted only a “detour,” the dream being, to put it simply, “the first member of a class of abnormal psychic phenomena” and having “the theoretical value of a paradigm,” the correlation being moreover so close that “anyone who has failed to explain the origin of dream-images can scarcely hope to understand phobias, obsessions or delusions, or to bring a therapeutic influence to bear on them.”⁹

⁷ James Strachey, “Editor’s Note,” in Freud, “Interpretation of Dreams,” 4:xix–xx.

⁸ Freud, “Interpretation of Dreams,” 4:5.

⁹ Freud, 4:xxiii.

Yet if it is indeed on the correlation between dream and symptom that Freud, in the reality of his practice, focused his theoretical effort, the book constantly shows us only one panel of the diptych and can therefore produce only an empty model, as Freud admits at the end:

It is only by reference to these sexual forces that we can close the gaps that are still patent in the theory of repression. I will leave it an open question whether these sexual and infantile factors are equally required in the theory of dreams. I will leave that theory incomplete at this point, since I have already gone a step beyond what can be demonstrated in assuming that dream-wishes are invariably derived from the unconscious.¹⁰

Much could be said about this admission of incompleteness, or this feeling of going beyond what is demonstrable, for here we truly have the surest criteria for moving into another domain; this is also what gives this book its constantly ambiguous character, as it purports, on the one hand, to theorize an object, albeit one it posits as a paradigm, and on the other hand, still conceives the status of the demonstrable in terms of those authors who do nothing other than align contradictory theses on the dream from which we learn nothing new.

For us to learn something new, one must first have changed location, and this is what Freud did from his return from Paris in 1886 until the invention of the term “psychoanalysis” in 1896. He subsequently tried to distance himself, in the form of a theoretical production, capable of justifying a certain number of practical decisions, which gave us *The Interpretation of Dreams*. And finally, we would like to show how the dream became the center of the web or the knot from which the braided threads of the “sieve” were likely to hold, a knot that had to be tied or known how to untie [*noeud qu’il fallait pouvoir nouer ou savoir dénouer*].

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As for the “break,” if one can use that word in psychoanalysis, it can only designate the end of Freud’s dependent relationship with Fliess once the work was completed. This means that far from attributing this act of rupture to a scholar’s decision, we must, in this domain, derive it from a patient’s demand. Anna O. compelled Breuer to listen to her speak; Emmy von N. compelled Freud to

¹⁰ Freud, 5:606.

abandon hypnosis and take an interest in dreams; Elizabeth von R. compelled Freud to listen to her without interrupting; *et cetera*.

Nevertheless, these decisions wrested from the physician were endorsed by the theoretician. Indeed, over the ten years we have isolated, we will have to follow the process that led to the birth of an institution, and which can be said to be punctuated, in the form of repetition, through Freud, by “breaks” made in other fields that delineate the unitary form of knowledge. In the repetition of the various breaks that we will isolate, psychoanalytic theory was rendered possible, [a theory] that we can, in the final analysis, very precisely designate as a “theory of medical ideology.” However, while it is quite remarkable that these various repetitions could pass through the sole proper name of Freud, it is no coincidence that these “breaks” can all be designated by the names of his masters: Charcot, Jackson, Bernheim, Breuer.¹¹

This presentation, in any case, does not aim to establish real historical connections. The population of “discursive events” forms a whole that is undoubtedly more complex. It is, for example, urgent to trace the origin of most Freudian concepts to measure the distortion they undergo once integrated into his system. Now, there is no longer any doubt that they are most often drawn from Herbartian psychology, stripped of its philosophical content and established as an empirical science tinged with associationism. This indeed formed the reference framework for several researchers on the anatomy and physiology of the nervous system during the speculative part of this research called “mythology of the brain,” to such an extent that its functioning could only be structured according to the image of psychological processes given by Herbartian psychology. It is now known that it penetrated through textbooks into the Austro-Hungarian school system and that, for example, in the gymnasium where Freud studied, its teaching had become quasi-official, so that any discussion between psychologists, psychiatrists, neurologists, or educators could only be conducted in Herbartian terms. Most of these terms are present in Lindner’s manual that Freud had in his hands; this manual, according to O. Andersson, whose research is worth quoting, presents

¹¹ [Nassif takes up each of these figures in his monograph *Freud, l'inconscient* (Paris: Flammarion, 1977). In the present text, he only discusses the Freudian system in relation to Charcot.]

the conception of psychic phenomena as manifestations of a “*Vorstellungsmechanik*,” a dynamic interaction of ideas. Various phases of this were referred to under the Herbartian terms: “*Klarheitsgrad, Hemmung, Verdunkelung, Komplikation, Verschmelzung, Modifikation, Aperception, Aufmerksamkeit, Reproduktion*.” The dynamic character of this conception of mental life is especially apparent in the use of a series of metaphors related to the Herbartian notion of a “*Schwelle des Bewusstseins*.” In relation to this threshold, the interplay of ideas was pictured as “*Herabdrückung, Verdrängung oder Sinken der Vorstellungen unter die Schwelle des Bewusstseins*,” and “*Aufsteigen der Vorstellungen über die Schwelle des Bewusstseins*,” with or without “*Reproduktionshilfen*” or “*Widerstand*” from the more or less integrated “*Vorstellungsmassen*” present there.¹²

It is indeed towards this physics of representations that Freudian conceptualization points us, at its most theoretical. But we should also consider how the concepts of thermodynamics—which, in Freud’s time, was the equivalent of what linguistics is for the “human sciences” today—integrated into the Herbartian model, filling this purely descriptive dynamic with a characterization of the underlying mental force.

But here, we can only formulate hypotheses, pointing to directions for research. Indeed, we must still position ourselves within Freud’s texts, making them function as a sieve for wheat grown on land they did not sow, and starting from the premise that they cannot be reinscribed into the field of discursive events that gave rise to them, as long as the scope of the event they represent has not been taken into account, thereby calling into question the very form of knowledge itself.¹³

¹² Ola Andersson, *Studies in the Prehistory of Psychoanalysis* (Scandinavian University Press: Norstedts, 1962), 13; and our note in *Critique* of February 1968. [This issue of *Critique* was inaccessible at the time of translation.]

¹³ We will complete this study in parts bearing on: Jackson and the concept of the unconscious; Bernheim and the concept of “psychic treatment;” and Breuer and the concept of economy. The text that we present on Charcot and the concept of neurosis is exemplary of the method adopted, which permits a glimpse of the reasons that we attach a proper name to each of these concepts. To conclude, we will endeavor to elucidate the links that connect these proper names to one another, on the one hand, and to the general form of knowledge, on the other hand. [This provides an overview of what will be the organization of the later *Freud, l’inconscient* (1977).]

Charcot and the Concept of Neurosis

It is impossible to retrace the history of those ten years (1886-96) that witnessed the birth of psychoanalysis without transgressing the standard approach in the history of science, which can only explain “progress” taking the form of violent opposition through concepts as vague as “generational conflict,” when it’s not that of “emulation” between individuals or nations. One would begin, for example, by contrasting the German school of anatomo-pathology with the French school of neuropathology, then credit Freud with the combined influence of T. Meynert and [Jean-Martin] Charcot. In a second step, one would point out that Meynert and Charcot ultimately lived in the same era—the one that saw the great expansion of anatomical localizations—and are therefore indebted to the same scientific orientation, whereas Freud lived in an era when the triumph of localizations was deemed to have given rise to excessive hopes and when functionalist theories of the nervous system predominated, thanks to the rise of electro-physiology.

This way of seeing things is no longer merely naive, but positively false, when it comes to psychoanalysis, because it constitutes a genuine obstacle to reading Freud. It is in much less scholarly terms that we will simply say that Freud was driven by a passion for the new. Now, “I had to consider,” he writes at the beginning of his “Report on My Studies in Paris and Berlin (1936 [1886]),” “that I could not expect to learn anything essentially new in a German University after having enjoyed direct and indirect instruction in Vienna from Professors T. Meynert and H. Nothnagel.”¹⁴

Now these proper names designate one as the ideal type of classical psychiatrist who is himself ultimately swept away by madness, the other as that of the great physician of high society capable of the most colorful language in the “on-call lounge” [*salle de garde*], but who does not want to let these “outbursts” affect his relationship with patients.

It seems that Charcot was of a different caliber and was truly Freud’s second master, after [Ernst Wilhelm von] Brücke. We must see in what terms he describes

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Report on My Studies in Paris and Berlin,” in *Standard Edition*, 1:5.

their encounter, and how the opposition between “national characters” can precisely serve to rationalize an enthusiasm:

The man who heads all these resources and auxiliary services is now sixty years of age. He exhibits the liveliness, cheerfulness, and formal perfection of speech that we are in the habit of attributing to the French national character; while at the same time, he displays the patience and love of work which we usually claim for our own nation. The attraction of such a personality soon led me to restrict my visits to one single hospital and to seek instruction from one single man.¹⁵

Such terms in a scientific report are indeed surprising; however, it is unclear why the domain of science should be the sole realm where unexpected observations must be disregarded. Is it perhaps because an event cannot carry the connotation of novelty within this domain? The fact remains that six years later, upon Charcot’s death, it is to this very term “new” that Freud dedicates significant attention in the text he devotes to him:

He might be heard to say that the greatest satisfaction a man could have was to see something new—that is, to recognize it as new; and he remarked again and again on the difficulty and value of this kind of “seeing.” He would ask why it was that in medicine people only see what they have already learned to see. He would say that it was wonderful how one was suddenly able to see new things—new states of illness—which must probably be as old as the human race; and that he had to confess to himself that he now saw a number of things which he had overlooked for thirty years in hospital wards.¹⁶

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This text is of capital importance to us inasmuch as it establishes, through an intermediary, that which constitutes the central axis of what could without exaggeration be called Freud’s “*ars inveniendi*.” One can indeed argue that the entirety of psychoanalytic method lies in this inversion of medical method, which aims only to provide the physician with the ability to “see what he has already learned to see,” thereby sparing him any surprise when confronted with any symptom. Conversely, one could define all psychoanalysis as a systematic repetition of “the

¹⁵ Freud, 1:8.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, “Charcot,” in *Standard Edition*, 3:12–13.

old”—induced by the surprise encountered with the “new” that is the symptom—in order to render possible this “vision” of which Freud speaks.

However, we must also discuss this term “vision,” which evidently possesses a long history in the clinic: long enough in any case to have passed into the realm of ideology, having become detached from the effective practice of the “clinician.”

Within Freud’s very text, indeed, that which Charcot called with confidence “practicing nosography”—a practice which, in fact, consisted in classifying symptoms according to a purely formal typology, thereby at least allowing the tracking of the gradation from “the *formes frustes*” to “types”—is curiously described by Freud with extensive recourse to visual metaphors:

He was not a reflective man, not a thinker: he had the nature of an artist—he was, as he himself said, a “*visuel*,” a man who sees. Here is what he himself told us about his method of working. He used to look again and again at the things he did not understand, to deepen his impression of them day by day till suddenly an understanding of them dawned on him. In his mind’s eye the apparent chaos presented by the continual repetition of the same symptoms then gave away to order[.]¹⁷

A little further on, Freud’s pen goes so far as to compare Charcot in the milieu of the Salpêtrière to Cuvier’s statue in front of the Jardin des Plantes, or even to a kind of Adam before whom God would parade the nosological entities so that he might name them! However, this entire *mise-en-scène* in the text precedes the famous anecdote so often reiterated by Freud¹⁸ according to which Charcot would have responded to some pedantic objection from a disciple of Helmholtz: “Theory is good, but that does not prevent existence.” However, the objector was none other than Freud himself, and the question, essential for making a diagnosis of hysteria, concerned the concomitance of hemi-anesthesia and hemianopsia (thus, once again, a visual context), as we learn from a note by Freud on page 210 of his translation of the Tuesday Lectures. But then, Freud adds: “If only one knew what exists!”¹⁹

¹⁷ Freud, 3:12.

¹⁸ Freud, 3:13n2.

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Preface and Footnotes to the Translation of Charcot’s *Tuesday Lectures*,” in *Standard Edition*, 1:139.

The entire question lies therein, and we, for our part, cannot refrain from considering this witticism that Freud recalls in various places throughout his career as a kind of admonition that he would have ceaselessly addressed to himself in defense of having exceeded the confines of the “clinic,” once the visual was replaced by the acoustic, once the visual domain was supplanted by the acoustic, to such a degree that it would suffice to substitute the word “seeing” with “listening to” in the sentence we are about to quote, thereby establishing Charcot as the pioneer of the new clinic: “Charcot, indeed, never tired of defending the rights of purely clinical work, which consists of seeing and ordering things, against the encroachments of theoretical medicine.”²⁰

Now it is precisely in this that Charcot can be said to have introduced a break, undoubtedly induced by the demand of the hysterics with whom he dealt, for what must be understood by “theoretical medicine” is nothing other than pathological anatomy, which he permits himself to declare completed. As early as 1886, Freud takes note of it: “Charcot used to say that, broadly speaking, the work of anatomy was finished and that the theory of the organic diseases of the nervous system might be said to be complete: what had next to be dealt with was the neuroses.”²¹

Now is the moment to retrace the history of this term “neurosis” to measure the importance of this decision by Charcot. The conception of “neurosis” is indeed to be related to an epistemological foundation, not only different from that of our present era, but also from the medicine of the nineteenth century. The term was indeed forged at the end of the eighteenth century in the Scottish school by William Cullen (1713-1790), one of the founders of “neural pathology.” This is the culmination of the studies conducted throughout the century on the “irritability” and “sensibility” of organisms; it implies a theory of medicine according to which the nervous system is the source and the regulator of all vital phenomena, of health as well as of illness, in such a way that disturbances in its global functioning can provide a principle of explanation possessing the widest application.

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²⁰ Freud, “Charcot,” 3:13. [Nassif cites page 13 of the first volume of *The Standard Edition*, which corresponds to the “Paris Report,” but this quotation appears in the text dedicated to Charcot collected in the third volume as cited here.]

²¹ Freud, “Paris Report,” 1:10.

But what the nineteenth century retained from [the preceding century was the belief] that the disturbances supposed by Cullen to account for the different sorts of diseases were not localized in delimited parts of the nervous system but were considered as disorders in its global functioning. Now, insofar as the main current of medicine went in the direction of an effective, or supposed, localization of disease, neuroses could only constitute a marginal field where the ignorance of anatomical localizations prevailed for the time being.

However, it is precisely this concept that Charcot will restore to honor, imparting to it very precisely Cullen's meaning, as found in Littré and Robin's medical dictionary, which presented from 1855 to 1884: "generic name for diseases which are supposed to have their seat in the nervous system, and which consist in a functional disorder without sensible lesion in the structure of the parts nor any material agent apt to produce it."²² Charcot will nevertheless exert the full weight of his authority to strip this term of all depreciative connotation and to make it designate a field of phenomena entirely irreducible and perfectly objective. Freud, who in 1886 is still somewhat a neurologist, is astonished by it, but expresses his astonishment with an unmistakable hint of humor: "[T]he whole trend of his mind leads me to suppose that he can find no rest till he has correctly described and classified some phenomenon with which he is concerned, but that he can sleep quite soundly without having arrived at the physiological explanation of that phenomenon."²³

Now, if a new path is thus opened, it is indeed because Charcot was especially interested in hysteria, whose symptoms one can readily "describe and classify," without concerning oneself with finding an anatomical substrate for them, for their essential characteristic is precisely in being displaced in relation to anatomy and to function according to an organically deceptive [*fausse*] physiology. The patient is nevertheless not a simulator, and the physician loses his Latin there; furthermore, he is seized by "the blind fear of being made a fool of by the unfortunate patient—a fear which till then had stood in the way of a serious study of the neurosis[.]"²⁴

²² Cited in Andersson, *Prehistory of Psychoanalysis*, 31. It should be noted that the fifteenth edition of 1884 replaces "without sensible lesion" with "without presently appreciable lesion."

²³ Freud, "Paris Report," 1:13.

²⁴ Freud, "Charcot," 3:19.

It is essentially this obstacle that the break instituted by Charcot allows us to overcome. Henceforth, the patient will no longer be treated with contempt as an ill jester, his illness will no longer incur discredit, and one will grant to the hysterical phenomenon the attention that an original and objective symptom deserves. Now, if Freud, to describe this revolution, does not fear resorting to the most suspect hagiography, it is indeed because Charcot giving his lecture is to the tableau of the Salpêtrière what the real of the *après-coup* is to the symbol: “Charcot,” he writes, “had repeated on a small scale the act of liberation in memory of which the portrait of Pinel’s portrait hung in the lecture hall of the Salpêtrière.”²⁵

It is in fact about accomplishing the matter on a large scale and therefore establishing the concept of neurosis in all its generality. It appears that matters are mature, as proven by the immediate acceptance in the medical world of the concept of [n]eurasthenia introduced by Beard in 1880–84. It is in fact the first psycho-sociological theory of mental illness, since the “conditions of modern life” were deemed sufficient to produce this disorder. Now it is only in 1885 that Charcot presents his psychological explanation of hysterical paralyses; it is towards the end of the same year that Freud arrives in Paris with, in his dossier, the astonishing adventure with Breuer in the case of Anna O., whose cure dates back to 1882.

One sees that it is practically possible to chronologically pinpoint the veritable fold in culture that the emergence of the field of neuroses represented in the domain of scientific investigation. Yet, our conception aims to reintegrate the dimension of the act into this closed field of discursive events [*ce champ clos des événements du discours*] and to affirm that everything passes not so much through “generalization” but through *repetition of the break*.²⁶

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Now this leads us to reestablish perspectives and to return to the received idea which purports to derive the birth of psychoanalysis from the exclusive study

²⁵ Freud, “Charcot,” 3:19.

²⁶ [The phrase here is “*répétition de coupure*” which I have very purposefully translated with a definite article to capture and retain the sense of a general or formal break rather than a particular break in the personal history of an analysand. This appears justified given that “everything passes *not so much* through ‘generalization’” implying that generality certainly has its role to play here, just not on center-stage.]

of hysteria. A textual biographer as attentive as Ola Andersson notes in this regard: “It seems probable that Freud’s stay in Paris was as significant for the development of his theoretical and therapeutic interest in neurasthenia as it was with regard to hysteria. His attempts to resolve the problem of neurasthenia during the years following his visit to Charcot are fully comparable, in terms of intensity in concernment, to his simultaneous endeavors to clarify the problems raised by hysteria.”²⁷ And this is beyond doubt if one recalls that Freud nevertheless chose this name to designate his own neurosis. In a text from January 1887, (a note on Averbeck’s book, *Die akute Neurasthenie, ein ärztliches Kulturbild*), Freud speaks of “neurasthenia” as the “commonest of all in our society,” and then, he specifies that it is not a “clinical picture in the sense of textbooks based too exclusively on pathological anatomy: it should rather be described as a mode of reaction of the nervous system.”²⁸ One sees that the concert of neurosis commonly plays without even being mentioned; but above all, it is from this concept of neurasthenia that Freud will produce that of “obsessional neurosis”; we shall not speak of it directly because of the bizarre lacuna in the letters to Fliess concerning the genesis of this discovery, but also above all because that would lead us to the side of the substance that the “sieve” allows us to retain; however, we have enjoined ourselves to adhere to the positioning of the threads stretched across its web.

It is sufficient to note that as early as 1888, in the article “Hysteria” from Vilarret’s *Encyclopedia*, whose attribution to Freud is now certain, one can read: “Hysteria is fundamentally different from neurasthenia and indeed, strictly speaking, is contrary to it.”²⁹ And further on, concerning complex cases, Freud adds: “Unfortunately the majority of physicians have not yet learned to distinguish the two neuroses from each other. [. . .] The male nervous system has as preponderant a disposition to neurasthenia as the female to hysteria.”³⁰

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These precious formulations are still evidently quite maladroit; this is because, in this entirely new domain, researchers certainly lacked concepts; we shall see later from which sphere Freud and Breuer would attempt to borrow them. The

²⁷ Andersson, *Prehistory of Psychoanalysis*, 45. [I have translated this quotation from Nassif’s French rather than from the English edition.]

²⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Two Short Reviews,” in *Standard Edition*, 1:35.

²⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Hysteria,” in *Standard Edition*, 1:42.

³⁰ Freud, 1:53.

fact is, in any case, that the break is far from clear-cut even in Charcot himself, since he considers himself obliged to accompany his psychological explanations of hysteria with an anatomo-physiological alternative, which Freud would obviously reject. But this matter holds its importance, for it is the first time that he is afforded an opportunity to criticize the master.

Charcot, indeed, showing himself on this occasion to be quite incoherent, produces a theory of “dynamic lesions” which would be localizable in the nervous system in the same way that “structural lesions” have been observed in organic diseases. There would therefore be a “dynamic lesion” observable in cases of hysterical paralysis in the same anatomical region where a structural lesion causes organic paralysis. It is evidently this thesis that Freud attacks when he writes at the very beginning of the 1888 text: “Hysteria is a neurosis in the strictest sense of the word—that is to say, not only have no perceptible changes in the nervous system been found in this illness, but it is not to be expected that that any refinement of anatomical techniques would reveal any such changes.”³¹ It is evidently out of the question that Charcot at that time be directly cited and criticized. One knows that Freud, returning from Paris, brought back in his boxes the material for a text on the criteria of distinction between organic and hysterical motor paralyzes, a text that Charcot himself had commissioned from Freud, and which would only appear in French seven years later, in July 1893, about fifteen days before his death, on August 16. [Ernest] Jones³² and the editors of the *Standard Edition*³³ give us all sorts of plausible reasons for this delay, to which we are obliged to add that of his ambivalent relationship with the master, already greatly displeased by the notes that his translator allowed himself to add to his Tuesday Lessons. Moreover, the only text where Freud touches on this subject, in Villaret’s *Encyclopedia*, remained unsigned and was exhumed only very recently. One finds there this very significant passage where it is undoubtedly the theory of “functional lesions” that is targeted:

It may be said that hysteria is as ignorant of the science of the structure of the nervous system as we ourselves before we have learnt it. The symptoms of organic

³¹ Freud, 1:41. [Nassif provides page 42 for this quotation, but it appears on page 41.]

³² James Strachey, “Editor’s Note,” in Sigmund Freud, “Some Points for a Comparative Study of the Organic and Hysterical Motor Paralyzes,” in *Standard Edition*, 1:155–57.

³³ Strachey, “Editor’s Note,” in Freud, “Some Points,” 1:157–58.

affections, as is well known, reflect the anatomy of the central organ and are the most trustworthy sources of our knowledge of it. We must for that reason dismiss the thought that some possible organic disorder lies at the root of hysteria; nor must we appeal to vaso-motor influences (vascular spasms) as the cause of hysterical disorders. A vascular spasm is from its nature an organic change, the effect of which is determined by the anatomical conditions, and it differs from an embolism, for instance, only by the fact that it leads to no *permanent* change.³⁴

A vascular spasm cannot, therefore, be designated by the term “functional lesion,” as any lesion implies a permanent change. And thus, there is no doubt that Charcot is in regression relative to the “break” he was led to introduce, whereas Freud, by the mere fact that he is compelled to reiterate it from his own experience, is capable of assessing its full scope and generalizing its effects.

It should not be believed, however, that Charcot’s decision was not followed by a theoretical effort commensurate with its practical importance. His theory of hysteria is indeed presented as a theory of the demonological ideology of “possession.” The physician who is averse to treating hysterics is in fact merely an unwitting inquisitor. And Freud would always insist upon the essential nature of this correlation: “During the last few decades a hysterical woman would have been almost as certain to be treated as a malingerer, as in earlier centuries she would have been certain to be judged and condemned as a witch or as possessed of the devil.”³⁵ In Charcot’s estimation, it was in fact a matter of defending himself, by drawing this comparison, against those who asserted that he had fabricated a novel nosological entity entirely, alleging that they did not encounter hysterics within their service. Indeed, the “new” is nothing other than the recognition of the old as old. Freud derives every possible advantage from this: “In the Middle Ages neuroses played a significant part in the history of civilization, they appeared in epidemics as a result of psychical contagion, and were at the root of what was factual in the history of possession and of witchcraft. Documents from that period prove that their symptomatology has undergone no change up to the present day.”³⁶

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³⁴ Freud, “Hysteria,” 1:49.

³⁵ Freud, “Paris Report,” 1:11

³⁶ Freud, “Hysteria,” 1:41.

It is therefore ultimately nothing other than a kind of “intuition of essence” where the historical (and bibliographic) erudition of the “great master” comes to play the role of “imaginary variation.” Freud, for his part, takes these facts literally and begins by proposing a kind of “naive theory” of the hysterical phenomenon which would nevertheless take into account all the facts present, a theory he presents as that of the “unprejudiced and untrained observer.” It is true that he uses the concept of dislocation of “the associative chain,” that this dislocation is supposed to allow the “memory to express its affect by means of somatic phenomena” and that this ultimately leads to the supposition that there has been a “cleavage of consciousness.”

These terms are nevertheless the closest to those that the ideology of possession could employ in a displaced fashion:

No one should object that the theory of a splitting of consciousness as a solution to the riddle of hysteria is much too remote to impress an unbiased and untrained observer. For, by pronouncing possession by a demon to be the cause of hysterical phenomena, the Middle Ages in fact chose this solution; it would only have been a matter of exchanging the religious terminology of that dark and superstitious age for the scientific language of today.³⁷

Thus, far from having to change its location, Freudian theory, remaining at the level of knowledge expressed by ideology, takes it literally to elucidate its logic and contents itself with replacing one lexicon with another, without there necessarily being cause to view this change as “progress.” Science does not dissipate superstition; it assigns it its true place. Thirty years later, in the text “A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis,” Freud would even go so far as to write: “The demonological theory of those dark times has won in the end against all the somatic views of the period of ‘exact’ science.”³⁸

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But in 1893, just as he was beginning to “shake his sieve,” Freud does not go that far; he simply contents himself with remarking: “Charcot, however, did not follow this path towards an explanation of hysteria, although he drew copiously

³⁷ Freud, “Charcot,” 3:20.

³⁸ Sigmund Freud, “A Seventeenth-Century Demonological Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 19:72.

upon the surviving reports of with trails and of possession, in order to show that the manifestations of the neurosis were the same in those days as they are now. He treated hysteria as just another topic in neuropathology[.]”³⁹ Thus, the theoretical process is clear: in order to integrate hysteria into the field of knowledge and treat it in the same way as any other theme in neuropathology, it is necessary and sufficient that its symptoms be shown identical over time, as if there had already been in the Middle Ages a “subject supposed to know” what pertains to “possession,” that is to say, hysteria. Freud himself is sincerely convinced of this . . .

But one suspects that everything lies not only in the possibility of writing this relation of identity, but above all in that of giving oneself the theoretical means to invert its terms (hysteria, that is to say, possession). This is indeed an event of discourse and not a simple addition to knowledge; and we can very precisely describe this operation as a repetition of the break: Charcot makes hysteria a “theme” for neuropathology, Freud calls neuropathology into question from the standpoint of hysteria.

For, just as one can read on certain road signs: “One train can hide another,” it is often possible, when classical science feels the need to designate itself as “theory of an ideology,” that is to say, as a simple discloser, to ascertain that this operation hides a rootedness in another ideology, to which the denunciation of the first, always a bit antiquated and ridiculous, serves as a screen.

One can indeed posit that it is in the same step that Freud unknowingly ascertains on the one hand that, following the path traced by the master, “his own pupil, Pierre Janet, as well as by Breuer and others [. . .] replaced the ‘demon’ of clerical fantasy by a psychological formula”⁴⁰ and, on the other hand, that “the aetiological theories supported by Charcot in his doctrine of the ‘*famille névropathique*,’ of which he made the basis of his whole concept of nervous disorders, will no doubt soon require sifting and emending.”⁴¹

³⁹ Freud, “Charcot,” 3:20.

⁴⁰ Freud, 3:22. [Nassif provides page 23 for this quotation, but it appears on page 22.]

⁴¹ Freud, 3:23. [Nassif provides page 22 for this quotation, but it appears on page 23. French in Strachey’s translation.]

It is thus Freud himself who provides us with the metaphor of the sieve; and it is significant that it comes from his pen concerning the concept of “heredity,” a concept which is none other than the inverse of that of “degeneracy,” the ultimate aetiological principle of all nineteenth-century psychiatry and a major axis of evolutionary ideology [*l’idéologie évolutionniste*].

It might perhaps not be useless here to retrace in broad strokes Charcot’s aetiological doctrine; through the reading and translation of his works, Freud was quite familiar with it; he had even been able to examine these patients whom the master had presented in the spring of 1885 and from whom he had dissected the mechanism of hysterical paralyses; Villaret’s Encyclopedia article is entirely consistent with his views on the predominant role of heredity⁴² and the presentation of a case of male hysteria⁴³ that Freud makes upon his return from Paris, is in some way a “Tuesday Lesson” that the disciple would have addressed from Vienna to his master.

However, it is remarkable that alongside the analysis of traumatic aetiological factors, one never encounters discussions of the observed hereditary factors. Charcot, for the most part, contents himself with retracing the family history where, as expected, one will find psychic disorders or nervous diseases that need only be mentioned. This is because the pre-Mendelian ideology of “psychic heredity” was then a kind of inevitable frame of reference. Its main proponents are Morel⁴⁴ and Magnan⁴⁵; but the book by Th. Ribot, *L’hérédité psychologique* (Paris, 1873), is still its clearest presentation; this ideology assumes on the one hand that there is no need to distinguish between the phylogenetic concept of “heredity of acquired characters” and the ontogenetic one of “degeneration,” that is to say, of tissue dedifferentiation, and on the other hand that it is entirely possible for acquired characters, as well as acquired degeneration, to

⁴² “The aetiology of the *status hystericus* is to be looked for entirely in heredity: hysterics are always hereditarily disposed to disturbances of nervous activity, and epileptics, psychical patients, tabetics, etc., are found among their relatives.” Freud, “Hysteria,” 1:50.

⁴³ Sigmund Freud, “Observation of a Severe Case of Hemi-Anaesthesia in a Hysterical Male,” in “Preface to the Translation of Charcot’s *Lectures on the Diseases of the Nervous System*,” in *Standard Edition*, 1:23–31.

⁴⁴ Bénédicte Auguste Morel, *Traité des maladies mentales* (Paris: Librairie Victor Masson, 1860).

⁴⁵ Valentin Magnan, *Leçons cliniques sur les maladies mentales*, second edition (Paris: Alcan, 1897).

become hereditary; consequently, for the majority of psychiatrists entrenched behind this wall, once a degeneration, of whatever kind, has manifested in the nervous system, it becomes as difficult to eliminate as the famous presence of the “monkey in man” whose “resurgence” is always possible.

But one must not believe that this ideological bastille where psychiatrists could (and no doubt still can) entrench themselves remained unassailed during the nineteenth century, certainly not at the level of therapeutic practice, but at the level of theoretical research, which precisely do not go hand in hand within classical psychiatry. The “scholars” then, that is to say, no doubt the “psychologists” of the era, are perfectly aware of the vague and diffuse nature of the heredity criterion, and quite lively discussions on this point are often engaged. The most violent controversies undoubtedly took place between January ‘85 and July ‘86, within the Medico-Psychological Society of Paris, and it is quite probable that Freud was able to attend some of them. Nevertheless, the theory on which Charcot relied constituted a more advanced “rationalization”; it had been definitively worked out in 1884 by Ch. Féré and was designated by the term “neuropathological family,” forged by Charcot, whom it is worthwhile quoting here:

Very often, I have spoken to you about what I have proposed to call the neuropathological family. Under this name, I am accustomed to designating all affections of the central nervous system and the neuro-muscular system, organic or, on the contrary, without appreciable anatomical lesions, which are linked to each other by heredity, and you are not unaware that here, alongside homologous heredity, dissimilar or transformation heredity is to be distinguished, which is observed even much more frequently than the former.⁴⁶

It is clear that the term “family” is taken here in its two meanings: that of the classification model and that of the kinship bond. On the one hand, diseases of the nervous system constitute a single “family”; on the other hand, this family is indissolubly united by the “laws of heredity.” These permit the explication that it is not the same disease that is electively transmitted, but only a diffuse

⁴⁶ Jean-Martin Charcot, *Leçons du mardi à la Salpêtrière* (Paris: Bureaux du Progrès medical, 1887–88), 410. [A digitized version from Duke University History of Medicine Collections is available online at <https://archive.org/details/leonsdumardilasao1char/page/410/mode/2up>.]

‘neuropathic disposition’ which, subsequently and depending on non-hereditary factors, may “specialize” into a distinct disease.

But then again, Charcot, with his concept of “dissimilar heredity or transformation,” which we will indeed “not ignore,” distinguishes himself from a Morel, for example; for the latter, psychic degeneration followed a sequence of increasingly severe diseases which from generation to generation eventually led, without any parody, “to the loss of life to which your madness will have led you.”⁴⁷ With Freud’s master, things do not go that far, since traumatic etiology is nevertheless recognized and it is precisely about building a bridge between it and hereditary etiology; one could even say that the famous Freudian problem of the “choice of neurosis” is thus prefigured, since, from the same “neuropathic tendency,” one can say after the fact that there was “dissimilar heredity” or “homologous heredity,” depending on the moment or the nature of the traumatic event which must then be considered as an *agent provocateur*.

It is very precisely at this point that Freud takes up the matter, attempting to think together this dual etiology and obliged by his practice to gradually abandon the hereditary aspect to focus more and more attentively on what presents itself under this concept of “trauma” as a “provoking agent.” Charcot himself, having started from a very realistic conception of trauma as a physical accident, is imperceptibly led to take an interest in what happens in the person who undergoes it, to use hypnosis to discover it, and to be able to reproduce hysterical paralysees in this way, that is to say, in fact, to produce their mechanism which is a psychic process. Now, Freud has a very clear awareness that Charcot thus stands at the extreme edge of the break he carries, and that it is precisely at this point that he most clearly opens the way to the future. One only needs to read him:

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At one point in his work Charcot rose to a level higher even than that of his usual treatment of hysteria. The step he took assured him for all time, too, the fame of having been the first to explain hysteria. While he was engaged in the study of hysterical paralysees arising after traumas, he had the idea of artificially reproducing those paralysees, which he had earlier differentiated with care from organic ones. For this purpose he made use of hysterical patients whom he put into a state of somnambulism by hypnotizing them. He succeeded in proving, by an unbroken

⁴⁷ [Nassif does not provide the pagination for this quotation from Morel.]

chain of argument, that these paralyses were the result of ideas which had dominated the patient's brain at moments of a special disposition. In this way, the mechanism of a hysterical phenomenon was explained for the first time.⁴⁸

This text is particularly interesting insofar as Freud has just praised Charcot for his stubbornness in asserting that hysteria “was the same everywhere and at all times.”⁴⁹ However, it seems that the experimental setup he devises to prove it allows this “essential intuition” to be inscribed not only in the time of the events of discourse that bear a proper name (“Charcot [. . .] the first to explain hysteria”), but also in that of events pure and simple which do not necessarily maintain this essential relationship with the proper name. The scope of Charcot's experiment, which Freud is undoubtedly the only one to have correctly seen, lies indeed in the fact that it is about leading the patient under hypnosis to genuinely reproduce a “first time,” that of the coincidence between the traumatizing event and that element of mental life which is a “representation.” Yet it seems that in the institution represented by the relationship between the hypnotist and his patient, and of which psychoanalysis will be the heir, as we will see later (in our text on “Bernheim and the Concept of Psychic Treatment”⁵⁰), one can, in a sense, recommence the first time at will. Thus, from now on, the event of a subject's recognition of the “first time” and the event of a discourse's resumption of this “first time” will be indissociable, and psychoanalysis can therefore present itself without contradiction and with full rigor as a “science of the event.”

But before getting there, we must see how Freud transitions from the concept of “psychical heredity,” from which we started, to that of “early seduction,” which is in fact nothing other than the denotation of a new heredity, that of the proper name, with the new concepts of time and causality that it presupposes.

The ideology of “psychical heredity” is indeed only a shifted and irrelevant language concerning a series of events where, Freud remarks, one would have to “invert the adage ‘*cessante causa cessat effectus*’ [when the cause ceases the effect ceases].”⁵¹ And it is from a reflection on the “traumatic event” that Freud is

⁴⁸ Freud, “Charcot,” 3:22.

⁴⁹ Freud, 3:22.

⁵⁰ [This never appeared as a standalone work but exists as a chapter in Nassif's *Freud, l'inconscient*.]

⁵¹ Josef Breuer and Sigmund Freud, *Studies on Hysteria (1893–1895)*, in *Standard Edition*, 2:7.

led to draw a conclusion of such general scope. This trauma, which was thought by Charcot only as a “provoking agent” actualizing the “neuropathic disposition” inherent to the patient’s family, is to be thought according to a less Aristotelian conception of causality.

It is in this sense that we could reread the first part of the “Preliminary Communication” written jointly with Breuer and dated December 1892. From the outset, this text confronts us with the concept of an event thought of as a “precipitating cause” of the illness, as the “point of origin” of the hysterical symptom, or more precisely as that which “arouse[s] his memories under hypnosis of the time at which the symptom made its first appearance.”⁵² There is therefore a “causal connection” between an event and a symptom;⁵³ but, besides the fact that this connection is difficult to discover in a classical anamnesis, it is impossible to make the patient discover it, who was, so to speak, the spectator and actor of the event, without dislodging him from the place of subject that he occupies; the simplest means is still to hypnotize him; “when this has been done, it becomes possible to demonstrate the connection in the clearest and most convincing fashion.”⁵⁴ But then, using the same experimental protocol as Charcot, but having put himself in a position to repeat his break, Freud can already draw this general conclusion: “external events determine the pathology of hysteria to an extent far greater than is known and recognized.”⁵⁵ It will therefore be necessary to generalize the concept of “traumatic hysteria” at the expense of that of a hysteria induced from a mythical “neuropathological family.”

However, insofar as this causal relationship between trauma and illness can also serve as a model for interpreting the relationship between the illness and its various symptoms, produced spontaneously, but “strictly related to the precipitating trauma,” it becomes necessary to question what makes an event traumatizing.⁵⁶ This is because “[i]n other cases the connection is not so simple. It consists only in what might be called a “symbolic” relation between the precipitating cause and the pathological phenomenon—a relation such as healthy people form in

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⁵² Breuer and Freud, 2:3. [Nassif provides a more liberal translation of the English, perhaps in consultation with the original German.]

⁵³ Breuer and Freud, 2:3.

⁵⁴ Breuer and Freud, 2:3.

⁵⁵ Breuer and Freud, 2:4.

⁵⁶ Breuer and Freud, 2:4.

dreams.”⁵⁷ Now, if one looks closely at the text, one notes that it is in fact these complex cases of symbolic connection between event and symptom that allowed for a generalization and that this presupposed a distinction between “traumatic neurosis” and “common hysteria” which can now be subsumed under the concept of “traumatic hysteria,” whose “extension” can then be justified.⁵⁸ Moreover, one must distinguish between “physical injury” and “psychical trauma,” since a symbolic interpretation is interposed between them.⁵⁹ Now, this “psychical trauma” is, in “traumatic neurosis,” an “affect of fright,” whereas in “common hysteria” it is rather a series of “partial traumas” forming a group of provoking causes and able to present themselves as chapters of a “same history of sufferings.”⁶⁰ But there are even more complex cases, which are also undoubtedly the most general, where this symbolic connection occurs in the form of a combination between “apparently trivial circumstances” and the “actually operative event” and therefore in the form of a false connection, but nevertheless made possible at moments of “peculiar susceptibility to stimulation.”⁶¹

However, this tightly woven fabric of analyses with slyly concealed articulations, especially when it comes to moving from simple cases to more complex cases, always in fact presented as “other cases” that are added to the first ones even though they allow for generalization—this whole series of arguments, therefore, aims in fact at only one thing: to call into question the type of causality underlying the sequence “neuropathological family—provoking agent” and to substitute another for it which will be, we can now say, that of the “*après-coup*.” Freud still uses here the image of the “foreign body” (which he would later denounce in the analysis of the case of Elizabeth Von R.): “But the causal relation between the determining psychical trauma and the hysterical phenomenon is not of a kind implying that the trauma merely acts as an *agent provocateur* in releasing the symptom. We must rather suppose that the psychical trauma—or more precisely the memory of the trauma—acts like a foreign body which long after its entry must continue to be regarded as an agent that is still at work[.]”⁶² To the notion of “*agent provocateur*” implying a linear and punctual causality, must

⁵⁷ Breuer and Freud, 2:5. [Nassif cites page 4, but this quote appears on page 5.]

⁵⁸ Breuer and Freud, 2:5. [This citation is not provided by Nassif in the original.]

⁵⁹ Breuer and Freud, 2:6. [This citation is not provided by Nassif in the original.]

⁶⁰ Breuer and Freud, 2:6.

⁶¹ Breuer and Freud, 2:6.

⁶² Breuer and Freud, 2:6. [French in Strachey’s translation.]

therefore be substituted that of “agent at work” (or in labor) for which another type of causality is to be produced, precisely allowing to explain the effect of the reviviscence of the trauma which is to make the symptom disappear, at the same time as one remembers the event and “abreacts” the affect.

Now this “therapeutic” discovery due to the connivance of Breuer and Anna O., and which the text would like, at the “manifest level,” to present as its culmination, is in fact to be considered, in the economy of our reading, only as a kind of example coming in the “order of reasons,” to corroborate the thesis, according to which the “adage ‘*cessante causa cessat effectus*’” is to be “reversed” and its famous consequence: “*Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences.*”⁶³ One can now do without the concept of “psychical heredity” and, in the rest of the text, these sharp points where Charcot’s theory should be directly attacked, provide examples of the most laborious patching up. As for his final concluding sentence, it is a masterpiece of insidious ambiguity in denial:

If by uncovering the psychical mechanism of hysterical phenomena we have taken a step forward along the path first traced so successfully by Charcot with his explanation and artificial imitation of hystero-traumatic paralyses, we cannot conceal from ourselves that this has brought us nearer to an understanding only of the *mechanism* of hysterical symptoms and not of the internal causes of hysteria. We have done no more than touch upon the aetiology of hysteria and in fact have been able to throw light only on its acquired forms—on the bearing of accidental factors on the neurosis.⁶⁴

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But all the threads woven across the web of the “sieve” and the entire conceptual framework of this text aim, as we have seen, to sift this concept of “neurosis” which is the last word on which we are left, and to show that the question of the “internal causes” of hysteria is no longer in any way relevant. It is therefore solely towards an elucidation of trauma that one will have to turn to explain the “aetiology of hysteria.”

One knows what conclusions Freud reached during his research. In the case of hysteria, the trauma is to be located during the infantile period, before the

⁶³ Breuer and Freud, 2:7.

⁶⁴ Breuer and Freud, 2:17.

second dentition, and it is in the child's relations with the parental authority that it is provoked. "Destiny," which one preferred to dress in the ideological term of "psychic heredity," is in fact represented by the father, or quite simply by the perverse adult (the Viennese governesses . . .) whom the innocence of the child provokes and who instills in him, in a way, the sexual venom, a "foreign body" to the body of needs . . . Now, even if this theory of "early seduction" is a fantasy that Freud himself recognized as such as early as letter 69 of September 21, '97, it is known that the "traumatic theory" continued to function for quite some time; and it is in any case interesting to see how Freud supports his thesis in this text which limits our period and where he uses the term "psychoanalysis" for the first time, namely the "New Remarks on the Psychoneuroses of Defense" from 1896. After having insisted on the "sexual and passive" character of the event, which took place during the infantile period, Freud, without further citing Charcot's name, merely writes: "How greatly the claims of hereditary disposition are diminished by the establishment in this way of determinants of accidental aetiological factors as a determinant needs no more than a mention."⁶⁵ And yet, two pages later, concerning the case of a family where the brother is afflicted with obsessions and the sister with hysteria, Freud cannot help but speak of "familial neurotic disposition" and use the significant term "pseudo-heredity."⁶⁶ One may well say that this "pseudo-heredity" can be reinterpreted in terms of the Oedipus complex in the model of the "family romance," it remains nonetheless true that for us, Freud will remain in many respects a disciple of Charcot despite everything. Moreover, the "theory of drives," which only appeared in 1905, the very term *Trieb* being completely absent in the texts before that date, is it not a kind of resurgence of the "traumatic theory," the drive itself being again considered a "foreign body" and its "destiny" being something as opaque and fatal as heredity?

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One would obviously have to provide more solid evidence; here we only want to sketch the idea according to which any "break" which makes possible the "theory of an ideology" entails a "re-fissuring" [*refente*] of the updated theoretical field, but that this "re-fissuring" in the case of Freudian theory is in a way only the *verso* of a *recto*, since the entire theoretical discourse developed is

⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence," in *Standard Edition*, 3:163.

⁶⁶ Freud, 3:165.

supported only in the act of the repetition of this break, the patient being compelled to reenact, in relation to Charcot or his representative, Freud's own work.

(To be continued . . .)⁶⁷

Translated by Holden M. Rasmussen

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Another Body, Another Fantasy: Ambivalence, Drive, and the Letter in Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten"

Keywords

ambivalence, drive, fantasy, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Nassif, Oedipus complex, sexual difference

Abstract

In a 1967 article for *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Jacques Nassif shifts the focus of Freud's "A Child is Being Beaten" from the aetiology of perversions to the question of fantasy. Nassif concludes that there is a fundamental fantasy exhibited in these cases and conducts an "archaeology" of this fundamental fantasy, locating the origin of fantasy with the origin of sexual difference: castration and the Oedipus complex. In the final lines of the article, Nassif wonders if "another fantasy," with a different verbalization that corresponds to a "another body," could be built on this structure, but admits his reading does not permit an answer to this question. I propose that a reading that shifts the focus in the text again provides both an affirmative answer to Nassif's question as well as indications of an elaboration. On my reading, without abandoning Nassif, ambivalence is the conceptual focus. Ambivalence, as Freud formulates it, is not just the reversal of feelings into their opposite, like love transformed into hate. Rather, ambivalence is the co-presence of things "different in their nature," and this co-presence modifies these things chained together. In the context of the fantasy in "A Child is Being Beaten," this shift in conceptual focus results in an alternative schema of the Oedipus complex, an analysis of drive as a linguistic representation of the ambivalent relation, and the Lacanian concept of the letter as the precipitate of this ambivalent relation circuted by the drive. The conclusion, here, is that the fantasies recorded in the text do not only express a fundamental fantasy about the origin of the sexes, as Nassif suggests, but express a fundamental fantasy about the conditions of signification *tout court*. The article ends on an open question—cued by Nassif's closing question in his essay—regarding

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the possibility of further reconciliation between queer theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis in light of this analysis of ambivalence, drive, and the letter.

Neko drugo telo, neka druga fantazma: ambivalenca, gon in črka v Freudovem »'Otrok je tepen'«

Ključne besede

ambivalenca, gon, fantazma, Sigmund Freud, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Nassif, Ojdipov kompleks, spolna razlika

Povzetek

V članku, ki ga je leta 1967 objavil v *Cahiers pour l'Analyse*, Jacques Nassif v obravnavi Freudovega spisa »'Otrok je tepen'« premakne poudarek z etiologije perverzij na vprašanje fantazije oziroma fantazme. Nassif ugotavlja, da se v obravnavanih primerih razkriva temeljna fantazma in se loti njene »arheologije«, pri čemer izvor fantazme umesti v izvor spolne razlike: kastracije in Ojdipovega kompleksa. V zadnjih vrsticah članka se Nassif vpraša, ali bi bilo na tej strukturi mogoče zgraditi »neko drugo fantazmo« z drugačnim ubesedenjem, ki bi ustrezala »nekemu drugemu« telesu, a prizna, da njegovo branje ne dopušča odgovora na to vprašanje. V prispevku zagovarjam tezo, da dodatni premik fokusa omogoči pritrđen odgovor na Nassifovo vprašanje, obenem pa nakaže možnosti nadaljnje razdelave. V mojem branju – ki se ne odvrne od Nassifa – je konceptualni fokus ambivalenca. Ta, kot formulira Freud, ni le sprevernitev čustev v njihovo nasprotje, denimo ljubezni v sovraštvo. Ambivalenca je, nasprotno, soprisotnost reči, ki so »različne po svoji naravi«, in soprisotnost modificira te med seboj spete reči. V kontekstu fantazije v spisu »'Otrok je tepen'« ta premik konceptualnega fokusa proizvede alternativno shemo Ojdipovega kompleksa, analizo gona kot jezikovne reprezentacije ambivalentnega razmerja in lacanovski koncept črke kot usedlino tega razmerja, okrog katerega kroži gon. Odtod sledi, da fantazije, ki jih popisuje Freudovo besedilo, ne izražajo le temeljne fantazme o izvoru spolov, kot predlaga Nassif, temveč obenem temeljno fantazmo o pogojih označevanja nasploh. Prispevek sklenem z odprtim vprašanjem – na katerega napelje Nassifovo lastno sklepno vprašanje – o možnosti nadaljnega zbližanja med kvirovsko teorijo in lacanovsko psihoanalizo, ki ga odpre tovrstna analiza ambivalence, gona in črke.

Introduction: Is it Possible to Subvert Oedipus?

Toshio Matsumoto's 1969 film *Bara no Sōretsu* or *Funeral Parade of Roses*, opens on an amended quotation from Baudelaire's *Fleurs du mal*: "I am the wound and the blade—the victim and the executioner." The film blends documentary interviews with gender nonconforming people of 1960s Tokyo together with a re-telling of the myth of Oedipus. This latter thread follows the life of a trans woman, Eddie, in a disjointed montage.

Though the following linear presentation is perhaps a betrayal of the film, the much-abbreviated story goes like this: As a child, Eddie was beaten by her father. When her father abandons Eddie and her mother, Eddie suggests to her mother that she still has Eddie to support her. Her mother mockingly laughs at her in response. Sometime later, Eddie finds her mother with another man, and Eddie stabs them both using a knife. Now an adult, Eddie works at The Genet, a gay bar and brothel. The Genet is managed by Gonda, with whom Leda, another trans woman and the madame of the bar, lives; the two are in a relationship. However, Leda correctly begins to suspect that Eddie and Gonda have a secret sexual relationship. To Eddie, Gonda promises to make her the new madame of the bar. Leda is later found lying in her bed, having committed suicide, draped in a veil, and surrounded by roses. On the floor are two dolls, one with a nail in its upper chest, and the other with a nail in each eye. After Leda's funeral, Eddie is promoted to madame of the Genet. While Eddie takes a shower after having sex with him, Gonda finds a book containing a photograph of Eddie with her parents. Though a hole has been burnt through the face of Eddie's father in the picture, Gonda recognizes Eddie's mother as his former wife and the young child as his. Upon this realization, Gonda kills himself with a knife. Upon seeing this, Eddie takes the knife and stabs herself in each eye before stumbling outside in front of a crowd of people.

It is obvious that this is a parody of the classical myth of Oedipus. The film itself nods to the reference material by including posters advertising performances of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in the background of one of the scenes. However, in *Funeral Parade of Roses*, instead of the son killing the father and sleeping with the mother, it would seem a strict inversion of the myth of Oedipus has occurred: the daughter has killed the mother and slept with the father. For a Jungian, this would represent a dramatization of the Electra complex instead. Yet, the *tableau*

of the film is far more complicated than either of those understandings would have it, not least because Eddie is not a cisgender man or woman but perhaps more importantly because of the play of psychosexual resemblance, difference, and ambivalence incarnated in the androgyny and queerness of most of the cast and their interrelations. Hence, the film is more appropriately called a “subversion” rather than an “inversion” of the myth of Oedipus and the Freudian schema of the psychological complex associated with it.

The film’s subversions foreground the questions of my inquiry of certain fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory. Is the Oedipus complex invariant? If so, which schema (or schemata) of Oedipus are we bound to refer to and return to in our theory? Does any Oedipal schema necessitate conformity to a path of normal psychosexual development whereby a man or a woman lives up to the ideal of their sex? Or, can another body, another fantasy, form on the same structures that undergird Oedipus?

Jacques Nassif’s 1967 essay on Freud’s “‘A Child is Being Beaten’” opens up this question for other heirs of the Lacanian conceptualization of the fundamental fantasy. In this essay, Nassif reads the text as if fantasy were the matter at issue rather than Freud’s explicit aim of elaborating an aetiology of the perversions.¹ In doing so, Nassif follows Freud’s argument closely, explicating the concept of fantasy in terms of the content, object, and signification of the fustigation fantasies.

To begin, I present the basic concepts and terms that arise in both Freud’s and Nassif’s respective analyses of the empirical material recorded in “‘A Child is Being Beaten,’” namely the Oedipus complex and ambivalence. From here, I retrace Nassif’s sidetracking of Freud and the place and function of the Oedipus complex in both Freud’s and Nassif’s analyses of the clinical vignettes of fustigation fantasies. Then, I problematize the particular schema of Oedipus both theorists adopt, taking a cue from Freud himself that ambivalence in the Oedipal configuration might not be based on the child’s rivalry with the parent of the same sex, as is often unquestioningly assumed. Alongside that analysis, I contextualize this alternative schema of the Oedipus complex within the clinical

¹ Jacques Nassif, “Fantasy in ‘A Child is Being Beaten,’” trans. Holden M. Rasmussen, *Filozofski vestnik* 46, no. 3 (2025): 9–32, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.46.3.01>.

vignettes presented in “A Child is Being Beaten.” Subsequently, I initiate my own reading of that text, treating the text as if the core issue were neither the aetiology of the perversions (Freud’s frame of inquiry) or fantasy (Nassif’s) but ambivalence within the Oedipus complex, and I follow the same three tracks of elaboration as Freud and Nassif: the tracks of the content, object, and signification of the fustigation fantasies. When the focus is shifted to ambivalence, the object of the fustigation fantasy is not the sex of the beaten child but is instead the drive as the representation, in words, of the relation and limit between somatic, libidinal experience and symbolic, psychosexual reality. In turn, the signification does not directly correspond to the meaning of the fantasies and the meaning of the positions of the players in any version of the fustigation fantasies but is instead the letter, Lacan’s concept that names the substrate of all language and signification.

The advancement I make through Nassif’s opening suggests a path forward for better understanding “another fantasy” other than that presumed to be normal according to the simple schema of the Oedipus complex proposed by Freud and adopted by Nassif. In other words, this argument heralds a different approach to the question of transgender, queer, and otherwise sexual and gender “nonconformity” than ones hitherto taken by Freudians and Lacanians alike. This final point is merely an implication; it is an opening made in like manner to Nassif’s at the close of his 1967 article. The substance of the present article concerns the rejection of the simplest schema of the Oedipus complex and a conclusion that the fustigation fantasies do not express a fundamental fantasy about castration and sexual difference but instead seem to express a fantasy about the conditions of signification *tout court*.

Nassif’s Sidetracking of Freud: Fantasy, Oedipus, and Ambivalence

In that 1967 article in *Cahiers pour l’Analyse*, Nassif comes to the same questions I posed in the penultimate paragraph of the Introduction. Though he poses these questions from within a very different context to ours, they nonetheless present us with an opening, a refreshing reading of Freud, and a novel approach to the production of psychoanalytic theory. This opening allows me to suggest certain innovations to Freudian and Lacanian doxa.

Nassif subjects Freud's 1919 "A Child Is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions" to a provocative reading operation that he characterizes with the following:

There is no doubt that in [Freud's] manifest project the fantasy of fustigation is exposed and detailed only in order to provide an example of perversion, the veritable focus of interest. What we would like to do is properly decenter the subject to shift the spotlight and focus it on a precise sequence of the theoretical field that Freud works on; in short, to act as if the problem of fantasy, at the level of a latent project, were being approached for its own sake through this text.²

Nassif then tells us the intriguing result of his decision to treat the elaboration of fantasy as the manifest project of Freud's text: the fantasy crystallized in the statement "A child is being beaten" is not a fantasy belonging to an individual neurosis but is "a metaphorical representation of a fundamental fantasy. In this case [. . .] it is a castration fantasy whose role is to express the origin of the difference of the sexes."³ Reframed in this manner, the fustigation fantasies detailed in Freud's clinical vignettes thus become expressions of more fundamental and invariant structures. The problem of the aetiology of perversions is put aside in order to investigate the question of the nature of the unconscious, fundamental fantasy and what exactly this unconscious, fundamental fantasy exposes about the nature of subjectivity. In investigating this question, Nassif eventually proposes an "archaeology of the subject," less concerned with the case-historical genesis of a perversion expressed in fustigation fantasies and more concerned with the question of sexual difference and the acquisition and construction of sexed and gendered behaviors and dispositions.

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In other words, Nassif's "archaeology" uncovers processes of differentiation and identification as base elements of a fundamental fantasy. Such processes are *represented* by the permutations of the fustigation fantasies across time, and these permutations are expressed by the *wording* or the verbalization of the fantasy.⁴ Importantly, this wording expresses an ambivalence; beating (read:

² Nassif, 10.

³ Nassif, 11.

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "A Child Is Being Beaten': A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of Sexual Perversions," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 17:185.

displeasure) coexists side-by-side with loving (read: pleasure) in one form or another in each of the permutations. Regarding this, Nassif writes,

Freud does employ the concept of verbalization on several occasions (which I have found expressed in English by the term “wording”). In this context, and in support of our preceding interpretation (beating—fucking), Freud remarks [. . .] that intimacy between parents is thought of in terms of relations of another order, such as sleeping together, undressing oneself in front of the other, etc. [. . .] Verbalization here is thus a simple form of transposition that does not involve any imbrication in a process of ego-defense. It concerns nothing more than the verbal expression of signifiers already known and immediately interpretable where a kind of “secondary elaboration” comes into play at the level of the vocabulary available to or, rather, lacking in the subject.⁵

This process of “secondary elaboration” and the transposition of descriptions of one type of relation into another are subtended by a complex function that allows for the substitution of images or words: the sex act can become something else in the wording of the child. This merely describes the changes and how they occur in the verbalization, though. What is more fruitful to follow is the implication that prior to any specific event or experience, the individual child has at their disposal the means to combine, or rather “co-present” things. This suggestion leads us to venture the claim that some underlying element, function, or process depends upon the co-presence of different significations in order to “make sense,” to try to construct a cogent reality wherein one has a position that in turn grants oneself meaning.

The means to “co-present” things different in their nature is our capacity for ambivalence. “Ambivalence” does not simply describe feelings or affects that turn into their opposite, like love turning into hate or attraction turning into repulsion. Tadej Troha explains why Freud’s usage of the term “ambivalence” cannot be reserved solely for the description of this transformation or reversal feelings:

[The] frequent coexistence [of love and hate], their simultaneous focus on the same object, provides the most important examples of the ambivalence of feeling. If this were all, ambivalence would serve only as a description of a special

⁵ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 17.

case of reversal, more precisely, it would designate the consequences of one of the cases of reversal, the coexistence of opposite feelings that a subject has for the same object.⁶

As such, Troha proposes an extension of the concept of ambivalence, one in line with Freud's own usage, even if he seldom spells this out for us. For example, in "A Child is Being Beaten," Freud recognizes the fact that seemingly opposite characteristics of the drive may exist alongside one another. He writes that as time passes "an instinctual impulse, its (passive) opposite may be observed alongside of it deserves to be marked by the very apt term introduced by Bleuler—'ambivalence.'"⁷ And, commenting on this same passage, Troha argues,

The motif for extending the use of the concept seems clear: what makes up the essence of ambivalence is not determined substantially in terms of love and hate but is a matter of a formal coexistence.⁸

[. . .]

The second member of the pair does not eliminate the first one, the substitute does not annul the original. In this sense, ambivalence is no longer a specific characteristic of a special case of the reversal into opposite, but precisely the point in which both processes that are declaratively "different in their nature" lose their fundamental distinguishing feature.⁹

This extension of the concept of ambivalence aptly captures the core of the child's ability to hold together two ideas, seemingly opposed, and develop a cogent system of reference and signification on that basis. In this process, the "primary" elaboration is usurped by what Nassif calls the "secondary elaboration," annulling the first and constructing a new meaning which permits the elements to formally coexist.

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Furthermore, and perhaps most overlooked despite the rise in attempts to bridge theoretical psychoanalysis with queer theory, the determination of ambivalence as the formal coexistence or co-presence of things different in their nature clarifies the essence of what Freud names "bisexuality" to describe the co-presence

⁶ Tadej Troha, "On Ambivalence," *Problemi International* 1 (2017): 229.

⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," in *Standard Edition*, 14:131.

⁸ Troha, "On Ambivalence," 230.

⁹ Troha, 230; quoting Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," 14:127.

of both masculine and feminine attributes in an individual. We are justified in calling the constitutive androgyny of the human animal an instance of ambivalence since it bears the two features described by Troha. First, there is the co-existence of things “different in their nature.” Again, we are not dealing with opposites but with things that typically receive their meaning through their differences and resemblances. In this case, both masculinity and femininity describe something about the behavior or disposition of a person and the signals of their sex, signals which can include but are not limited to their secondary sex characteristics, and which indubitably take on different if not opposing forms in different contexts. The interpretation or “reading” of these signals position the individual relative to others through their resemblances and differences. The foregoing is a simple, general description of the social assignation of a person’s position on the basis of sex and gender; psychoanalysis complicates this assignation in providing evidence that these elements coexist *and annul one another*. This is the second feature described by Troha, and in this case it is important to dispense with Freud’s use of the term “bisexuality” since we are no longer handling an elaboration of the mixture of two things but their annulment and transformation into something else. Yet, at this stage, what this something else could be is opaque, and we must not rush to the conclusion that it is a third sex or gender since this process of annulment and transformation likely affects something more fundamental than both the names for sex-assignments and gender identifications as well as the social utility of that nominalism.

This opens a new approach that branches from Nassif’s own sidetracking of Freud’s text, an approach which will clarify the opacity introduced by the extension of the concept of ambivalence. Indeed, though the conceptualization of the perversions may appear to us obsolete, the empirical subject-matter of “‘A Child is Being Beaten’” appears still fecund over a century after its initial publication as a result of Nassif’s reading. According to Nassif, the ambivalent relation dramatized in the fantasy observably concerns sexual difference, and specifically concerns a more fundamental, underlying fantasy about the “origin of the difference of the sexes,” according to Nassif.¹⁰ This, however, depends on our understanding of the Oedipus complex since the changes in the permutations all bear, in some way or another, on the sex of the figures in the fantasy, as Nassif also observes. In lieu of a more precise formulation from Nassif’s pen, it seems

¹⁰ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 11.

that we ought to surmise that Nassif accepts Freud's famous articulation of the Oedipus complex from *The Ego and the Id*:

In its simplified form the case of a male child[’s passage through the Oedipus complex] may be described as follows. At a very early age the little boy develops an object-cathexis for his mother, which originally related to the mother’s breast and is the prototype of an object-choice [. . .]; the boy deals with his father by identifying himself with him. For a time these two relationships proceed side by side, until the boy’s sexual wishes in regard to this mother become more intense and his father is perceived as an obstacle to them; from this the Oedipus complex originates. His identification with his father then takes on a hostile coloring and changes into a wish to get rid of his father in order to take his place with his mother. Henceforward his relation to his father is ambivalent; *it seems as if the ambivalence inherent in the identification from the beginning had become manifest.*¹¹

In this simplified form, which Freud deems sufficient “for practical purposes,” the child develops a rivalry with the parent of the same sex. There are two outcomes of this inherently ambivalent identification. Freud calls one of these “more normal”: the child comes to further identify with the parent of the same sex while relinquishing their claim to the other parent as a love-object. The other outcome is an inversion: the child identifies with the parent of the opposite sex, relinquishing their claim to them as a love-object. In a young boy, the former outcome results in a more masculine disposition since he identifies with the father in a less ambivalent fashion, while the latter results in a more feminine disposition, and often in homosexuality and an even more pronounced ambivalence. The schema expresses an identical function for young girls, according to Freud, with the difference being that the mother is the rival.¹² Moreover, Freud specifies here that the relation between the child and the rival parent is always already ambivalent; ambivalence is there from the beginning, is even a condition of forming the rivalrous relation Freud is telling us characterizes every Oedipal configuration.

In the context of the fustigation fantasies Nassif and Freud analyze, given the evident importance of the sex of both the batterer and the beaten child in the

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in *Standard Edition*, 19:31–32; my emphasis.

¹² Freud, 19:32.

fantasies, the crux of the issue arguably lies in whether and how the child identifies with a feminine or a masculine position. In a configuration wherein the batterer and the beaten child are male, and wherein the beaten child is the same as the author of the fantasy, the fantasy seems to express a homosexual desire for the father. Nassif and Freud characterize one such fantasy of this kind as such, in fact.¹³ If we retain this understanding of the Oedipus complex, an understanding Freud himself calls a simplification rendered in the name of “practical purposes,” then we would be permitted in thinking, as Nassif does, that the whole of the fustigation fantasies express a more fundamental fantasy about sexual dimorphism and the child’s position within a psychosexual matrix coded by sexual difference and sexual dimorphism. The entirety of phantasmatic identification would depend on whether and how one identifies with one or the other sex as represented by the parents in a heterosexual coupling.

There may be skepticism on the part of some readers towards the heteronormativity of the theoretical portrait of development detailed just above. For my part, I contend that the view that all processes of identification and differentiation are a consequence of “the origin of the difference of the sexes” is not theoretically complete. This is partially because there is a “complicating element” in Freud’s simple schema of the Oedipus complex, but it is mostly because the characteristics of the fustigation fantasies contradict the conclusion that it is anatomical sexual dimorphism or even the more abstract concept of sexual difference that determine how one traverses fantasy. Indeed, in Nassif’s final analysis, such a proposition is a temptation to be countered since the matter can be immediately unsettled by posing a necessary question. Nassif closes the article on this discussion, writing,

if it is on the structure exposed by castration that the fantasy of being beaten is grafted, it is obviously not the difference of the sexes that by itself makes the fantasy. Or one could ask oneself, could another fantasy not form, with a different verbalization, on the ground of this same structure, based on this same archaeological foundation, but according to the individual history of a particular body?¹⁴

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¹³ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 24; Freud, ““A Child Is Being Beaten,”” 17:185.

¹⁴ Nassif, 31; Nassif’s emphasis.

In other words, the somatic, libidinal experiences and psychosexual, *symbolic* reality that compose the events of rivalry in the Oedipal configuration are secondary; they expose a structure rather than create one, and it is on that exposed structure that the ambivalent relation verbalized through the fustigation fantasy of “A child is being beaten” is grafted. Could another fantasy not form, with a different verbalization, on the ground of the same structure exposed by castration, based on the same archaeological foundation, but according to the history of a different body? In other words, are sexual difference, castration, and Oedipus intertwined in such a way to destine the subject for a particular formation, a normal path of psychosexual development or even sexuation?

To propel Nassif’s examination forward, I propose a sidetracking of his reading, one that foregrounds an elaboration of a theory of the drive that takes into account that “complicating element” of “bisexuality”—now in the new guise of “constitutive, psychosexual ambivalence”—as if it were the manifest project of Freud’s text. In other words, it is only due to Nassif’s adroit reading operation, where he decenters Freud’s explicit aim and takes the elaboration of fantasy as the manifest project of the text of “A Child is Being Beaten,” that we can conduct another, complementary reading operation of both his and Freud’s text together. Hence, I will retrace some of Nassif’s steps to conduct a reading that would permit responding to the question he poses at the close of his text.

The Oedipus Complex and the Fustigation Fantasy

Nassif appears to have the simplest schema of Oedipus in mind when he claims that the fustigation fantasies detailed by Freud are a representation of a more fundamental fantasy of castration in confrontation with sexual difference. However, in retracing Nassif’s reading, reasons emerge to adopt an alternative but unexplored schema hesitantly offered by Freud in *The Ego and the Id*. My own sidetracking of the reading of “A Child is Being Beaten” towards an examination of ambivalence begins from these reasons. Let us first remind ourselves of Freud’s own track through the material offered by these fustigation fantasies, though.

In “A Child is Being Beaten,” Freud posits that there are three phases of the fustigation fantasy.¹⁵ The form “A child is being beaten” is phase C, and it is what first appears in analysis as an utterance made in free association. The absence of the batterer from the verbalization—or the “wording” as Freud puts it in English—is the most obvious feature of this permutation, as is the seeming anonymity of the child being beaten. In phase A—temporally the earliest phase in the analysand’s life but coming second through in the work of analysis—the child derives pleasure from fantasizing a beating of a rival. The child being beaten “is invariably another child, most often a brother or a sister if there is any[;]” the one doing the beating is the father.¹⁶ So, the fantasy is worded as, “My father is beating the child (he only loves me).” In this phase, it is clear who is hurt and who is loved, but the loving is implied and dependent on the hateful harm inflicted on this rival child. It is only in phase B that the child producing the fantasy becomes the one being beaten by the father. According to Nassif, this “is what Freud expresses in the language of overdetermination, which is actually the language [*langage*] of co-presence in the same archaeological disposition where being beaten itself continues to signify being loved.”¹⁷ The wording in phase B is modified to: “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father).” In this shift, “loving” has been occulted by “beating,” and in this process loving and hating become entwined by the verb “to beat” or *battre* in French. For Nassif this phase is paramount because it attests to the fact that there is no simple disappearance or effacement of the identity of the batterer from the fantasy; between “My father is beating the child” and “A child is being beaten” there is a distinctive break and a transformation rather than a simple effacement, all evinced by the phase B verbalization.

In summary, the inventory of the phases of the fustigation fantasies as recorded in the text looks like this:

- Phase A: “My father is beating the child (he only loves me).”
- Phase B: “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father).”
- Phase C: “A child is being beaten.”

¹⁵ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:185–86.

¹⁶ Freud, 17:185.

¹⁷ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 26.

In tracing these permutations and the shifts that occur in a play of resemblance and difference, Nassif explains that his reading entails following three tracks Freud himself highlights: (1) the track of the content of the fantasy—who is being beaten and who the batterer is—(2) the track of the object of the fantasy—which here refers to the sex of the beaten child—(3) and the track of the signification of the fantasy—the interplay of love and hate through the verb “to beat.”¹⁸ My sidetracking will begin on that second track, that of the object, and I will redefine this object not as the sex of the child being beaten but as the drive. To wit, the analysis of “signification” will accordingly change on the basis of that analysis.

Now, the first track focuses on the content of the beating fantasy. The “content” refers to the description of the roles played out in the scene of the fustigation fantasy. In each of the cases, there is the latest, phase C formulation with the content of “A child is being beaten:” the batterer is undisclosed, and the author of the fantasy is “looking on.”¹⁹

In phase B the content is almost always a construction in analysis. It takes the form: “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father).” This construction aims at rendering clear, for the analysand, that what is at stake in the fantasy is the repression of their sexual choice for their father. Whereas the fantasy in phase A is the child’s imagined reality of a punishment for those whom they must share the father’s affection, the phase B permutation is only made possible by a repression of the pleasure associated with the object-choice for the father, transforming “to love” into a verb associated with displeasure: “to beat.” This changes the role of the author of the fantasy from onlooker to the beaten child.

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Nassif, here, highlights that in focusing on the content of the fantasy for its own sake rather than for the sake of describing the origin of the perversions, we begin to see that we are dealing with some remnant of castration, the very early encounter with the fact of the difference of the sexes and its later ossification into the Oedipus complex. This is because the transformations of the fantasy are characterized by the changes (or lack thereof) in the sex of each of the players.

At this stage, Nassif tells us that his reading only describes horizontal

¹⁸ Freud, ““A Child is Being Beaten,”” 17:184; Nassif, 20.

¹⁹ Freud, 17:186.

modifications and differences: little boys are like this, and little girls are like that. This type of description does not offer anything more than what colloquial expressions of the difference of the sexes already provide us, like “knowledge” that men come from Mars and women from Venus, as the playground proverb goes. This is a methodological consequence and limitation since isolation of the content of the fantasy from its other elements can result only in these dead-end descriptions. Freud’s own approach focuses primarily on the content of the fustigation fantasy with only a secondary interest in the “object” of the fantasy, i.e. the sex of the beaten child. Indeed, in this article Nassif highlights that Freud himself fails to mention that he has documented cases—that of the Rat-Man and the Wolf-Man, namely—where the beating was localized in places other than those described in these vignettes: the penis versus the buttocks, for example.²⁰ It would seem that following the track of the content fails to illuminate much more about the character, structure, and logic of fantasy. Hence, Nassif directs us along two other and more theoretically fecund tracks.

The second track—that of the “object”—advances the endeavor. By “object” Nassif is referring to the sex of the person being beaten in any of the permutations of the fantasy. The importance of this track is most clearly exhibited in phase B of the fantasy. In phase B, the child being beaten is the same as the author of the fantasy and the batterer is always the child’s father or one of his substitutes. In most of the cases recorded in “A Child is Being Beaten” phase B is a construction offered in the analysis. Freud suggests to these analysands that this fantasy must have been repressed, being a logical intermediary step towards the ultimate anonymous phase of the fantasy—“A child is being beaten”—where the child is no longer identical to the author and the batterer is notably absent from the formulation. From phase A, which is a recollection, to phase C, which is the articulated formulation, the fantasy is anonymized, and the question concerns

²⁰ Nassif interprets a particular passage from the case-history of the Rat-Man as indicating a beating on the penis, though the text is actually ambiguous as to the location of the father’s strikes on the Rat-Man’s body in the described episode. It is clear, however, that the beating is tied to masturbation and hence involves the penis in the clinical construction Freud offers to the Rat-Man here. This construction elucidates how the Rat-Man unconsciously and retroactively constructed his own fustigation as a chastisement for experiencing sexual pleasure. Sigmund Freud, “Notes upon a Case of Obsessional Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 10:205. However, in the case of the Wolf-Man, it is clear that the beatings are localized on the penis. Sigmund Freud, “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 17:26.

what could warrant the redaction of the identities of the players between these two phases. Hence, Freud offers the phase B articulation “My father is beating me” which must be repressed to delimit an incestuous and potentially homosexual desire for the batterer.

Crucially, in one of the clinical vignettes of an adult, homosexual man, Freud tells us that phase B was not a construction but rather offered as the enunciated form of the fantasy in the analysis.²¹ This is where Freud draws inspiration for the construction of phase B in the other cases, and it would be tempting to suggest that the man’s retention of this form of the fantasy signals his arrested development in the Oedipus complex. Indulging this temptation, one could argue that rather than accept the superiority of his father in the rivalry for the affection of the mother, the homosexual man comes to identify as the romantic and sexual partner of the father instead. After all, the heterosexual women and the heterosexual man detailed in the same text seem to have repressed this phase, if they experienced it at all.

Given that Nassif’s underlying understanding of the Oedipus complex is precisely that simplest schema, the import of the second track, that which examines the changes in the sex of the beaten child, is clear, for it permits drawing a genetic relation between any of the phases to the child’s resolution (or lack thereof) to their rivalry with the parent of the same sex. This means that Nassif’s proposed “archaeology of the subject,” where archaeology is understood as an analytical method of uncovering origins—or more “primitive” or fundamental elements at the least—depends on the simplest schema of the Oedipus complex since it is only in this schema that the sex of the child and the sex of the parent maintain a fixed signification: boys are like this and should become men; girls are like that and should become women. The stability offered by the simplest schema of Oedipus lends itself to linking the signification of the fantasy to the difference or resemblance of the sex of the beaten child to the author of the fantasy. This construction of the processes of identification and differentiation *vis-à-vis* sex is only intelligible if the rivalry of the Oedipal configuration is taken to be a blueprint or genetic index.

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²¹ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:199–200.

However, though the child is identical to the author of the fantasy in phase B, the beaten child in the fantasy bears distinctively androgynous traits and an androgynous signification. This complicates the differentiation Nassif makes between object and signification because the sex of the child is irrelevant to the fustigation in these clinical vignettes. What Freud reports to us and what Nassif himself focuses on are the qualities that we associate with femininity and masculinity, including passivity and activity as well as secondary sex characteristics that would lead the author of the fantasy to identify the batterer as being either “male” or “female.” In other words, the object is identified on the basis of *signals of sex*, and not just those of the beaten child but of *each of the players in the fantasy*.

This problematization can be surmounted if one follows a different, though conceptually adjacent track of the “object.” However, both the fantasy under investigation in “A Child is Being Beaten” and the more complicated schema of the Oedipus complex admitted in *The Ego and the Id* problematize Nassif’s (and Freud’s) conception of the object, signification, and, ultimately, the stakes of the fantasy. To take the object of the fantasy to be the sex of the beaten child is by no means an uncontroversial *decision* if we read the B phase of the fantasy to the letter, and the ensuing obscurity can be better resolved with reference to the more complicated form of Oedipus based on “bisexuality” and ambivalence. Continuing his discussion of the feminine and/or masculine disposition in the Oedipus complex, he writes,

It would appear, therefore, that in both sexes the relative strength of the masculine and feminine sexual dispositions is what determines whether the outcome of the Oedipus situation shall be an identification with the father or with the mother. *This is one of the ways in which bisexuality takes a hand in the subsequent vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex. The other way is even more important. For one gets an impression that the simple Oedipus complex is by no means its commonest form, but rather represents a simplification or schematization which, to be sure, is often enough justified for practical purposes.* Closer study usually discloses the more complete Oedipus complex, which is twofold, positive and negative, and is due to the bisexuality originally present in children: that is to say, a boy has not merely an ambivalent attitude towards his father and an affectionate object-choice towards his mother, but at the same time he also behaves like a girl and displays an affectionate feminine attitude to his father and a corresponding jealousy and

hostility towards his mother. It is this complicating element introduced by bisexuality that makes it so difficult to obtain a clear view of the facts in connection with the earliest object-choices and identifications, and still more difficult to describe them intelligibly.²²

Here, Freud admits the possibility that an underlying *coexistence* of masculine and feminine attributes may explain the vicissitudes of the Oedipus complex. This suggests that there is an ambivalent relation or function that precedes the relations with the rival parent and the love-object. This “complicating element” is put aside, despite being “complete,” because it less neatly characterizes the relations of the child, and hence is less “practical.” Directly following this, Freud makes a remarkable, underestimated qualification, writing, “It may even be that the ambivalence displayed in the relations to the parents should be attributed entirely to bisexuality and that it is not, as I have represented above, developed out of identification in consequence of rivalry.”²³ Adopting this schema, and modifying our tracks through the empirical subject-matter of the fustigation fantasies as a result, yields provocative theoretical conclusions.

To wit, the empirical subject-matter of the fustigation fantasies in the text offers support for accepting this alternative schema of the Oedipus complex. If there is indeed a confusion of pleasure and displeasure made possible by the confusion of beating for love-making, in this reconstruction the father is loving and hating the beaten child at the same time; the verbs’ entwinement in the verb “to beat” casts the father and the child in ambiguous roles. Due to the ambivalence of the relationship knotted around the kernel of the verb-duo “to beat/to love” or “*battre/baiser*,” isolating rivalry and identification from one another becomes difficult, if not impossible, in examining the phase B form of the fantasy. Freud’s simplified schema of Oedipus cannot account for the shift from the A phase to the B phase then, and it cannot account for the coexistence of loving and hating in any of the phases except as a perversion of a development presupposed by the simple form of the schema itself. Thus, the empirical matter of the fantasies necessitates prioritizing analysis of the ambivalent character of the child’s relations with the parents over those characteristics of rivalry. As Freud hypothesizes, the ambivalence of the child’s relations with the parents can be

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²² Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” 19:33.

²³ Freud, 19:33.

attributed to “bisexuality” or the unfocused psychosexuality of the child, hence consideration of either text—“A Child is Being Beaten” or *The Ego and the Id*—leads us to the demand for an elaboration of what this attribution entails and what its implications are.

As suggested above, the term “bisexuality” relies on a strict binary but we need not imagine such a thing existing, since this term describes the expression of ambivalent, androgynous identifications and differentiations on the part of the child. It is perhaps more properly designated as “constitutive psychosexual ambivalence” and similar phrases and terms. Now, this alternative schema of the Oedipus complex differs from the simpler schema in a crucial way. Whereas the simple schema is concerned only with the relationship of rivalry between the child and the parent of the same sex, the alternative schema is concerned with the *ambivalent identification* of the child with multiple parties, primarily an identification with both feminine and masculine traits. This is a far more complicated schema in that it involves not only a single relationship between two individuals but the relation and limit of the somatic, libidinal experience of the child—how and from where the child experiences pleasure, displeasure, attraction and repulsion, or love and hate bodily—along with their psychosexual identifications and differentiations—how they attempt to represent themselves in light of their bodily and libidinal experiences. Thus, the object is no longer the biological sex of the child but the *representative* of the limit between the child’s somatic experience and psychical reality. The object of the fantasy is *the drive*.

The Drive: Recasting the Object in the Fustigation Fantasy

First, it is exigent that we carefully define this drive as a representative of the limit and relation between somatic, libidinal experience and psychosexual reality, since it possesses a precise function in the theory of psychoanalysis, and its function will bring us back to the discussion of the object and signification of the fustigation fantasies, and ultimately to the question of this archaeology of the subject.

Freud famously characterizes the drive in energetic, hydraulic, and sometimes quantitative terms: “There is nothing to prevent our subsuming the concept of [‘drive’] under that of ‘stimulus’ and saying that [a drive] is a stimulus applied

to the mind.”²⁴ The drive is the expression of quanta of stimulus, but even in Freud’s conceptualization “[a drive] appears to us as a concept on the frontier between the mental and the somatic, as the psychical *representative* of the stimuli origination from within the organism and reaching the mind.”²⁵ Freud, in other moments, ties the drive’s pressures, aims, objects, and sources to erogenous zones and corresponding, external phenomena according to the temporal, biological development of an organism, a tendency exaggerated by later psychoanalytic theorists.²⁶ In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” however, his analogies discourage thinking of the progression of these stages as a neat advancement from one to the next. Rather, the life of the drive resembles successive eruptions of lava, waves spilling over one another, cooling unevenly atop the previous layer.²⁷

Though this analogy presents an oft-ignored contradiction of the typical picture of developmental stages, it by no means repudiates the presentation of the drive as a conceptual representative of an energetic, hydraulic force. Freud’s conceptualization hence positions the drive as the representative of the limit between a somatic, biological force and a psychosexual reality, but a limit which is itself only the line between a primal urge or instinct and the “higher” expression of a psychosexual desire or wish. For example, the drive, in its oral dimension, originates from the human infant’s biological need for nutrition through consumption and digestion, and Freud relies on the assumption that pleasure is the result of a cascade of stimuli that encourage seeking out this nutrition again; something tastes good, so the organism can “bodily” believe that it offers nutrition, and therefore will preserve its life. This is a simple narrative that describes the honing of the libido in one “stage” of development. Of course, the human infant does not exist in a “natural” state void of social, economic, and technological mediations, and the earliest experience of oral nutrition and pleasure is the breast or its technological substitutes. Thus, in adult life we may find expressions of several psychosexual fixations, aims, and so on that may be traced back to these early experiences with the breast as the object that first fulfilled this

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²⁴ Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 14:118.

²⁵ Freud, 14:121–22.

²⁶ Freud, 14:116–19. Even on these pages, Freud does not go so far as to suggest that the drive’s pressure, aim, object, and source are exclusively determined by time and physiological development, however.

²⁷ Freud, 14:131.

biological urge. In this conceptualization, the life of the drive is *linear* and its origin in somatic, libidinal experience determines the possible permutations of the psychosexual reality of later life. However uneven in movement the successive waves of the drive across an individual's life may be, the analogies relying on hydraulic and energetic images necessitate this *linear* presentation of the life of the drive and progressive honing of the libido as hydraulic, energetic force.

Lacan's conceptualization of the drive does not rely on these energetic, hydraulic analogies, and instead takes the *linguistic material* uttered in psychoanalysis to be the *representative* of the limit between the individual's somatic experience and psychosexual reality.²⁸ This conceptualization much better encapsulates the empirical matter of fantasies like those recorded in "A Child is Being Beaten" because the experience and reality of the fantasy is not represented by an energy or a hydraulic force; after all is said and done, these forces are never *observed* by Freud but merely *postulated* in order to begin making sense of the phenomena encountered in the psychoanalytic clinic.²⁹ The term "limit" here is an appropriate characterization of the drive because, as Lacan argues in the closing words of the second book of his *Seminar*, the drive possesses a phenomenological duality (even in Freud's formulation): it can tend towards pleasure and displeasure, and do so simultaneously, but only due to the fact that the drive necessarily exists on the threshold between the somatic and the linguistic, the libidinal and the symbolic.³⁰ As pleasure-seeking, the drive is libidinal, and is thus of the imaginary order since representing this aspect requires the use of analogy to provide an image of this pleasure-seeking action. Furthermore, this aspect of the drive is narcissistic because it operates within the structure of the ego. As death-seeking, however, the drive is linguistic and *partial*, because it exists *beyond the pleasure-seeking aspect* in a form that is incompletely recognized. Insisting that his audience reread the text of "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," Lacan claims,

The symbolic order is rejected by the libidinal order, which includes the whole of the domain of the imaginary, including the structure of the ego. And the death drive is only the mask of the symbolic order, in so far—this is what Freud

²⁸ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Peregrin, 1986), 177.

²⁹ Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," 14:119–20.

³⁰ Jacques Lacan, *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Sylvana Tomaselli (New York: W. W. Norton, 1991), 326.

writes—as it is dumb, that is to say in so far as it hasn't been realized. As long as the symbolic recognition hasn't been instituted, by definition, the symbolic order is dumb. The symbolic order is simultaneously non-being and insisting to be, that is what Freud has in mind when he talks about the death drive as being what is most fundamental: a symbolic order in travail, in the process of coming, insisting on being realized.³¹

Precisely in masking the symbolic order's incompleteness the *death drive* is the representative of the limit between a somatic urge, or something that can be represented by analogy as a somatic, libidinal urge to seek pleasure, and symbolic, since it is articulated in a linguistic form that crystallizes or arrests the urge for pleasure. This representative is non-being precisely because it is made up of mere *wording*; yet, it is insisting to be because it represents the function of the symbolic order in modifying the somatic, libidinal, and imaginary urges. Consequently, what Freud calls the death drive turns out to be the most complete conceptualization of *the* drive rather than a special instance of *a* drive, according to Lacan. The drive represents the circuit between somatic experience (which is indifferently) and psychosexual reality (which is itself only representable through *words* like “A child is being beaten” or “My father is beating me.”). Thus, the drive, as a foundational concept, represents both *the fact that* as well as *how* language—like that *wording* of the fustigation fantasies—steps in to bridge the somatic experience with material reality, giving rise to a *psychosexual reality* whose pressures, aims, objects, and sources may have nothing to do with biological reproduction, self-preservation, or homeostasis.³²

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Given that the hard kernel, as Nassif puts it, of the fantasy is the unchanging and entwined verb duo “beating/loving,” the fantasy stages the relation and limit that the notion of the drive represents; this verb duo, present in all of the phases of the fantasy, instantiates a threshold with two “sides,” as it were: one somatic, libidinal, and imaginary, and the other linguistic, psychosexual, and symbolic. The action is definitively somatic, as corporeally violent as it is, and the ambivalent fusion of pleasure and displeasure, love and hate, designates

³¹ Lacan, 326; translation modified.

³² Nassif refers to an “imaginary reality” structured by fantasy as opposed to a “real reality” in his discussion of the fustigation fantasy. The latter certainly corresponds to what I call “material reality” and the former is perhaps close to what I call “psychosexual reality.” Cf. Nassif, “Fantasy,” 14.

the other side of the threshold portrayed in the fantasy. This verb duo thus acts as an axis around which the permutations revolve. If we take the object to be the “thing” staged and observable in the fantasy, then it is this limit, which remains unchanged and always bifurcates the *tableau* between the somatic, libidinal, and imaginary, on the one hand, and the psychosexual and symbolic on the other. And, again, the concept of the drive is a representation of this limit that sutures, relates, and bridges just as much as it constructs a threshold and a delimitation between the libidinal and the symbolic. Thus, the object of the fantasy is the drive with its circuit expressed in the wording of the fantasy.³³

So, the drive is the representation, in words, of the ambivalent relation and limit upon which the individual constructs and maintains identification that are similarly ambivalent. This points to the necessity of the alternative, more complex schema of the Oedipus complex, since we are not dealing with the single relation of rivalry with the parent of the same sex, as the simplest schema holds.

As such, the signification of the fantasy should not be interpreted solely in light of the sex of the beaten child but should be understood as the *annulment* and *transformation* of the meaning of the things that are different in their nature yet co-present in the drama of the fustigation fantasy. By “annulment” here we should not understand a simple, clean elimination of masculinity, femininity, love, hate, and so on. Rather, this annulment represents the elimination of the *first* signification of each of the attributes caught in the ambivalent structure of the fantasy, namely the somatic, imaginary, and libidinal one. The act of fantasizing—as an enactment of the construction of the relation and limit that the drive represents—annuls both sides of the coin, as it were, producing an altogether different alloy, and one that can explain the underlying nature of the drive beyond what clinical observation of ambivalence offers.

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Hence, we are not dealing here with a fantasy made solely in confrontation with the origin of the differences of the sexes but instead made in confrontation with the drive itself, wherein those signals of sex merely indicate something more

³³ At most, we could say that the sex of the beaten child is not the sole object of the fantasy; however, whether there is one, two, or several objects of the fantasy does not matter given that this reading, mimicking Nassif, follows one path of several through the subject-matter of the fustigation fantasies.

fundamental than both somatic experience and the symbolic order. The question arises of what those signals indicate and how they indicate. In a word: what do they mean? This appears to put us onto a similar track as Freud and Nassif: the track of the signification of the fustigation fantasy. However, the problem that the analysis of the drive as linguistic representative presents is not one of signification but the annulment and transformation of the signification of two terminal aspects: somatic, libidinal, imaginary experience and linguistic, symbolic, psychosexual reality.

We thus come upon the possibility of a theoretical conceptualization of the governance of the drive, its constitutive ambivalence, and its precipitate annulment and transformation of the elements it delimits and binds. The problem is not one of determining the signification of the fantasy but one of excavating the substrate that generates ambivalence (which the drive merely represents) and organizes the relationships and matrices of the elements of the fantasy. Our question now concerns what concept we can construct to adequately represent the governance of the drive and its rendering of the content of the fantasy. We are dealing with something that underlies signification, determining its transformation through processes merely dramatized in the fustigation fantasy. This is *the letter*, as articulated by Lacan.

The Letter: Recasting “Signification” in the Analysis of the Fustigation Fantasy

Lacan provides a simple definition of the letter: “By ‘letter’ I designate the material medium [support] that concrete discourse borrows from language. This simple definition assumes that language is not to be confused with the various psychological and somatic functions that serve it in the speaking subject.”³⁴ The letter is not simply the written characters that compose a written language, neither is it the phonemes of spoken language. It is a constructed concept that names the condition of all signification, passed down and maintained in any community, institution, society, or civilization: “[N]o signification can be sustained except by reference to another signification,” writes Lacan, and it is the letter that anchors this “signifying chain,” constructing signification while simultaneously

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³⁴ Jacques Lacan, “The Instance of the Letter in the Unconscious, or Reason Since Freud,” in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 410.

determining the positions and indices of any word and thing.³⁵ Implied by these cursory definitions is the letter's capacity to hold together formally different or distinct elements together; it possesses a capacity to found coexistence and sustain the co-presence of things different in their nature. Now, we can be more precise about this function: it is the consequence of the annulment of "things different in their nature" through a process of what we may call "literalization" since these "things" are being annulled and transformed through their formal relation of coexistence *qua* letter. As an example, Lacan describes two doors labeled "Ladies" and "Gentlemen." Both signifiers refer to the same signified (a restroom), but their difference arises from the distinct associative chains of signifiers that history and culture attach to implied sexual differentiation.³⁶ The signifiers create meaning through the play of resemblance and difference in a context, not through their shared reference. In other words, "things" become signifiers, no longer simply being "signifieds" or references represented by a word, sign, or image; the "being" and reality of a signifier is characterized by its relation to other signifiers rather than an essence or an attribute. The letter is *representative* of the fundamental element of these relations that are chained together by various somatic, psychological, historical, and institutional links. The letter thus *hews* the possibility of all formal relationality.

Consequently, the letter is the condition of possibility for the drive. The drive is the representation of the particular ambivalent relation and limit that structures the fustigation fantasies, and so it belongs to the set of phenomena conditioned by the letter.

Turning our attention more directly to the empirical subject-matter of the fustigation fantasy and the fundamental fantasy it expresses, the question now seems not to be one of the meaning or the signification of the fantasies. The question concerns instead the underlying nature of the "text" that carries this signification as well as the drive to compose this text and which mandates its recurrence, the repetitive fantasizing of the beatings; we could call the repetitive action of this fantasizing a compulsively repeated "reading" of a "text" founded on the letter. In this way, one can consider symptoms, fantasies, dreams, verbalizations, and even clinical constructions as texts composed of signifying chains,

³⁵ Lacan, 411.

³⁶ Lacan, 411.

all founded upon the letter. Not only does the reoccurring fantasizing of the fustigations represent a recurrent reading, so too does the psychoanalytic investigation—in the clinic and in theory—represent a reading of a kind too. “Therein lies a veritable ‘drive,’” writes Paul-Laurent Assoun, “that confronts the subject with the letter of their desire and makes present an absence that is dear to them. Scientifically, ‘de-psychologized,’ the question can be articulated with its own brutality: What does the one who reads want?”³⁷ In the context of “‘A Child is Being Beaten,’” we can inquire what the one who composes and rereads the text of the fustigation fantasy recurrently wants. This inquiry requires locating the material support of the fantasy as a text and symptom: the letter. Following this, we can suggest something about the nature of not only these fundamental concepts but the relationship of our theory to what these concepts supposedly “think through” or name.

Now, Nassif suggests where one might locate the bedrock of the fantasies and subjectivity. Yet, this will inadvertently direct us to a more palpable and convincing location of the letter. He writes that “the body, although it can only be apprehended in its significant parts [*ses parties significantes*], is this entity that, as it develops, supports the temporalization of the subject, as is implied by repression. And one could therefore assume that the body constitutes in some way a repressive instance that bars the evanescent subject.”³⁸ Nassif’s conclusion is that the body is the medium that bears the impact of the Oedipus complex, marked by the “scars of Oedipus,” a name Freud employs to characterize the fustigation fantasies themselves.³⁹ The body “supports the temporalization of the subject” in serving as a visible, physical “chronicle” of the individual’s path through childhood and the travails of the Oedipus complex. This would potentially allow one to “assume” that it is the body that marks the limit and threshold between the unconscious and waking subject of thought, where the latter designates the traditional conceptualization of the subject as self-conscious bearer of rationality and autonomy. The body preserves these scars of Oedipus and so permits the potential instigation of the repetition of the drive-circuits that the fustigation fantasy stages.

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³⁷ Paul-Laurent Assoun, *Introduction à la métapsychologie freudienne* (Paris: Quadriges, 1993), 126; my translation.

³⁸ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 31.

³⁹ Freud, “‘A Child is Being Beaten,’” 17:193.

However, in pointing out the prominence of the body to us, Nassif inadvertently identifies an aspect more solidly grasped by the schema and analysis I have elaborated: “[The body] can only be apprehended in its significant parts,” where the French term could more awkwardly be rendered as “signifying parts.”⁴⁰ These would be what I referred to as “signals of sex” as opposed to the actual, anatomical sex of the batterer or the beaten child. The body cannot be the support of the temporalization of the subject, and it cannot be the bearer of the scars of Oedipus precisely because it is not the anatomical body that can be apprehended in the fantasy. The drive, however, is such a support and bearer; this is not simply a sleight-of-hand but a consequence of reframing the empirical subject-matter of the cases recorded in the text as dramatizations of the construction of limit and relation by the drive. Furthermore, this dramatization depicts a constitutive ambivalence that annuls both the somatic, libidinal experience and the symbolic, psychosexual reality of the subject. If the body has a part to play in “bar[ring] the evanescent subject,” it is only through its annulment and *literalization* into a text.⁴¹ So, the drive, and its specific verbalization or *wording*, indicates the location of a scar of Oedipus; it silhouettes a wound and, in the repetitive composition of the “texts” of the fustigation fantasy, the drive plays the role of the blade that makes the wound and exposes a more fundamental structure.

The scar, as an analogy, is a representation of the remainder supposed to have been left behind after the disappearance of the subject in the drive. This disappearance or loss of the subject may explain what exactly is at stake in the “‘ambivalent’ striving for the object, which may include ‘injury and annihilation.’”⁴² Alenka Zupančič glosses the Lacanian position on this stake linked to the relation between subjectivity and the drive with the following:

Even before we become ourselves, we lose something. But what follows from the Lacanian perspective is rather this: The originally lost object is the subject itself, the subject “before” the transcendental constitution. [. . .] To put it in a somewhat clumsy but suggestive way: What falls out of reality when it is constituted as a possible object of knowledge is the subject as an object among other objects. The

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⁴⁰ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 31.

⁴¹ Nassif, 31.

⁴² Darian Leader, *Jouisissance: Sexuality, Suffering, and Satisfaction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 13; quoting Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 14:137–39.

subject begins as an object [. . .]. When it constitutes itself as subject, it disappears from [. . .] objective reality; but it disappears in such a way that it remains inscribed in it as the lost object.⁴³

This is what the word “scar” indicates, then: the subject is lost as an element belonging to material, objective reality. This requires its annulment as an object among other objects and its transformation into an inscription. In other words, the subject is annulled as object and literalized into an element of the symbolic order. The letter is the material support that results from this process. Across the permutations of the fantasy in “A Child is Being Beaten” this is indicated everywhere, whether it be by the necessary absence of the subject in the scene—as is the case in the form “A child is being beaten”—or the representation of the subject as an object that is simultaneously loved and hated in the form of “My father is beating me” or “My father is beating the child (he only loves me).” The letter is what bars the subject and what the drive’s circuit encircles, restaging its disappearance even to the point of injury or annihilation, even if such injury and annihilation is phantasmatic. The letter is the scar of Oedipus.

The fustigation fantasies do not, then, express a more fundamental fantasy about the origin of the sexes, and do not indicate anything about an individual’s resolution (or lack thereof) of the simplest form of the Oedipus complex. The fustigation fantasies recorded in “A Child is Being Beaten” express a more fundamental fantasy of the *literalization of the being of the subject*. It is the codification, inscription, or writing of a text composed of signifiers that do not signify a subject but another signifier. My recourse to “Lacanesque” here is not meant to purposefully ambiguate the matter. Rather, it is meant to cement my insistence that we are not dealing with one and only one type of relationship, like that of rivalry. We are dealing with the conditions and effects of establishing any and every relationship, identification, and differentiation; we are dealing with the conditions of signification and formal relationality *tout court*. Through the fustigation fantasy, somatic, libidinal experience and psychosexual reality are annulled and *literalized*, transformed into a *text* whose kernel is the verb duo “to beat/to love.”

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⁴³ Alenka Zupančič, “Lacan as Speculative Thinker?,” *Rivista di Estetica* 86 (2024): par. 45, <https://doi.org/10.4000/13876>.

Conclusion: Oedipus Subverted

In the final moments of *Funeral Parade of Roses*, right after Eddie has pierced both of her eyes with the knife Gonda, her father, has used to slit his own throat, a shot of a man suddenly appears: “It was frightening, wasn’t it?” he asks the viewer. “The cursed destiny of man! It was such a unique film with cruelty and laughter. Let’s look forward to the next film. *Sayonara, sayonara, sayonara.*” We abruptly return to the sight of Eddie stumbling onto the street, blind and bloody, just like Oedipus: the same cruel destiny, but another body, another fantasy. The film’s “subversion” of Oedipus dramatizes the same processes of annulment and literalization belonging to the drive and the letter. Just as the titular letter of Edgar Allan Poe’s “The Purloined Letter”—a text that serves Lacan in his famous illustration of the function of the letter—organizes the actions, positions, desires, and fates of the characters, so too does the photograph, with a hole bored by a burning cigarette in the face of the father in the film. We could crystallize Eddie’s final, tragic moments, as the film invites us to do with its title frames, with the following: “I am the wound and the blade—the victim and the executioner.”

The fustigation fantasies recorded in “A Child is Being Beaten” exemplarily, rather than uniquely or singularly, stage this same process, the same cruel destiny that repeats the disappearance of the subject and its impossible transcendental constitution. The fustigation depicted in the fantasy (its content) is an expression of ambivalence. This ambivalence is crystallized in the relation and limit established by the verb duo “to beat/to love,” and is represented and encapsulated in theory by the concept of the drive (the object). The drive’s repetitive action and perpetual re-inscription through continual re-fantasizing betrays the material support of signification (the letter). In all of this, the subject is necessarily lost, or rather, annulled and literalized. Wound and blade, victim and executioner: a cursed destiny.

We come again to Nassif’s questions, better equipped. I paraphrase him: If it is on the structure exposed, not by castration but the drive, that the fantasy of being beaten is grafted, it is obviously not the difference of the sexes that by itself makes the fantasy. Or one could ask oneself, could another fantasy not form, with a different verbalization, on the ground of this same structure, based on this same archaeological foundation, but according to the individual history of

a particular body?⁴⁴ The foregoing permits us to answer affirmatively to these questions since, in bridging Freud and Nassif's analyses with other developments in psychoanalytic theory, we can pinpoint the archaeological foundation of the subject in its literalization. Put differently, the "origin" of the subject is only its retroactive annulment and transformation, as dramatized and expressed in the wording of texts like the fantasy, the symptom, the dream, and so on. However, there are two caveats, or rather two new meanings each for these two terms "fantasy" and "body." Regarding "another fantasy," this designates both the possibility of another permutation of the fustigation fantasy as well as the open-ended possibility of any other fantasy that may not conform to the simplest schema of the Oedipus complex. Regarding the "particular body," another body, it is precisely its particularity which leaves open the possibility of either another imaginary body-schema that does not conform to the gender binary or any physiological configuration of anatomy, especially those that do not conform to the presumed standard of sexual dimorphism. In short, we are well beyond the colloquial playground parable about Venus, Mars, men, and women: there is room for transgender, transsexual, and intersex individuals; in a word, all gender nonconforming bodies bearing a letter that generates a fantasy. Another fantasy and another body may be conceptualized and represented in psychoanalytic theory. Another fantasy with a different verbalization can form because what underlies the fustigation fantasies is the phantasmatic exposition of the condition of all signification. The cursed destiny of the subject, to be the author of its own disappearance and perpetual literalization, is not determined by the origin of the difference of the sexes but the condition of all signification: the ambivalence of the letter.

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That exposition of the condition of all signification includes the signification made possible by the metaphorical substitution of the mother's desire for the Name-of-the-Father. This refers to a Lacanian conceptualization of the Oedipus complex, and one constructed from the simplest schema based on the rivalry between the child and the parent of the same sex. Lacan maintained that this metaphorical substitution characteristic of the Oedipus complex represented the bestowal of civilization upon the subject, deeming it necessary and ineluctable. This feature is not contradicted by my analysis and adoption of the more complex form of the Oedipus complex; indeed, it is a strong argument for

⁴⁴ See Nassif, "Fantasy," 31.

Lacan's insight since constitutive ambivalence is now directly tied to a structure that foments not just sexual difference but signification *tout court*, hence all of the "texts" of the subject's desire.

My aim in writing about *Funeral Parade of Roses* in an article about Freud, Nassif, Lacan, and the fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory was to highlight bodies and fantasies typically excluded from psychoanalytic theorization, bodies deemed abnormal according to that simplest schema of the Oedipus complex. These nonconformists, gender traitors, and queers are traditionally designated as being arrested in a "psychosexual" stage of development, stuck with a perverse fixation, or even diagnosed as psychotic. It would be a crude oversimplification to suggest that all psychoanalytic theory endorses such designations. However, in Lacanian circles it cannot be denied that the question of transitioning from one sex to another, of electing to identify as a gender distinct from one assigned at birth, and even of valorizing one's queerness as not abnormal remain controversial topics. These controversies stem from formalizations of the Oedipus complex constructed on the basis of the simplest schema. My aim has been to subvert this schema by following Nassif's adroit sidetracking of one of Freud's overlooked texts. I did not set out to put to rest the controversies in psychoanalytic and "queer theoretical" circles. This article is about certain fundamentals of psychoanalytic theory; these fundamentals happen to be at the center of said controversies, though. It is my position that a lucid elaboration of the letter of the desire of individuals who defy the simplest, overused schema of Oedipus cannot be heard by clinicians and theorists if these fundamentals are not revisited.

Catherine Millot presents one such "classical" theorization of the phenomena associated with a desire to change one's sex, presenting three "formalizations" that frame her readings of the biographies of historical figures who were transsexual or transgender as well as her interpretations of "interviews" conducted with gender nonconforming individuals in Paris in the 1980s. She deems these formalizations to be "keys to transsexuality," insisting on that term throughout.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Catherine Millot, *Horsexe: Essay on Transsexuality*, trans. Kenneth Hylton (New York: Autonomedia, 1990), 31. Millot also insists on referring to transgender women as male transsexuals and transgender men as female transsexuals. I do not adopt her terminology or quote here but offer this clarification for the reader who may consult her text.

One of these is the Oedipus complex as articulated by Freud and formalized by Lacan. She writes,

Lacan's contribution to Freudian theory of the Oedipus complex consists in showing that it can be analysed in terms of the semiotic theory of modern linguistics. The Oedipal phenomenon, when viewed in this way, can be thought of as a signifying operation involving the substitution of one signifier for another—in other words, involving metaphor. The metaphorical operation generates a new signification, one which the signifiers initially brought into play not in themselves entail. Metaphor, like metonymy, is a way of producing sense by means of signifier play. The Oedipus complex is a special example of metaphor; it consists in substituting one signifier, the Name-of-the-Father, for another, the desire of the mother.⁴⁶

Millot's conceptualization aligns with my own, up to a point. The description of the signifying operation of metaphor is compatible with my own account of Oedipus and the excavation of the letter through analysis of the fustigation fantasy. However, given that the defining feature of Oedipus is not rivalry with the parent of the same sex and is instead the possibility of ambivalence understood as the coexistence of things different in their nature, like femininity and masculinity, a reevaluation is called for. Namely, is it so certain that the effect of the paternal metaphor is a "substitution [that] at last makes sense of maternal conduct and speech"?⁴⁷ But, this "making sense" is there from the beginning of the Oedipus complex and not at its accomplishment: the ambivalent relation is more manifest at different moments in time but it is there from the beginning, according to Freud.⁴⁸ This brings into question the possibility of marking the "end" of the Oedipus complex, and therefore problematizes Millot's argument that an inability to enact the substitution of the mother's desire for the Name-of-the-Father represents an incomplete, abnormal psychosexual development.

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Millot's conclusion is that the desire to change one's sex is a psychotic symptom of that incomplete, abnormal psychosexual development. In her view, it is a desire to change something in material reality in the hopes of rectifying a symbolic confusion (though in her idiom we are often left confused as to whether

⁴⁶ Millot, 32.

⁴⁷ Millot, 34.

⁴⁸ Freud, "The Ego and the Id," 19:32.

she means a change in the Real or a change in material reality, which are not equivalent in Lacanian theory). Her argument deserves closer attention in light of the subversion of the simple schema of Oedipus I have offered here. If rivalry with the parent of the same sex is not what determines the ambivalence of identifications, then theorizations depending on this relationship require reevaluation. More to the point: Can we maintain that there is a normal path through the Oedipus complex if we cannot demonstrate that there is an end to ambivalence, desire, and fantasy?

However, this analysis merely indicates where one could start in returning to Millot as well as other Lacanian conceptualizations that are either with or against so-called queer theory (and, of course, this inquiry would benefit from clearer conceptions of “queer theory” outside of a genre or fashionable buzzword). The present analysis alone does not offer conclusive argumentation on these matters. To proceed, however, one would need to carefully elucidate not only how the alternative schema of Oedipus may or may not affect other theorists’ arguments but also detail what the epistemological status of the letter, as a concept and as the scar of Oedipus, exactly is. My analysis has clarified the connection of the letter to ambivalence, Oedipus, and the drive, but there are further questions. For instance, the relationships amongst theoretico-clinical constructions in analysis, the letter, and the *matheme* remain opaque. Though the drive, as a conceptual representation of the relation and limit constructed by ambivalence, exposes the letter and its effects, more must be clarified about the differences and resemblances between theoretico-clinical constructions and the daily construction of the symptom, the fantasy, and so on. In other words, what distinguishes theory’s constructions from fantasizing?

So, we are left better equipped, I hope, to investigate two persistent problems for psychoanalytic theory. First, what is the letter of the desire of so-called queers and gender nonconformists when viewed not through the simplified text of Oedipus but the complex text? Second, what differentiates the conceptualization and construction of the letter in theory from the conceptualization and construction of fantasy constitutive of subjectivity itself? These two questions are by no means small matters, and they are not disconnected from one another given that Millot’s own theoretical position is not born out of malice or sheer prejudice (one hopes, at least) but out of her understanding of Lacan’s formalizations and constructions. The fundamental fantasy expressed by the fustigation fantasy is

not merely about the origin of the difference of the sexes, it expresses a fantasy about the genesis of signification and the subject's symbolic annihilation and literalization as a condition of that genesis. Though this process is, of course, psychosexual in nature and bears on sexual difference, we must recognize that this is always only a sublimation of sexuality, hence we call it "psychosexual."

If there is an archaeology of the subject, then it is not properly conducted solely on the basis of sexual difference, but on the condition of signification that literalizes the subject. An analysis of the ambivalent relation and limit—represented by the drive—exposes that fundamental substrate underlying all fantasy and signification. The letter: it is the remainder of the annulment and literalization of the being of the subject, and the particular texts of the fustigation fantasy and *Funeral Parade of Roses* offer translucent vignettes of these processes fomented by our constitutive ambivalence.

Evidently, Nassif's exemplary approach to the "return to Freud" still holds promise for the field and function of psychoanalysis, a promise which may begin to bear fruit through these translations.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Construction in Traversing the Fantasy¹

Keywords

fantasy, drives, construction in analysis, primal repression, fundamental fantasy

Abstract

Jacques Nassif's commentary on Freud's analysis of the fustigation fantasy ("A child is being beaten") offers several incisive points of entry into Freud's conceptualization of fantasy and its relation to other central notions of psychoanalysis. This text examines its connection to the drives, as well as the distinction between the structural, the individual, and the singular in fantasy formation, emphasizing Freud's notion of "construction in analysis" as pivotal. It highlights the difference between the "fundamental fantasy" and the so-called "original fantasies," and proposes an articulation of the relation between drives and fantasy grounded in the concept of primal repression (*Urverdrängung*).

Konstrukcija v prekoračitvi fantazme

Ključne besede

fantazma, goni, konstrukcija v analizi, prapotlačitev, temeljna fantazma

Povzetek

Komentar Jacquesa Nassifa k Freudovi analizi fantazme tepeža ("Otrok je tepen") ponuja več prodornih vstopnih točk v Freudovo konceptualizacijo fantazme in njenega

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odnosa do drugih osrednjih pojmov psihoanalize. Besedilo preučuje njeno povezavo s pojmom gona ter razliko med strukturnim, individualnim in singularnim v formaciji fantazme, pri čemer poudari Freudov pojem »konstrukcije v analizi« kot ključen. Izpostavi razliko med »temeljno fantazmo« in tako imenovanimi »izvornimi fantazmami« ter predlaga artikulacijo razmerja med goni in fantazmo, utemeljeno v pojmu praprotlačitve (*Urverdrängung*).



Jacques Nassif's text offers a remarkable reading of Freud's analysis of the "A child is being beaten" fantasy. "Remarkable" because of what it manages to bring out not only in relation to the Freudian text itself but also to the broader question of the formation of fantasy. What is at stake here is the formation of individual fantasy. Yet from a Freudian perspective, the "individual" is never simply the opposite of something more general or "structural." For example, the fantasy of castration is said to be the "bedrock" of the beating fantasy. But to say it is the bedrock does not mean that it constitutes the *phantasmatic core* of this particular fantasy. The latter is something different, and can only emerge through a "construction in analysis." It is this latter dimension that is also at stake in Lacan's notion of "traversing the fantasy," which marks the end of analysis.² We will re-

² There seems to be some terminological confusion in Freudian and Lacanian psychoanalysis between the terms *fundamental fantasy* and *original* or *primal fantasy*. Nassif uses both terms when referring to the castration fantasy, but I am inclined to argue that the more appropriate term here would be *original/primal fantasy*. In their famous 1964 paper "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," Laplanche and Pontalis, following Freud, speak of three *original fantasies*, which are also *fantasies of origin*: the fantasy of the primal scene (being present at one's conception), the fantasy of castration, and the fantasy of seduction. Like myths, these fantasies all concern origins: the primal scene pictures the origin of the individual; seduction fantasies stage the origin and upsurge of sexuality; castration fantasies picture the origin of sexual difference. See Jean Laplanche and Jean-Bertrand Pontalis, "Fantasme originaire, fantasme des origines, origine du fantasme," *Temps Modernes* 215 (1964): 1833–68; "Fantasy and the Origins of Sexuality," *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 49, no. 1 (1968): 1–18.

I would suggest that these *original fantasies*—which, moreover, are usually not entirely inaccessible to consciousness (they are often brought into analysis and recognized there)—should be distinguished from the phantasmatic core which, according to Freud, can only ever be a *construction in analysis* and never something directly assumed by the analysand in the course of analysis.

turn to this distinction between structural or “original” fantasies and the phantasmatic core of fantasy later, but the main focus of our study, following Nassif, will be on the relationship between the temporal and the atemporal aspects of fantasy as a dynamic interplay between structure and history.

It would be too simple to view the relationship between the “structural” and the individual merely as the way in which an individual, on account of her particular subjective history and circumstances, forms her own version of the “structural impasse,” her own—more or less complicated—way of dealing with it. Nassif identifies a third level, which he calls the “archaeology of fantasy,” that makes it possible to think about breaks or cuts in the succession of phases.

What is at stake here is neither simply a historical succession or development of fantasy through different “phases” or formulations (Freud identifies three), nor simply a disclosure of what in these phases is “structural” (atemporal). Rather, it is what Nassif calls *permutations*. The curious feature of these permutations is that they do not merely twist around some inflexible core structure, but seem to induce change in the structure and its relations themselves. The permutations can be said to take place at the level of historical development, but they are not reducible to it, since they also introduce something like a transformation of the structural relations.

As Freud already put it:

A systematic application of [psychoanalysis] shows that fustigation fantasies have a historical development which is by no means simple, and in the course of which they are changed in most respects more than once—as regards their relation to the author of the fantasy, and as regards their object, their content and their significance.³

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Another crucial difference is that the primal or original fantasies, according to Freud, are universals. By contrast, the “fundamental fantasy,” as understood by Lacan, is singular for each subject. I will return to this distinction in more detail in the second part of this text.

³ Sigmund Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten’: A Contribution to the Study of the Origin of the Sexual Perversions,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1955–74), 17:184.

Nassif proposes a detailed analysis of what occurs on three levels: that of content (the clinical manifestation, of which the fantasy is only a symptom), that of the object (the person—or rather the sex—of the beaten subject in the fantasy), and that of signification (the connection the subject establishes between beating and loving or hating). He concludes by asking whether, without simply abandoning the “archaeological foundation” of castration, another fantasy might not form, articulated through a different verbalization.

Fantasy and Drives

Let us start by some basic clarifications concerning the notion of fantasy.

First, fantasy in the psychoanalytic sense is not some subjective scenario waiting and wanting to *get realized*. It participates in reality and sustains it exactly *as fantasy*. In this sense fantasies are not the opposite of reality, but its support. What prevents fantasy from being fulfilled is not simply our fear (“lack of nerve” or other considerations), but above all the fact that fantasy fully fulfils its role *such as it is*, as fantasy.

If fantasy is the substitute for the impossible/forbidden enjoyment,⁴ it has the capacity to transform the enjoyment in question into something not only “possible,” but actual—something taking place. The “substitute” is not a next-best replacement for what one cannot have; it is *a way of having what one cannot have*, and of enjoying it. There is no way the subject could access this enjoyment without the screen of fantasy (except, perhaps, in certain cases of perversion). In other words, fantasy—in its final, “monolithic” form (to use Nassif’s term), in our case “*A child is being beaten*”—is what sustains and provides enjoyment, rather than something that merely imagines or fantasizes about it. It manifests as libidinal excitation, which most often finds its outlet in masturbatory acts.⁵

As Nassif—and Freud before him—show very clearly, the seemingly “neutral” and “abstract” nature of the final formula (it is neither clear who the beater is nor who the beaten child is) is far from simply neutral or abstract. For the verbalization to function as a fantasy, it must in some way carry within itself the

⁴ Freud, 17:189.

⁵ Freud, 17:189.

breaks (shifts, substitutions) so meticulously analyzed by Nassif. Nassif's choice of the term "archaeology" is hardly arbitrary. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, Freud famously compares the unconscious apparatus to the city of Rome, in which several different cities and civilizations coexist, superimposed upon one another.⁶ In his text "Constructions in Analysis" the archeological metaphor is even more prominent.⁷ Nassif's particular use of the term aims at formulating a model of a singular mixture of the temporal and the atemporal: "we are dealing with a temporal–intemporal mix where the relationship to the origin is not thought in terms of cause and effect, but in terms of resemblance and difference."⁸

This last point is crucial: resemblance and difference take the place of the temporal cause-and-effect relation, yet this does not mean that the temporal dimension, or "history," simply disappears. Rather, we could say that it continues to exist as a kind of "frozen history" that endows these resemblances and differences with their specific libidinal charge.

Perhaps this archaeological model or comparison is especially apt as a model of fantasy (even more so than of the unconscious in general, as Freud suggested), since it resonates strongly with Freud's decomposition of the beating fantasy into three sequences and the permutations between them, as analyzed by Nassif. However, in a footnote to this passage, Nassif goes a step further: he recalls Freud's reflections in the essay "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," where drive activity and its effects are given yet another metaphor — this time "geological" rather than archaeological.

Perhaps, however, it is permissible to look at the matter and represent it in yet another way. We can divide the life of each instinct into a series of *separate successive waves*, each of which is *homogeneous* during whatever period of time it may last, and whose relation to one another is comparable to that of *successive eruptions of lava*. We can then perhaps picture the first, original eruption of the instinct as *proceeding in an unchanged form* and undergoing no development at all. The next wave would be modified *from the outset*—being turned, for instance, from active

⁶ Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *Standard Edition*, 21:69.

⁷ See Sigmund Freud, "Constructions in Analysis," in *Standard Edition*, 23:259–60.

⁸ Jacques Nassif, "Fantasy in 'A Child is Being Beaten,'" trans. Holden M. Rasmussen, *Filozofski vestnik* 46, no. 3 (2025): 9–32, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.46.3.01>.

to passive—and would then, with this new characteristic, be added to the earlier wave, and so on. If we were then to take a survey of the instinctual impulse from its beginning up to a given point, the succession of waves which we have described would inevitably present *the picture of a definite development of the instinct*.⁹

Here we have the image of successive eruptions of lava, each homogeneous in itself, remaining as it is and undergoing no further development, with each new wave already beginning as a modification (“modified *from the outset*”) and then adding itself to the previous one. The final result, referred to by Freud as a *bestimmter Entwicklung* of the drive—not so much a “definite development” as a “determined” or “specific development”—thus suggests that the elements of the drive are mechanically bound or glued together, rather than organically integrated. It is an image that appears anything but dialectical; the constitutive elements undergo no transformation, no proper movement in their relation.

Lacan seemed to appreciate this image. The French translation of Freud’s *Trieb* as *pulsion* by Laplanche and Pontalis had already emphasized the aspect of pressure or push, to which Lacan added the idea of a pulsatory movement, “erupting” in waves. Furthermore, he proposed his own notion and image of this “mechanical” coalescence of the different elements of the drive: namely, *montage*.¹⁰ But let us remain with Freud’s image.

First, we need of course to take into account that, in the passage quoted above, Freud speaks of the *drives* (and their vicissitudes), as does Lacan when talking

⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” in *Standard Edition*, 14:130–31; my emphasis.

¹⁰ “The *montage* of the drive is a *montage* which, first, is presented as having neither head nor tail—in the sense in which one speaks of *montage* in a surrealist collage. If we bring together the paradoxes that we just defined at the level of *Drang*, at that of the object, at that of the aim of the drive, I think that the resulting image would show the working of a dynamo connected up to a gas-tap, a peacock’s feather emerges, and tickles the belly of a pretty woman, who is just lying there looking beautiful. Indeed, the thing begins to become interesting from this very fact, that the drive defines, according to Freud, all the forms of which one may reverse such a mechanism. This does not mean that one turns the dynamo upside-down—one unrolls its wires, it is they that become the peacock’s feather, the gas-tap goes into the lady’s mouth, and the bird’s rump emerges in the middle.” Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 169.

about *pulsion*, and drives are not the same as fantasies. In this sense it would be questionable to treat the different sequences/phases of fantasy discussed by Freud in his fustigation fantasy essay as different “layers of lava” from the image he proposes in his essay on the drives. And yet, there seems to be a connection. In the Freudian take, and to put it simply, fantasy is what mediates between drives and reality.

In what follows I propose to pursue the quote that appears in Nassif’s footnote, and use it to raise the following question: What exactly would be the relationship between, on the one hand, the subsequent “eruptions of lava” in Freud’s model of drives and, on the other, fantasy? This is indeed a key question, and a complex one.

We can begin with the drives and the way Freud presents them in the quoted passage. Freud’s formulation is in fact more dialectical, or at least more dynamic, than it may appear at first sight. We are not simply dealing with successive eruptions of lava that are connected only in a purely external, mechanical way. First, these eruptions seem to have the same source: they arise from the same pressure, they originate in the same place. In this sense they are clearly connected. Second, something also occurs at this very source that *alters the texture and composition* of each layer. (“The next wave would be modified *from the outset*—being turned, for instance, from active to passive.”) In other words, although the layers remain as they are and undergo no subsequent change or development, they nonetheless embody change: they are like *frozen frames* of a certain development or permutation. They themselves do not change, but they do constitute change. The key feature of this “development,” if we can call it that, is that it takes place through cuts, not through linear, continuous motion. The pressure (*Drang*) of the drive is constant, as Freud insists, but its formations are not; they come in waves.

What is it exactly that induces the modification or difference? Why does the drive not just repeat the same, unmodified “eruption”? Moreover, we also have to bear in mind that a repetition with a difference can very well be the repetition of the same, and does not *necessarily* mean that something has effectively changed at the source (“from the outset” of each eruption). In psychoanalysis, repetition is involved not only in a stereotype of behavior, but also takes place as a repetition in relation to something always missed, as a repetition of a failed

encounter, and the encounter can fail in different ways. We also—and crucially—need to bear in mind that that “failure” in this case does not simply imply a failure of the satisfaction, it does not mean that the satisfaction is missed, and that this is what motivates and drives subsequent attempts. On the contrary, the lesson of the drives is exactly the opposite: they always find satisfaction. The point is not that the repetition involved in drives springs from the fact that drive is never satisfied, never gets its thing. The point is rather that it always gets it, because its “thing” is to return to the circuit, to repeat the repetition. This is what Lacan articulates by distinguishing between the drive’s aim and its goal. Drive makes its tour around the impossible object of satisfaction, and it is this tour that *satisfies it*.¹¹ In this precise sense, and in spite of its “failure” or “missed encounter”—or, rather, through it—drive repeats the satisfaction, it is the repetition of some satisfaction that “drives” it, not its lack.

We could say that drive is indifferent to what and how it repeats (hence its “plasticity” or, better, *flexibility*), but it would seem that something else is not so indifferent to what goes on here. Drive is constitutively linked to and, hence, affected by the unconscious. Not only does it (that is to say, its representatives) become subject to repression, *Verdrängung*, but Freud also links the drive to his hypothesis of a *primal repression*: a kind of original hole of the unconscious that fixates the latter and becomes the condition and basis of all subsequent repressions, that is of what we usually call repression.¹² The constitution of the unconscious does not simply coincide with the first thing we repress, there needs to already be something in place that receives, and even “attracts” (Freud’s term), this repressed thing. Primal repression, writes Freud, befalls “the psychical (ideational) representative of the drive.” It is here that Freud introduces the famous term *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz (des Triebes)*.¹³

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Lacan makes a point of translating this as “that which takes the place of the representation” (*le tenant-lieu de la représentation*), or something that “stands for representation.”¹⁴ As already emphasized, the latter differs, according to Freud, from the “second stage of repression,” which “affects mental derivatives of the

¹¹ Lacan, 178–79.

¹² Sigmund Freud, “Repression,” in *Standard Edition*, 14:148.

¹³ Freud, 14:149.

¹⁴ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 60, 110.

repressed representative”¹⁵—or, to comply with Lacan’s translation: which affects mental derivatives of the repressed stand-in for representation. The point of Lacan’s emphasis, I would venture to say, is to mark out the singular character of primal repression: what is repressed is something that does not even have a “representative,” something that takes place of a missing representation. We could even say that it takes the place of an “originally missing representation,” in the precise sense that it is not missing because repressed, but *missing before it is repressed*, so to speak. In *Urverdrängung*, we repress not only its stand-in, but also that fact that a representation is missing from the outset.

This doubly twisted topology is indeed crucial if we want to appreciate the Freudian and Lacanian theory of the drives and their relation to the unconscious, and particularly their relation to fantasy. We could put it as follows: The primal repression as repression of the *Vorstellungs-Repräsentanz* splits and follows two destinies (which nevertheless remain intertwined). One follows the representative stand-in, its repression, and the subsequent repression of its derivatives—which further implies the movement and the dialectics of the unconscious and its formations, gives place to symptoms, neurosis, etc.—whereas the other becomes fantasy, a “fundamental fantasy,” which provides the coordinates of desire and fixates the enjoyment for the subject. Due to its tie with the missing *Vorstellung*, it could perhaps also be called a “phantasmatic *Vorstellung*.” In this sense, a fundamental fantasy is precisely the “impossible” *Vorstellung*. As such, it orchestrates and organizes the drive, particularly its “vicissitudes” or, to use Freud’s image, it’s volcano-like eruptions.

The fact that fantasy has itself a “history” and can be broken down in different phases, is not to be confused with permutations that take place at the level of the drive which it orchestrates; these are two different things. The montage of the drive, and its openness to reversibility, is not the same as superimposition of the different phases that constitute the fantasy. They are, however, *related* in the sense that the fantasy, once constituted, directs and affects both the pulsations of the drive and the enjoyment derived from it. It is also in this way that fantasy could be said to mediate between drives and reality.

¹⁵ Freud, “Repression,” 14:148.

“Traversing the Fantasy”

Let us return to the notion of “primal repression”: an element of the missing (“repressed”) representative of the *Vorstellung* continues its life as a “fundamental fantasy,” to borrow Lacan’s term, which does not refer to the monolithic verbalization that provides and sustains enjoyment for the subject (“A child is being beaten”), but instead relates to what Freud claims can only take place as a construction in analysis.

Bringing Freud and Lacan together in this way, we could say that fundamental fantasies are *correlates* of primal repression, or even that they are one with it; they are like *transcendental frames* that structure desire and its relationship to enjoyment. This is precisely why they are not exactly repressed, or “unconscious” in the common sense of the term. We cannot perceive them, or become conscious of them, because everything we perceive, we perceive through their frame. We could also say that—in the particular case or example we are discussing—they constitute a missing link that holds together the three phases of the fustigation fantasy according to Freud (1. “My father is beating the child, he only loves me”; 2. “My father is beating me (I am being beaten by my father)”; 3. “A child is being beaten”). The middle phase is not, and can never be “conscious” or “experienced,” because it constitutes the constitutional frame of the other two which, in contrast, can eventually be brought to consciousness.

We also know that a great deal is going on *behind the scenes* of these different phases of the fantasy, which indeed appear as frozen frames of all this happening (things get repressed, accents shift, sexes change, etc.). Nassif brings all of this out very meticulously; not in order to fill out the blanks, but rather to demonstrate how these additional elements are in fact vehicles of several cuts (their repetitions), rather than providing something homogenous and continual.

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As suggested above, the non-homogeneity of this space is emphasized by the significant difference that Freud makes between what we could call the “ontological status” of the three sequences or “phases” of the fustigation fantasy. He points out that one of them (the second phase: “I am being beaten by my father”) has never been actual but is a “construction” of analysis.

The second phase is the most important and the most momentous of all. But we may say of it in a certain sense that it has never had a real existence. It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious. It is a construction of analysis, but it is no less a necessity on that account.¹⁶

As a matter of fact, we could probably even say that it is the only one which is “a necessity” strictly speaking, whereas the others may well depend on contingencies. In what follows, I focus on the particular modality of “constructions in analysis” that concerns the “fundamental fantasy,” and set aside a discussion of the broader—though intriguing and indeed central—topic of the necessity of analytic construction.¹⁷

To the ambivalence or, rather, oscillation between love and hate that Freud highlights (the signification of “being beaten” oscillates between “being loved” and “being hated”) Nassif adds the connection between “beating” and “fucking,” which makes “loving (me)” resonate with “making love (to me),” thus making the incestuous layer of the fantasy more explicit. As Nassif writes,

Being beaten, needless to say, is an arduous bodily experience for the child, and it could well be, more generally, that “to beat” means “to fuck” [*“baiser”*] for him, since in any case he has no word at his disposal to recount a strictly amorous relation, and that is what it is all about really.¹⁸

However, this *does not* simply mean that it is because of its link to incest and its social prohibition that this second phase is repressed to the extent that it never, not even in analysis, becomes conscious and can only remain a construction. What Freud suggests is rather that this sequence is of a different order, situated on a different level, which escapes the opposition “repressed–not-repressed” (or conscious). It is, we could say, what sustains, holds up the subject who represses something, or not. It is a criterion for repression, not its content.

¹⁶ Freud, “A Child is Being Beaten,” 17:185.

¹⁷ For important discussion on this broader level see Tadej Troha, “The Objective Construction: Freud and the Primal Scene,” in *Objective Fictions: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, Marxism*, ed. Adrian Johnston, Boštjan Nedoh, and Alenka Zupančič (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 198–216, and Jacques-Alain Miller, “Marginalia to ‘Constructions in Analysis,’” *Psychoanalytical Notebooks* 22 (2011): 47–74.

¹⁸ Nassif, “Fantasy,” 17.

Let us illustrate this with an example from another register: Jonathan Glazer's film *The Zone of Interest*. In order to live their idyllic family life next to the extermination camp, the Nazi family simply did not see certain things and horrors around them (they did not see them even when they looked at them; in this sense, they "repressed" them). But, in order to be able to do so in the first place, they had to tell themselves a certain story, one that provided the frame and conditions for repression to take place. This story that "they told themselves" is not something they could consciously think about; it is never present to them in that way.

The story we tell ourselves when repressing certain things (or in order to be able to repress certain things¹⁹) is not the same as a "rationalization"; it is something else entirely. It is not a conscious narrative, but a framework that structures repression itself. Moreover, it is precisely this "something else" that can only appear through a "construction in analysis": not a fabrication, but rather a mapping of the "transcendental constitution" of a particular subjective destiny, or of a specific chain of repressions.

Psychoanalysis is particularly "unforgiving" and non-comforting in this respect, because for it to "work" it sooner or later confronts us with the paradoxical fact that we are responsible for our own "transcendental constitution"; that, albeit not in any empirical moment of time, we have in some way chosen this constitution, and in this sense have "chosen our unconscious." It is at this level that what is called the "traversal of fantasy" unfolds at the end of analysis. It is important to stress, however, that to be "responsible" for one's transcendental constitution is not equivalent to being irremediably *guilty*. Guilt is something else; it is a form of subjectivation, a way of inscribing oneself into one's particular history or destiny.

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Earlier, I suggested that the missing representation involved in *Urverdrängung* splits and follows two intertwined destinies. One line follows its representative substitute, its repression, and the subsequent repression of its derivatives

¹⁹ For we must bear in mind that it is not that simple, or obvious, to repress something. *Cela ne vas pas de soi*, as the French idiom has it—this "doesn't just go by itself" or perhaps "it doesn't go without saying"—whereby the "saying" in this case would be precisely the hole of primal repression as framed by the fantasy. I cannot just decide, "Okay, I'll repress *this* so that it will make my life easier."

(which further implies the movement and dialectic of the unconscious and its formations, giving rise to symptoms, neuroses, etc.). The other becomes fantasy—a “fundamental fantasy”—which provides the coordinates of desire and fixates enjoyment for the subject. In analysis, these two paths correspond respectively to interpretation and to construction. As Slavoj Žižek puts it,

an interpretation is a gesture that is always embedded in the intersubjective dialectic of recognition between the analysand and the analyst; it aims to bring about the effect of truth apropos of some particular formation of the unconscious (a dream, a symptom, a slip of the tongue . . .): the subject is expected to “recognize” himself in the signification proposed by the interpreter, precisely in order to subjectivize this signification, to assume the proposed signification as “his own” (“Yes, my God, that’s me, I really wanted this . . .”). The very success of interpretation is measured by this “effect of truth,” by the extent to which it *affects the subjective position of the analysand* (stirs up memories of the hitherto deeply repressed traumatic encounters, provoking violent resistance). In clear contrast to interpretation, a construction (typically that of a fundamental fantasy) has the status of a knowledge which can never be subjectivized—that it, it can never be assumed by the subject as the truth about himself, the truth in which he recognizes the innermost kernel of his being. A construction is a purely explanatory logical presupposition.²⁰

I would suggest that already in *Seminar XI*, Lacan makes room for this distinction (often associated with the so-called “late Lacan”) when he differentiates between alienation and separation, insisting on the importance of the latter. Alienation corresponds to, and constitutes the space of, interpretation, i.e. the pursuit of the metonymy of desire. This includes identifying the fantasies that sustain desire or narrate its originally lost object. At this level, the subject is led to “find” her desire, to establish its unconscious mapping, and to subjectivize the mishaps and oddities encountered along this path. Yet this is not enough; and, it is precisely in insisting that this is not enough that Lacan distinguishes himself from, what was at that time, mainstream psychoanalysis. In this sense, we could say that this is how and why he “returned to Freud,” remaining more faithful to him than many “Freudians.”

²⁰ Slavoj Žižek, *The Plague of Fantasies* (London: Verso, 1997), 35–36.

Separation, on the other hand, introduces and marks the “greatest possible distance”²¹ between *I* (the ego ideal as point of identification) and *a*, the object of the drive, that element in the subject with which she can never identify and never recognize as her own. At the end of analysis, the subject is not required to assume this object regardless (that would rather constitute the properly Sadean structure of perversion). However, she is “forced,” or perhaps invited, to *live with it*. This unrecognizable object has to appear at the end, and the subject is led *not* to subjectivize it, but to map her relation to it.

It is in this precise sense that the end of Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* is one of the best renderings of the end of analysis and of “traversing the fantasy” as a form of separation. I wrote about this extensively some time ago,²² but let me briefly repeat the gist.

At the end of the tragedy, when everything is revealed (that he killed his father and married his mother), and when everyone expects him to kill himself, as befits a tragic hero, Oedipus refuses to do so. He does not *subjectivize* his destiny. He does not make himself the “hero” of this destiny by retroactively recognizing his desire or subjective being where, in truth, he was nothing but a toy in the hands of destiny, decided in advance. He quite literally did not know who his father and mother were (the latter took particular care to ensure that). Oedipus “takes his destiny upon himself,” or accepts responsibility for it, in a very different way: he blinds himself.

How should we understand this gesture? He explains that he did not see the people around him for who they really were (his father and his mother), and so he insists that he is not guilty of parricide and incest. At the same time, he acknowledges that he nevertheless committed these acts in which he cannot recognize himself. What he assumes, then, is not his destiny as such, but the “thing” in him that made the realization of this destiny possible: his particular blindness. In effect, he says: “I did it, and I accept responsibility, but I cannot subjectivize it (and in this sense, I am not guilty).” Here guilt would be an easy way out through an early exit; it would be a way of avoiding the full traversal of the fantasy. Instead of ending his life alongside Jocasta, as everyone more or less

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²¹ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 273.

²² See Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 175–81.

expects him to do, Oedipus ends up as the *object/abject* of his tragedy/destiny, and continues his life in that “separated” form, which is indeed Sophoclean stroke of a genius.

The sequel, *Oedipus at Colonus*, is one of the strangest and most unusual tragedies—calling it “unusual” is actually quite an understatement. It does little more than depict Oedipus’ life as a blind outcast. Nor is it a “tragedy” in the strict sense. He wanders about, accompanied by his daughter Antigone. When, due to another prophecy, he suddenly becomes a precious object rather than an abject one (an oracle predicts prosperity for the city in which he will be buried, so the Thebans are now eager to forgive him and take him back before he dies), he refuses, and at the end he miraculously disappears without a trace. That is: without a dead body from which this or that political regime could profit, and which would also restore some (political) glory to him, Oedipus.

In *Seminar XI*, when discussing his notion of “traversing the fantasy,” Lacan also wonders what comes afterwards, after analysis:

[N]othing is ever said as to the outcome of the analysis, that is, after the mapping of the subject in relation to the *a*, the experience of the fundamental phantasy becomes the drive. What, then, does he who has passed through the experience of this opaque relation to the origin, to the drive, become? How can a subject who has traversed the radical phantasy experience the drive? This is the beyond of analysis, and has never been approached.²³

If *Oedipus Rex* gives us a near-perfect dramatization of the end of analysis—of “traversing the fantasy”—then *Oedipus at Colonus* can be read as staging what comes afterward: the strange temporal zone that Lacan calls “the beyond of analysis.” Oedipus’ existence as a blind, wandering remainder—neither reintegrated into the polis nor simply excluded from it—offers an uncanny dramatic figure for the subject who has passed through the fantasy and now lives, so to speak, on the other side of it.

For Sophocles, this “after” is not redemption, but a transformed mode of being: a life no longer organized by the fantasy but by something closer to the drive’s

²³ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 273.

insistence, resistant to appropriation. And—perhaps paradoxically—in his case, as a figure of the remainder that no social order quite knows what to do with, is not simply an object, but precisely its *disappearance*. For even as an outcast object, he is still eligible for trade; there is still a way to incorporate him into symbolic or political exchange. It is the disappearance of this object that marks a limit that neither tragedy nor politics can absorb. In this sense, the miraculous vanishing of Oedipus' body at the end of *Oedipus at Colonus* is perhaps the most genuinely “materialist”—that is, emancipatory—ending. He does not become “bodiless” or “discorporate”—this would be an “idealistic” reading. No, his body becomes: unavailable.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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The Choice of Neurosis: Charcot and Freud¹

Keywords

Sigmund Freud, Jacques Nassif, metapsychology, choice of neurosis, disposition

Abstract

The article approaches Freud's concept of the choice of neurosis (*Neurosenwahl*) through Jacques Nassif's 1968 essay "Freud and Science." In this text, Nassif focuses on the ways in which Jean-Martin Charcot influenced the development of Freud's thought, highlighting in particular Charcot's decisive gesture of isolating neurosis as a purely psychological affection. The article accordingly proceeds from the hypothesis that the repetition of the break—which Nassif identifies as the central methodological gesture of psychoanalysis—takes place here in the form of a repetition and radicalization of Charcot's "choice of neurosis." In other words, the problem of the choice of neurosis could be posed only on the basis of Charcot's prior gesture, and if Freud wished to remain faithful to this gesture, he had to articulate the choice of neurosis as a speculative, metapsychological concept. The article shows that the choice of neurosis functions as a nodal point between empiricism, psychoanalytic technique, and metapsychological speculation, and, on another level, between ontogenetic and phylogenetic approaches: a constellation that becomes particularly clear in the analysis of the initially lost and later rediscovered twelfth and final metapsychological essay, "Overview of the Transference Neuroses."

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Izbira nevroze: Charcot in Freud

Ključne besede

Sigmund Freud, Jacques Nassif, metapsihologija, izbira nevroze, dispozicija

Povzetek

Članek se v obravnavi Freudovega koncepta izbire nevroze, *Neurosenwahl*, opre na spis Jacquesa Nassifa »Freud in znanost« iz leta 1968. V njem se Nassif osredotoča na načine, kako je na razvoj Freudove misli vplival Jean-Martin Charcot, pri čemer posebej izpostavi prelomno gesto osredotočenja na nevrozo kot čisto psihološko afekcijo. Članek posledično izhaja iz hipoteze, da je ponovitev preloma, ki ga Nassif postavi kot osrednji metodološki prijem psihoanalize, v tem primeru potekala kot ponovitev in zaostritev Charcotove »izbire nevroze«; problem izbire nevroze se je, drugače rečeno, lahko postavil zgolj na podlagi predhodne Charcotove geste, in če je Freud želel tej gesti ostati zvest, je izbiro nevroze moral oblikovati kot spekulativni, metapsihološki koncept. Prispevek pokaže, da izbira nevroze zavzame vlogo vozlišča med empirijo, psihoanalitično tehniko in metapsihološko spekulacijo, na drugi ravni pa tudi med ontogenetskim in filogenetskim pristopom, kar je še posebej razvidno iz analize sprva izgubljenega in kasneje najdenega sklepnega metapsihološkega spisa »Pregled transfernih nevroz«.



Introduction

The text by Jacques Nassif, “Freud and Science,” appearing in the present issue in English for the first time, constitutes the germinal cell of the author’s broader project, *Freud, l’inconscient*. There, Freud’s enduring indebtedness to Jean-Martin Charcot forms part of a comprehensive reconstruction of the genesis of Freudian epistemology and of psychoanalysis as such. Psychoanalysis is a specific science; for this reason, the study of its emergence and of its concept—the logic of its constitution—requires us to identify the generative principle that brought it into existence and continues to propel it. Nassif formulates this principle as the “repetition of the break,” thereby indicating that its inaugural gesture was already a repetition of earlier breaks.

In the repetition of the various breaks [. . .] psychoanalytic theory was rendered possible [. . .]. However, while it is quite remarkable that these various repetitions

could pass through the sole proper name of Freud, it is no coincidence that these “breaks” can all be designated by the names of his masters: Charcot, Jackson, Bernheim, Breuer.²

It is important to stress that this generative principle is both the condition of psychoanalysis’s founding—impelling Freud, already at a relatively mature age, to break with his previous scientific practice—and the motor of its ongoing operation after Freud, of its persistence: “every psychoanalysis,” Nassif argues, “inherently involves a (quasi-theoretical) reevaluation of all Freudian concepts, and every reading of Freud should be understood as an enactment of these concepts upon the very text they construct.”³

This inexhaustibility of psychoanalytic concepts—that is, their capacity to intervene reflexively in their own conceptual field by means of the very concepts they deploy—is, as Nassif suggests, a consequence of their mode of emergence. Psychoanalysis initially drew on a network of already existing concepts belonging, of course, to antecedent sciences; yet it did so only in order to reconfigure them into a new constellation. Nassif captures their paradoxical status with particular force when he writes:

[Psychoanalytic] concepts possess a unique scientific status, having been mostly imported from related fields—or even from the “leading science” of the time, namely thermodynamics (!)—often functioning as metaphors, their precise meaning impossible to pin down, all bearing the stamp of arbitrariness and thus, throughout the texts, shifting from one meaning to its opposite: a strange science indeed! However, we would like to show that these concepts, which are indistinguishable from those of classical psychiatry, neurology, or Herbartian psychology, nonetheless form a system, in the very precise sense that they functioned as a “sieve” that allowed Freud to sift through the science of his time and steer it towards a specific practice.⁴

The metaphor of the “sieve,” which Nassif derives from Freud and around which he constructs this text, may be usefully read in relation to the original

² Jacques Nassif, “Freud and Science,” trans. Holden M. Rasmussen, *Filozofski vestnik* 46, no. 3 (2025): 41, <https://doi.org/10.3986/fv.46.3.02>.

³ Nassif, 37.

⁴ Nassif, 37.

German word employed by Freud. While the English *sifting* and the French *passer au tamis* and *cribler* suggest a patient process of separating and filtering, the German *rütteln*, used by Freud,⁵ introduces into the metaphor a far less goal-directed dynamic.

Rütteln, which in German refers less to sifting than to shaking and jolting, on the one hand distances psychoanalysis from a standard scientific posture; yet at the same time it brings it closer to its experimental core. This is especially so when the material in question is human psychology, infected by the unconscious, and for which one must first find a way of inducing its manifestation, without it being possible to determine in advance when, or in what form, such a manifestation will occur. It is precisely here that Freud comes closest to Charcot.

In the initial phase, Charcot's role, as every reader of Freud is well aware, was singular. His influence did not primarily stem from theoretical innovation, but rather from a clinical and pedagogical practice that embodied his fundamental methodological orientation more forcefully than any fully systematised theory could. As Freud wrote after Charcot's death, "each of his lectures was a little work of art in construction and composition"; they were "perfect in form and made such an impression that, for the rest of the day, one could not get the sound of what he had said out of one's ears, or the thought of what he had demonstrated out of one's mind."⁶

Freud's fascination with this perfection, however, should not be misunderstood. What impressed him was not merely the finished form of Charcot's lectures, nor the completeness of their overall effect, but the fact that this apparent perfection rested on a sustained exposure to imperfection. More precisely, it rested on a clinical practice that did not merely tolerate the imperfect, the irregular, or the unresolved, but actively produced and forced such moments in order to let the empirical material appear as an enigma. This was most clearly the case in Charcot's *leçons du mardi*, where clinical demonstration suspended ready-made

⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Charcot," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 3:23; Sigmund Freud, "Charcot," in *Gesammelte Werke*, ed. Anna Freud et al. (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1952), 1:35.

⁶ Freud, "Charcot," 3:17.

explanations and allowed the empirical to show itself precisely in its resistance to conceptual closure.

In fact, Charcot, too—and this was what fascinated Freud most—was someone who, in his scientific practice, first and foremost worked by agitating his material (or letting it agitate itself), in the literal sense of *rütteln*, of shaking and jolting it, until the human material that appeared to medicine as old and ready to be subsumed under existing categories suddenly revealed itself as something new. This is precisely the moment emphasized by Nassif. After first citing a passage from Freud's text on Charcot, in which Freud describes this dynamic, Nassif writes:

This text is of capital importance to us inasmuch as it establishes, through an intermediary, that which constitutes the central axis of what could without exaggeration be called Freud's "*ars inveniendi*." One can indeed argue that the entirety of psychoanalytic method lies in this inversion of medical method, which aims only to provide the physician with the ability to "see what he has already learned to see," thereby sparing him any surprise when confronted with any symptom. Conversely, one could define all psychoanalysis as a systematic repetition of "the old"—induced by the surprise encountered with the "new" that is the symptom—in order to render possible this "vision" of which Freud speaks.⁷

Charcot's influence, however, does not end at the level of general methodological orientation. It can also be traced to a point that is decisive for psychoanalysis itself, namely in the construction of a new, properly psychoanalytic concept: the choice of neurosis, a concept which marks psychoanalysis' central question concerning the genesis of neurosis. It is here, too, that Freud can be said to repeat Charcot's break. In contrast to his contemporaries, Charcot, with his distinction between homologous and dissimilar heredity, does not go so far as to reduce psychic pathology completely to a deterministic hereditary sequence. In Charcot,

traumatic etiology is nevertheless recognized and it is precisely about building a bridge between it and hereditary etiology; one could even say that the famous Freudian problem of the "choice of neurosis" is thus prefigured, since, from the same "neuropathic tendency," one can say after the fact that there was "dissimilar

⁷ Nassif, "Freud and Science," 44.

heredity” or “homologous heredity,” depending on the moment or the nature of the traumatic event which must then be considered as an *agent provocateur*. It is very precisely at this point that Freud takes up the matter, attempting to think together this dual etiology and obliged by his practice to gradually abandon the hereditary aspect to focus more and more attentively on what presents itself under this concept of “trauma” as a “provoking agent.”⁸

In what follows, I will address three issues: first, what precisely Charcot’s preliminary gesture was that opened up, for Freud and for psychoanalysis, the very field in which the *problem* of the choice of neurosis (*Neurosenwahl*) could emerge; second, how this problem comes to be articulated as a *concept* and how the concept of the choice of neurosis may be understood as a paradigm of the metapsychological concept as such; and third, how this concept persisted, functioning at once as a boundary between observation-based theory and speculation, and as a hinge—within Freud’s work—between ontogeny and phylogeny.

Charcot and the Neurosis-Event

The choice of neurosis, *Neurosenwahl*, is a central yet subterranean, largely unarticulated issue in the history of psychoanalysis. In Freud, it first appears as a clinical puzzle: Why does psychic conflict crystallize as hysteria, obsessional neurosis, or paranoia? From the outset, however, the phrase carried a profound ambiguity. Does it mean the choice *of* a neurosis, as if the subject chooses their illness? Or does it mean the choice *by* neurosis, as if a structure chooses the subject in advance? This conceptual and grammatical uncertainty is not confined to its first articulation, but extends to the very configuration of psychic life. For such a life is marked by the same ambiguity: We are “spoken” by language and “driven” by drives, and yet, in contingent circumstances, we can perform proper acts of choice. This multiplicity of senses also opens a further register of *Neurosenwahl*: not only the choice *of* a neurosis, and the choice *by* neurosis, but also the choices of neuroses made within psychoanalytic history itself. Different authors have privileged different affections as their point of departure. Freud began with hysteria, though he felt most at home on the terrain of obsessional neurosis; Jung turned to schizophrenia, and Freud himself ventured into that terrain to open the previously inaccessible problem of narcissism; Lacan,

⁸ Nassif, 56.

throughout, more or less explicitly, privileged psychosis, the affection that is precisely not a neurosis, and in which the subject “chooses” foreclosure of the symbolic. Yet the entire endeavour also turns on an earlier epistemological decision. Charcot had, quite literally, chosen neurosis: not a particular neurosis, but neurosis as such, understood as a psychological affection in the strict sense.

Up to this point, I have placed the emphasis on the way Charcot influenced Freud through his general methodological stance. This is a stance that has less to do with conceptual capture than with a dynamic of loosening and overcoming conceptual rigidity in light of empiria and the practice of observation, and which coalesces into a guiding principle that Freud was never able to shake off: “*La théorie, c’est bon, mais ça n’empêche pas d’exister*” (“Theory is good, but that does not prevent existence”). What Nassif brings sharply into focus, by contrast, is Charcot’s conceptual innovation. Or, more precisely, the delimitation of the very concept of neurosis “in all its generality”⁹ (and note well: not merely hysteria, as is usually the case). As Nassif emphasizes, Charcot himself, as the agent of the first break, was unable to follow through on his own gesture and thus found himself “in regression relative to the ‘break’ he was led to introduce”;¹⁰ nevertheless, the decision he made at the moment when he declared his work in pathological anatomy complete—namely, the decision to devote himself to the neuroses—was of inestimable importance for the history of psychoanalysis. Freud himself remained marked by the expectation that a definitive biological account would one day be forthcoming, a point endlessly repeated in the literature, and not always to the benefit of understanding what is at stake in his work. While he never closed the door to such a possibility, the effective core of his undertaking remained aligned with Charcot’s gesture: the wager on testing the limits of psychology as a science on an object that is, by its very essence, a purely psychological object.

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In his text, Nassif clearly shows that tracing Freud’s early fidelity to Charcot’s neurosis-event must necessarily include both the emphases Freud develops in connection with hysteria—already recognised as a “neurosis in the strictest sense,” that is, a pathology in which no perceptible traces can be discovered either by present anatomical techniques or by any future, as yet undiscovered

⁹ Nassif, 48.

¹⁰ Nassif, 51.

ones—and the insights concerning neurasthenia, which would become a neurosis only once Freud reconfigured it into obsessional neurosis. Neurasthenia, too, Freud states in a passage cited by Nassif, is not “a clinical picture in the sense of textbooks based too exclusively on pathological anatomy; it should rather be described as a mode of reaction of the nervous system.”¹¹

Once this perspective is introduced—this purely psychological perspective—we obtain not only a (presumably) correct insight into the nature of psychological affections, but also, more generally, a different object of scientific inquiry. The system we observe— i.e., the psychical apparatus, which, of course, does not exist as a fully autonomous entity and is in this respect open—can nevertheless now appear to us precisely as a closed, inwardly folded system, one for which, from a certain point onward (and this point is precisely the moment of *Neurosenwahl*), its internal dynamics come to prevail over external determinations.

At the same time, the very introduction of such a closed system fundamentally transforms the problem of intervention. Once constituted in this way, a particular psychical apparatus becomes a genuinely *other* system, one that is in principle resistant to external influence, especially including resistance to standard forms of therapeutic guidance or advice. Any intervention now has to reckon with the fact that it cannot simply be applied from the outside, but must find a way of operating from within the system’s own logic. The generalization of neurosis is, in this sense, a precondition for any psychoanalytic treatment of any psychical apparatus whatsoever, whether neurotic or non-neurotic—the latter understood either as normal, non-pathological functioning or as psychotically structured.

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At this point it is worth recalling “Draft K,” appended to Freud’s letter to Fliess on New Year’s Day 1896, in which Freud distinguishes four types of defensive neuroses as “pathological aberrations of normal psychic affective states: of *conflict* (hysteria), of *self-reproach* (obsessional neurosis), of *mortification* (paranoia), of *mourning* (acute hallucinatory dementia).” While these four types differ from one another in the same way that the four affects differ, the moment of neurosis common to all of them is defined by the fact that “they differ from these affects in that they do not lead to anything’s being settled, but to permanent

¹¹ Nassif, 49.

damage to the ego.”¹² The infinity of these processes—that is, the fact that they do not appear as a temporary sequence but instead determine the totality of functioning, thus becoming the operative principle of each system—can be understood only through the implicit economic-topical emphasis that Freud introduces here. These pathological processes, Freud writes, *führen zu keiner Erledigung*:¹³ they do not result in the state being expelled outward in the form of a disposal, but instead turn inward, permanently occupying and preoccupying the ego, and thereby transforming it.

It is precisely a system capable of closing in on itself that is, in the same gesture, a system that determines itself, producing its own disposition—so to speak, its own “metapsychology.” *Neurosenwahl*, which for Freud will always remain—already in “Draft K”—at once a question of the general conditions of the passage into pathology and of the emergence of neurosis (with heredity still invoked as a factor of gradation between the normal and the extreme case), and a question of the choice of a particular neurosis (for which heredity already plays no determining role in this text). Yet *Neurosenwahl* is more than this: as a concept, it cuts into the very core of the problem of metapsychology as a method.

Strong and Weak Metapsychological Concepts

The *choice of neurosis* is, beyond any doubt, a speculative concept. Speculative in the strict sense of metapsychological speculation, which emerges in Freud almost involuntarily, against his own declared intentions, out of a necessity paradoxically imposed by his uncompromising insistence on empiricism. Borrowing the language of more recent French theory, it is a concept that captures the singular universality and the universalizable singularity of the central object of metapsychology, namely the psychical apparatus. The perennial question of Freudian metapsychology, understood as the strictly speculative supplement to psychoanalytic theory, can thus be formulated as follows: How is one to think a lawfulness that, on the one hand, grasps the minimal common denominator of every manifest form of the psychical apparatus and, on the other, extends to

¹² Sigmund Freud, *The Complete Letters of Sigmund Freud to Wilhelm Fliess, 1887–1904*, ed. and trans. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1985), 162.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Briefe an Wilhelm Fliess 1887–1904: Ungekürzte Ausgabe*, ed. Jeffrey Moussaieff Masson (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1986), 169.

the extreme limit of manifestation of any concrete psychical apparatus that actually exists?

A fetish, a delusion, or an obsessional idea are—strictly speaking—not metapsychological concepts, insofar as they apply only to particular configurations of the psychical apparatus and do not appear in others. *The unconscious*, by contrast, is a universally applicable concept and also satisfies the second criterion, namely that of reaching the limit of possible manifestations. Yet it is, one might say, a *weak* metapsychological concept precisely because it is, in a certain sense, too strong, almost too universal. “The unconscious” can be applied to virtually any activity, gesture, or phenomenon, and, in the extreme case, even to consciousness itself, to its supposed opposite (in this, to be sure, it gains a certain dialectical weight, though that is a slightly different story). The more fully this universal applicability is recognized, the more the concept risks losing its metapsychological edge. Paradoxically, one could say that it was stronger at the moment when its scope was still narrower, when it had not yet been fully absorbed into psychoanalytic theory as a general explanatory resource.

Once incorporated into psychoanalytic theory, the concept of the unconscious becomes absolutely indispensable and, in a broader theoretical sense, inexhaustible. Yet if we consider it once again in the strict sense of Freudian metapsychological speculation—that is, speculation that emerges only at the point where empirically grounded theory reaches its limit and is left momentarily without words—we must also say that, over time, the concept of the unconscious does not gain in this specific respect. If nothing else, both theoretical elaboration and clinical practice suggest that, over time, it has tended to congeal rather than to intensify.

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This brings us, I would say, to the following point: In metapsychology, what is essential is the moment of insight—the speculative act—which remains valid in its meaning but whose immediate impact diminishes once a new insight emerges within the same field. The unconscious, for instance, has a greater impact before it is supplemented by the second topography; repression has a greater impact before it is later supplemented by further theoretical elaborations. This, once again, does not mean that repression becomes a less valid or less useful concept; the point, rather, is that if such supplements are ignored or not taken

seriously, there is a danger of sliding into an unproductive or even false abstraction.

To put this more concretely with regard to the question addressed in this text: At a certain point, the concept of repression received its essential speculative supplement. While Freud for a long time operated only with the pair ‘repression and the return of the repressed,’ it was in the metapsychological essay “Repression” that he added to this series the moment of *primal repression* (which, strictly speaking, amounts to the incorporation of the point of fixation that had already appeared in the proto-metapsychological third section of the Schreber analysis).¹⁴ What follows from this is not that repression loses its validity or its clinical relevance, but that its speculative weight is displaced. The conceptual cut that once traversed repression now passes through the concept of primal repression. Repression remains indispensable and fully operative within psychoanalytic theory, but the moment of speculative insight—the moment at which theory is forced beyond itself—has been transferred elsewhere. Once the supplement is articulated, it thus functions, on the one hand, as an amplifier of the original concept and, on the other, as an opening toward its possible reduction.

The choice of neurosis, by contrast, escapes the dynamic I have just described. Even though Freud eventually abandoned the concept—or, perhaps more accurately, allowed it to recede—replacing it largely with the basic ideas of primal repression and fixation, each time he returns to it, the concept appears in the same peculiar way: equally potent, equally enigmatic, and equally inexhaustible in its speculative core.

I am therefore tempted to say that, of all the concepts Freud ever introduced, *Neurosenwahl* comes closest to the very concept of metapsychology, at least as it functions in Freud himself. Metapsychology would later become, at times, a rather domesticated and domesticable term. In Freud, however, it names less a doctrine than a certain aspiration, and one that arises from the necessity of the material itself once we decide, in principle, to observe it from a single perspective.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Repression,” in *Standard Edition*, 14:148; Sigmund Freud, “Psychoanalytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides),” in *Standard Edition*, 12:67.

What do I mean by this? Metapsychology, as the name of Freud's ultimate aspiration, emerged precisely in connection with his wager on a purely psychological perspective. On the practical level of treatment, this wager produced the analytic situation as a platform in which psychic reality becomes material, tangible, malleable, and transformable. On the theoretical level, it produced metapsychology itself, because psychology—at the moment when it dared to approach its own limit and to persist in its relative helplessness and disorientation without seeking immediate support from neurology, chemistry, or moral philosophy—was almost compelled to generate an excess beyond itself.

If we look for a comparable configuration in Freud's work, we may turn to a passage from Nassif's essay that strikingly converges with a line of thought I have developed elsewhere and prior to my encounter with his text. The passage concerns what might be called—by analogy with the *Grundregel*—a fundamental formula of psychoanalysis. Addressing the question of dreams, Nassif writes:

There is, of course, the distinction between “latent content” and “manifest content,” the theory of the “dream as guardian of sleep” (which can be said to have been retrospectively confirmed by electroencephalography), the concepts of “condensation” and “displacement,” perhaps also that of “regression”—all of which belong to the corpus of scientific achievements that no “scholar” could seriously dispute; yet the very heart of Freudian theory, namely the thesis that “the dream is the fulfillment of a wish,” remains a theoretical assertion impossible to register within a science whose knowledge would be structured according to a cumulative model.¹⁵

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What this passage brings into sharp relief is the peculiar strength of such Freudian concepts and propositions. Their force lies precisely in the fact that they are theoretical gestures in which Freud persists by suspending “better knowledge,” resisting premature renunciation, and—almost obstinately—maintaining the absoluteness of an idea that, from the standpoint of common sense, appears valid only within a narrow range and otherwise seems implausible, even manifestly false. It is in this persistence that the object of the assertion itself is continually transformed, and with it the very conditions of truth. In turn, psychoanalysis becomes a science in which things are not simply verified or

¹⁵ Nassif, “Freud and Science,” 39.

falsified but rendered true in a different mode. There are moments, Freud seems to suggest, when understanding too quickly is precisely what blocks a theoretical breakthrough. Premature comprehension neutralises the productive tension of the problem. This, too, is something Freud learned from Charcot.

A Second Choice?

Back to the choice of neurosis: If the core of metapsychology is bound to the decision to test the potential of psychology at—and beyond—its own limits, then the concept of *Neurosenwahl* captures this very same moment with particular precision. Once we abandon, in the aetiology of psychological affections, the idea of degeneration—while at the same time refusing to relinquish the moments of determination, inertia, fixation, and irreversibility that are, if only we know how to look, unmistakable features of human psychology—we are compelled to ask where the qualitative leap occurs that shapes individuals into psychic constitutions from which they cannot rid themselves: not through psychiatric intervention, and not even through psychoanalysis. How is it possible that, within the psyche—and within a psyche bound to language—a structure is formed that is, in principle, unchangeable? How can there occur, within the psychical, a process analogous to coagulation: not only in the sense that basic structures are formed—consciousness, ego, superego, and so on—but also in the sense that the very modes through which these structures come into being themselves become ossified? Why does one subject become hysterical, another obsessional, and a third paranoid? Is this differentiation merely the effect of inherited constitution, the history of the Symbolic coagulated in our genes? Is there, on the contrary, an irreducible space of accident and contingency that gives rise to a specific necessity, a space that must appear if the psychical apparatus is to begin functioning at all, to calibrate itself at the outset? What, then, decides? Is it the moment of the trauma's occurrence? Is it the quantity of psychical investment mobilised in response to trauma, which—failing to find discharge—folds back upon itself and begins to repeat internally, only thereby assuming the function of a traumatic core? And, if quantity is at stake here, what kind of quantity are we dealing with? Does it concern a trauma originating in material reality at all?

As already noted, the expression *Neurosenwahl* lends itself to multiple readings. Most immediately, it articulates a tension between the choice *of* a neurosis and the choice *by* neurosis. Who chooses? Is it the subject who chooses, or does the

structure choose the subject? Is it rather the case that it is precisely in this moment that both the subject and the structure are constituted together? This is the point identified by Alenka Zupančič in *Ethics of the Real*, where she links the psychoanalytic notion of the choice of neurosis to a decisive Kantian thesis concerning freedom:

[T]he most important Kantian thesis concerning this issue is that the *Gesinnung*, the fundamental disposition of the subject, is itself something chosen. We could in fact link this point to what psychoanalysis indicates with the notion of the *Neurosenwahl*, the “choice of neurosis.” The subject is at one and the same time “subject to” her unconscious and the one who, in the last resort, as “subject of” the unconscious, has to be considered to have chosen it. This claim that the subject, so to speak, chooses her unconscious—which might be called the “psychoanalytic postulate of freedom”—is the very condition of possibility of psychoanalysis. The change of perspective that constitutes the end of analysis, or the (Lacanian) *la passe*, can occur only against the background of this postulate. This initial choice can be repeated: analysis reaches its conclusion when it brings the subject to the threshold of another choice, that is, when the subject once again finds the possibility of choice.¹⁶

When I myself took up, some years ago, the question of the substrate that makes this second choice possible—asking how the analytic situation itself shapes the conditions under which one can intervene in a choice that not only appears irreversible but in fact is so—I relied, among other things, on a passage from Freud’s *Introductory Lectures*. There Freud describes the analytic situation as a platform on which the distinction between the conscious/preconscious and the unconscious is suspended. In this respect, quite materially, analysis is not simply a matter of translating the unconscious into the conscious. It is true that unconscious contents break through to the surface and become strikingly present; yet this, in itself, is not sufficient to say that they have become conscious in the ordinary sense.

Freud writes:

¹⁶ Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000), 35.

[T]he dissension is between two powers, one of which has made its way to the stage of what is preconscious or conscious while the other has been held back at the stage of the unconscious. For that reason the conflict cannot be brought to an issue; the disputants can no more come to grips than, in the familiar simile, a polar bear and a whale. A true decision can only be reached when they both meet on the same ground. To make this possible is, I think, the sole task of our therapy.¹⁷

If we take Freud's image seriously, analysis succeeds only when the polar bear and the whale encounter one another on common terrain: that is, when an intersection is established that makes their encounter possible. Let us say that consciousness is the bear and the unconscious the whale. Where, then, can they meet?

This passage is usually understood—and Freud himself often reads it this way—within the framework of translating the unconscious into the conscious. Taken literally, however, this would mean that the whale would have to come onto land—and we know what happens then. The only meeting ground that can at least provisionally endure is therefore one in which the polar bear approaches the water and enters it. Why can the whale not step onto land? Why can the unconscious not directly become conscious? The whale, of course, was once a terrestrial animal, and Darwin—no insignificant figure for Freud—speculated in the first edition of *On the Origin of Species* that whales might have evolved from a bear-like ancestor.¹⁸ But once such an animal became fully adapted to an aquatic environment, it lost the possibility of returning to land. It cannot simply decide to feel at home on land again; such a return would be possible only through another turn of evolution, like the emergence of a mutation that would make such a transformation viable.

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis," in *Standard Edition*, 16:433.

¹⁸ "In North America the black bear was seen by Hearne swimming for hours with widely open mouth, thus catching, like a whale, insects in the water. Even in so extreme a case as this, if the supply of insects were constant, and if better adapted competitors did not already exist in the country, I can see no difficulty in a race of bears being rendered, by natural selection, more and more aquatic in their structure and habits, with larger and larger mouths, till a creature was produced as monstrous as a whale." Charles Darwin, *On the Origin of Species* (London: John Murray, 1859), 184.

It is true, however, that the whale's adaptation to the marine environment was never complete—just as the repressed unconscious never becomes unconscious in the sense of sinking into the depths of a mental ocean and disappearing from the radar once and for all. The whale may behave as if it had always been a marine animal, yet it remains existentially dependent on pulmonary respiration, a vestige of its former, terrestrial mode of existence. As external observers, we perceive these moments as symptoms—as spurts of water, as intrusions of the depths of the unconscious onto the surface. Alternatively, however, they can be understood as *breathing*: as returns to consciousness, as the intake of elements of the conscious, without which the repressed unconscious could not survive at all.

The polar bear, by contrast, manages remarkably well in and around the water. It can enter it, swim in it, and remain operative there, even if it typically hunts from the platform of sea ice. Our conscious life, too, is largely adapted to the unconscious; at times we know very well how to make use of our unconscious impulses—whether as an excuse or as a means of manipulation—so long as a secure platform has been established. Psychoanalysis, it seems, must precisely activate this already existing capacity. Since consciousness is already capable of, and accustomed to, excursions into the unconscious, analysis need only extend these excursions beyond their usual measure—and crucially, without the goal of hunting seals or scavenging stranded prey along the shore.

In analysis—and this is also where its impossibility, when it occurs as such, becomes apparent—the unconscious and consciousness must indeed find themselves on the same ground, a ground that is neither simply proper to the one nor the other. Rather, it is a repetition, within the analytic situation, of an originary, undifferentiated state from which both consciousness and the (repressed) unconscious have emerged. What is at stake here is not a return to an origin, but a provisional regression to a point prior to their differentiation, a point at which their opposition has not yet been instituted. In this sense, one could speak of a kind of collective regression to a common origin: just as the whale and the polar bear can encounter one another only by recognizing, in a strictly formal sense, their shared aquatic ancestry.

Put briefly, what is at stake here is a reversal of the standard reading: it is not simply a matter of making the unconscious conscious, but, in principle, of the

reverse process—of *deconsciousing* what is conscious, of provisionally adopting another logic or another currency, of conducting business in the currency of the unconscious, to use yet another of Freud's metaphors.

Freud's Phylogenetic Fantasy

As we have seen, one of the ways in which Freud addresses the problem of the choice of neurosis is, so to speak, by introducing speculation directly into the clinic and into psychoanalytic technique. In the choice of neurosis there is just enough choice, just enough freedom, to make it possible to choose one's neurosis—or, more precisely, one's disposition—a second time. The emphasis on the accidental moment was, for Freud, practically essential insofar as it opened a space, at least, for a certain form of subjective fatalism, understood as the minimal change offered by psychoanalysis: a subjective affirmation that acquires objective force through the analytic relation, affirming the fact that, once a disposition has been chosen, it can no longer be fundamentally altered. At a certain point, Freud himself became aware that psychoanalysis could not bring about any radical remaking of one's personality. However this may present itself, many conceptions of the end of analysis hinge less on voluntaristic transformation than on a recognition of what cannot be changed (a proximity to Stoicism that is often regarded with suspicion, though not without reasons internal to psychoanalysis itself).

But there was, clearly, something else at stake for Freud as well. Almost as a mission of psychoanalysis, he understood it as necessary—within the general consensus about the importance of heredity and of innate constitution, and despite his own agreement with this consensus—to put in a word for the significance of the accidental, to direct toward it, provisionally and precisely as psychology, an exclusive focus. And chance would have it that perhaps the most far-reaching attempt to foreground the acquired element in the formation of psychological disposition was articulated in a text that appeared to have been lost and was re-discovered almost miraculously only in 1983: the draft of what was numbered as the last—the twelfth—metapsychological paper, “Overview of the Transference Neuroses.”¹⁹

¹⁹ Sigmund Freud, “Overview of the Transference Neuroses,” trans. Axel Hoffer and Peter T. Hoffer, in *The Revised Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund*

While, as noted, in the *Introductory Lectures*, written in roughly the same period, the choice of neurosis appears primarily as a condition of possibility of analytic technique, in this text it becomes the point of departure for a full-blown speculative fantasy, and one so imposing that it gave its name to what until recently was the only English edition of the text: *A Phylogenetic Fantasy*,²⁰ borrowing Freud's expression from the letter to Ferenczi. This essay would, in its own right, deserve a comprehensive treatment; in the context of the present discussion, however, it may be more appropriate to highlight only a few of its structural features.

Freud begins by setting himself a very ambitious yet seemingly precise and delimited—almost technical—task: to cross the three types of transference neuroses—anxiety hysteria, conversion hysteria, and obsessional neurosis—with six factors, six *Momente*, that participate in the formation of a transference neurosis: repression, anticathexis, substitutive and symptom formation, relation to the sexual function, regression, and disposition/fixation.²¹

Freud carries out the first four steps of this crossing procedure almost automatically; the differences in the way these moments assert themselves in the individual types of transference neuroses practically exhaust, taken all together, the phenomenal scope of these concepts. In the fifth step, however—when regression is at issue, that “most interesting factor and drive vicissitude”²²—Freud already encounters, within this schema, a certain degree of epistemic inertia. This occurs when, with regard to anxiety neurosis, Freud notes: “No occasion to divine it from anxiety hysteria. Could say that [it] does not come into consideration here, perhaps because every later anxiety hysteria so clearly regresses to an infantile one [. . .] and this latter one appears so early in life.”²³

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The fact, then, is that regression does play a role here as well; yet because it is almost *too* pure and produces no material residues, a gap opens up in its relation to the other two types, which are, by contrast, described as the “most

Freud, ed. Mark Solms (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2024), 14:235–54.

²⁰ Sigmund Freud, *A Phylogenetic Fantasy: Overview of the Transference Neuroses*, ed. Ilse Grubrich-Simitis (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1987).

²¹ Freud, “Overview,” 14:239.

²² Freud, 14:243.

²³ Freud, 14:243.

beautiful examples of regression.”²⁴ This gap will have to be filled somewhere. Regression, as such, proves to be an auxiliary concept: the very fact that it so emphatically introduces the question of temporality—of a movement backwards in time—calls for a conceptual supplement that would represent the proгреди-ent moment, the other, less obvious side of *Nachträglichkeit*. This supplement is provided by the concept of disposition and/or fixation: “Behind regression are hidden the problems of fixation and disposition.”²⁵

If the fifth section of the text merely *indicates* a structural shift, the sixth section, devoted to disposition, completely overturns the dramaturgy of the essay. As if everything up to that point had served merely as preparation, Freud here completely changes his language, and the text unexpectedly comes to life. Freud, who here recognises himself in his task—“Because no-one is inclined to dispute constitutional factors, it devolves upon psychoanalysis to defend equally forcefully the claims of early infantile acquisitions”—proceeds, on the one hand, to return once again to an idea he had already introduced in his letter to Fliess of May 30, 1896,²⁶ and later revived in “The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis,”²⁷ namely the idea that the differences between the types not only of transference neuroses, but of psychoneuroses as a whole (that is, including the narcissistic neuroses, which later psychoanalysis would term psychoses), can be traced along two broadly mirrored temporal lines:

Here there exists a series to which one can attach various far-reaching ideas. It begins with an arrangement of psychoneuroses (not the transference neuroses alone) according to the point in time at which they customarily appear in the life of the individual. [. . .] The series is thus: anxiety hysteria—conversion hysteria—obsessional neurosis—dementia praecox—paranoia—melancholia-mania. The dispositional fixations of these disorders also appear to form a series, but one which runs in the opposite direction, especially when libidinal dispositions are considered. The upshot would thus be that the later the neurosis appears, the earlier the phase of the libido to which it must regress.²⁸

²⁴ Freud, 14:243.

²⁵ Freud, 14:244.

²⁶ Freud, “Complete Letters,” 187–88.

²⁷ Sigmund Freud, “The Disposition to Obsessional Neurosis,” in *Standard Edition*, 12:318.

²⁸ Freud, “Overview,” 14:246–47.

This mirroring, Freud notes, is not perfect; “this only holds true in general terms.” The first glitch appears in the relation between paranoia and dementia praecox: “dementia unquestionably appears earlier than paranoia, although its libidinal disposition extends further back,” while melancholia–mania (what we would today call manic-depressive illness) “permit[s] no definite ranking with respect to time.” The second point indicates the internal insufficiency of this otherwise productive construction and suggests that, alongside libidinal development, *something else* is at work, something which concerns the difference in the definitiveness of dispositions: “with advancing age hysteria or obsessional neurosis can turn into dementia; the opposite never occurs.”²⁹

Prompted by the internal inconsistency of this already old schema of his, and under the influence of Ferenczi’s metabiological ideas, Freud at this point opts for a leap into the field of phylogeny, linking the timeline of the emergence of the psychoneuroses to a speculative narrative that begins with the event of glaciation as the inauguration of general anxiety and gradually shifts onto the familiar terrain of the myth of the primal horde. The preliminary stage of this progression, which introduces “another[,] phylogenetic series,” *eine andere, phylogenetische Reihe*, “which is really concurrent with the temporal sequence of the neuroses,” *die wirklich mit der Zeitreihe der Neurosen gleichläufig ist*, is the postulated communal existence of the “primal human animal” in a “thoroughly rich milieu that satisfied all needs.”³⁰ Into this preliminary stage—in which libido could consequently free itself from the constraints of periodicity characteristic of non-human mammals—the Ice Age then intervened. External reality, which had previously provided libido merely with an external framework, now appeared as threatening: “it is conceivable that the ego, whose existence was threatened, to some extent abandoned object cathexis, retained the libido in the ego, and thus transformed into realistic anxiety what had previously been object libido.”³¹ In this way, Freud continues, a model was formed in which real anxiety once produced is repeated and reproduced in childhood by a certain portion of contemporary individuals—namely precisely those who go on to develop anxiety neurosis: “a portion of children bring the anxiousness of the

²⁹ Freud, 14:247.

³⁰ Freud, 14:247; Sigmund Freud, “Übersicht der Übertragungsneurosen,” in *Gesammelte Werke*, Nachtragsband, 643.

³¹ Freud, “Overview,” 14:248.

beginning of the Ice Age along with them and are presently induced by it to treat unsatisfied libido as an external danger. The relative excess of libido would result from the same precondition [*Anlage*], however, and thus make possible new acquisition of anxious disposition. Still, consideration of anxiety hysteria would support the preponderance of phylogenetic disposition over all other factors.”³²

Following this pattern, Freud proceeds to summarise the formation of the remaining five phylogenetic dispositions. The real impossibility of unlimited procreation due to the scarcity of resources found its social solution—replacing the killing of surplus offspring—in perverse regressions to the pregenital zones, thus forming the disposition to conversion hysteria. This phase then opened the path for a transfer of libido to intellectual activity, which constitutes the core of obsessional neurosis. The primal father of the horde, “who after the end of the Ice Age assumes its role, continues it as it were,”³³ is, first, the one who “does not allow full scope” to the sons and “robs them of their manhood, after which they are able to stay in the horde as harmless labourers;”³⁴ the retreat into auto-erotism here creates the generative core of dementia praecox. The sons who manage to escape form a community that “could have been built upon homosexual satisfaction,” and with this, Freud holds, there is given, on the one hand, a general disposition to homosexuality—the starting point of the sublimatory development of culture—but also, on the other hand, the specific disposition to paranoia as a model of an (unsuccessful) “attempt to ward off homosexuality.”³⁵ Finally—and again as a partial disruption of the linear temporal sequence—Freud, in a sixth step, also constructs the disposition to melancholia–mania, which condenses temporality into the alternation of triumph and remorse experienced by the sons after the killing of the primal father.³⁶

As noted, I will not at this point go into the details of Freud’s derivation; Freud himself—and here he deserves some credit—develops it precisely in order to prevent it from remaining a bare abstract fantasy, one that would, contrary to its very motivating premise, tip the balance decisively toward innate constitution at the expense of acquired character. Freud’s intrinsic motivation for this

³² Freud, 14:248.

³³ Freud, 14:252.

³⁴ Freud, 14:250–51.

³⁵ Freud, 14:251–52.

³⁶ Freud, 14:252.

phylogenetic construction lies precisely in the unresolved (and unresolvable) question of the predominant factor in the origin of fixation or disposition:

The possibility also exists that such fixation is brought along in pure form and also that it is produced by early impressions and, in the end, that both factors work together. All the more since it can be claimed that both elements are actually ubiquitous, insofar as [on the one hand] all dispositions are constitutionally present in the child and, on the other hand, the operative impressions are allotted to large numbers of children in like manner. It is thus a case of more or less, and of effective combination.³⁷

Freud, who, when confronted with the riddle of determining this “effective combination”—that is, the moment at which *wirksames Zusammentreffen*, the convergence of the two factors that produces a proper concept of disposition distinct from constitution, takes place—tended to emphasize accidental moments in childhood, here opts for a different direction. The defense of the acquired moment here proceeds as a deconstruction of heredity itself, as the attribution of an acquired core to the supposedly innate factor:

When the constitutional factor of fixation comes into consideration, acquisition is not thereby eliminated; it merely retreats into still earlier prehistory, since it can be justifiably claimed that the inherited dispositions are residues of ancestral acquisitions. We hereby come upon the problem of the phylogenetic disposition behind the individual or ontogenetic one, and should find no contradiction in the fact that the individual adds new dispositions from his own experience to his inherited disposition, passed down on the basis of earlier experience. Why should the process that creates disposition on the basis of experience cease precisely with the individual whose neurosis one is investigating? Or why should this individual create disposition for his progeny but not be able to acquire it for himself?³⁸

The generalization of the acquired moment must therefore be read precisely as such, even if we may be tempted to read Freud’s phylogenetic fantasy as a

³⁷ Freud, 14:244.

³⁸ Freud, 14:244–45. This same idea was given and made public in his twenty-third lecture: “The constitutional dispositions are certainly also the after-effects of the experiences of earlier ancestors; they too were once acquired; without such acquisition there would be no heredity.” Freud, “Introductory Lectures,” 16:361.

defense of the innate immutability of our fixations, disguised in the form of an impenetrable myth. Freud himself confirms this in the very conclusion, when he emphasizes that it is not the case that “archaic constitutions return in new individuals according to a predetermined ratio, and push them into neurosis through conflict with current demands. Room remains for new acquisitions and for influences with which we are not acquainted.”³⁹

This reservation is crucial. Although, on the one hand, Freud follows the idea that the development of civilization has provided phylogenetic models from which we choose when we choose a neurosis, he nevertheless opens up the possibility that these seemingly immutable models of the functioning of the psychological apparatus are themselves bound to historicity, and can be reconfigured into novel dispositions: first ontogenetically and then also phylogenetically. The choice of neurosis, in which, as Freud explicitly emphasizes here as well, the question of disposition is “the most decisive factor, the one that mediates the decision,” thus clearly forms a bridge between ontogeny and phylogeny in this text.

Structurally, however, and even with regard to the composition of the text itself, it stands on the boundary between the first section, “based on very careful and arduous observation,” and the second section, which offers yet another example of a moment when “criticism occasionally gives way to phantasy,” in which “unconfirmed things are presented, merely because they are stimulating and open up remote vistas.”⁴⁰

Once Freud had chosen neurosis—once he had followed Charcot’s break and placed his bet on a purely psychological object, a psychological system capable of closing in upon itself and generating its own determination—this threshold, from which a leap into speculation is at times necessary, became part of his own theoretical disposition. It may not be superfluous to recall that this essay, in which a discursive turn occurs at its very center, is not just any essay, but precisely the twelfth, the final text of his never-completed project of a great book on metapsychology. It is not only this essay that breaks here but the entire project, and so from this moment on becomes something else; yet the metapsychological

³⁹ Freud, “Overview,” 14:254.

⁴⁰ Freud, 14:245.

aspiration condensed in the enigma of the choice of neurosis has nevertheless not disappeared. The productive moments in Freud's later work are admittedly harder to discern and may indeed be rarer; yet even there Freud persists—in his treatment of myth no less than elsewhere—in insisting on the event-like character of the object of investigation, whether this object be the psychological apparatus, the group, or civilization itself: *Im Anfang war die Tat*. In closing, and thus returning to Nassif, only if there is an act at the beginning can there be a break in the proper psychoanalytic sense: a rupture that is not merely undergone, but one that can be repeated, and repeated again.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Images, Still: Matter Between Stillness and Movement in the History and Theory of Art

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La nature morte ou le retour aux choses – A quelles choses ?

Still Life; or, the Return to Things—What Things?

Keywords

still life, painting, return to things, domestic economy, appropriation, art history

Abstract

Here we seek to respond to the renewed interest that still life enjoys today: to draw out its symptomatic value, which would make still life the point of determination, within art history's discourse, of the broader return to things now unfolding across diverse fields—from philosophy to anthropology. To return to things would thus mean to return to the object. Yet it is precisely by refusing to let the concept of the thing collapse into the indeterminacy of an object that still life may be reimagined anew—once we attend to its profoundly *domestic* dimension, where “house” signifies less a building than possession, one's own place, one's domain, one's home. In this way, still life is restored to its *appropriative* vocation, against the *descriptive* logics that so often provide its theoretical frame. It is a way of displacing the discourse of objectification and the discourses of “scientific observation” in favour of another, far more ancient perspective: that of *domestic economy*. Conceived as the regulation of one's own goods, the ordering of the things of the household, domestic economy would then offer, in a sense, the theoretical formula for what seems to take place in the anthropological depths of still life: a pictorial art of tidying, arranging, disposing—an entire art of the home.

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Tihožitje ali povratek k stvarem – katerim stvarem?

Ključne besede

tihožitje, slikarstvo, povratek k stvarem, hišno gospodarstvo, apropiacija, umetnostna zgodovina

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Povzetek

Prispevek je odziv na ponovno zbuditev zanimanja, ki ga danes doživlja tihožitje. Izpostavlja njegovo simptomatsko vrednost, ki tihožitje v diskurzu umetnostne zgodovine postavi v središče širšega povratka k stvarjem samim, ki se odvija na različnih področjih, od filozofije do antropologije. Vrnitev k stvarjem bi tako pomenila vrnitev k objektu. Toda šele, ko pojmu stvari ne dovolimo, da bi se razblinil v nedoločnost objekta, lahko na novo premislimo tihožitje – šele, ko se posvetimo njegovi globoko *domačnosti* razsežnosti, kjer »hiša« bolj kot stavba pomeni lastnina, lastni prostor, lastno ozemlje, lastni dom. Na ta način tihožitje v nasprotju z opisno logiko, ki pogosto tvori teoretični okvir njegovega razumevanja, povrnemo k njegovi *prisvajalni* vlogi. S tem diskurze objektivacije in »znanstvenega opazovanja« nadomestimo z drugim, veliko starejšim vidikom: vidikom *hišnega gospodarstva*. Hišno gospodarstvo, zasnovano kot urejanje lastnega premoženja, razvrščanje stvari v gospodinjstvu, bi tako ponudilo teoretično formulo dogajanja v antropoloških globinah tihožitja: slikarska umetnost pospravljanja, urejanja, razvrščanja – gre za umetnost domovanja.



De toute évidence, nous sommes aujourd’hui embarqués, et depuis un certain moment désormais, dans un vaste retour aux choses. Le philosophe y entendra un leitmotiv qui résonne familièrement à ses oreilles, puisque toute l’histoire de la philosophie est marquée du sceau de multiples retours aux choses, de l’humanisme renaissant à l’entreprise cartésienne, de la phénoménologie husserlienne au bergsonisme... Et en effet, c’est bien philosophiquement que peut s’entendre de nos jours un tel mouvement, si l’on y voit là la direction tracée par un certain retour en force du réalisme, et plus globalement de l’entreprise métaphysique, sous les formes multiples des « philosophies orientées objet », du « réalisme spéculatif » et sa critique du corrélationnisme, des « ontologies plates », ou encore de l’essor de la question du perspectivisme et autre « cosmomorphisme »¹. Assurément, dans toutes ces configurations, il s’agit bien de contester la primauté d’un subjectivisme que rendrait impérieuse une nouvelle exigence de chose en soi. Mais, peut-être plus profondément, tout cela renvoie-t-il moins à un appareil conceptuel qu’à une expérience, du moins à une quête

¹ Voir par exemple le collectif dirigé par Emmanuel Alloa et Elie During, *Choses en soi. Métaphysique du réalisme* (Paris : PUF, 2018). Voir encore Pierre Montebello, *Métaphysiques cosmomorphes. La fin du monde humain* (Dijon : Les Presses du Réel, 2015).

d'expérience, qui voudrait nous faire retrouver quelque chose de l'extériorité du monde et de la multitude de choses qui le peuplent – animaux, plantes, pierres... – tout cela, précisément, que la modernité nous aurait fait perdre.

Il ne faut donc pas s'étonner qu'un tel besoin de retour aux choses déborde largement du seul champ philosophique pour s'épanouir dans de multiples domaines. En anthropologie, par exemple, ne faut-il pas penser conjointement le nouvel intérêt porté à tout le monde des images, des objets visuels, et plus généralement des cultures matérielles et ce « tournant ontologique » qui redonne à l'anthropologie (du moins la plus en pointe) de nouveaux objets en même temps qu'il questionne les fondements mêmes de l'anthropologie culturelle dans ses rapports à la nature ? Et pour ne rien dire du succès de la notion d'agence (*agency*), forgée par Alfred Gell, qui semble conférer aux objets et aux artefacts une partie des prérogatives prêtées aux seuls humains, « comme si » ces mêmes objets se montraient capables d'action voire de pensée². Et plus globalement, au niveau cette fois de l'ensemble des sciences sociales, c'est bien tout le *material turn* qu'il s'agit dès lors d'enrôler dans ce retour aux choses, en sa volonté d'incarner des rapports sociaux dans des objets, des matières, des techniques, des gestes, façon de comprendre que les plus simples ou triviales *realia* peuvent encore produire ou être le support du symbolique.

Dans ces conditions, on comprendra aisément que l'histoire/théorie de l'art puisse se laisser allègrement porter par un tel tournant matérialiste, si tant est que c'est par principe, ou immédiatement, qu'elle aurait affaire à des objets matériels : des images comme objets visuels, mais pour lesquels compterait moins la prise en compte de la dimension technique de la production artistique qu'un élargissement du spectre des objets pris en compte : vêtements et objets textiles, accessoires cosmétiques, liturgiques, cérémoniels, objets domestiques, objets de dévotion, etc. C'est bien d'ailleurs sous la catégorie de « choses » que bien des objets traditionnels de l'histoire de l'art – objets d'arts, arts décoratifs, objets de collection, œuvres d'art elles-mêmes bien sûr – semblent trouver un nouvel élan, voire semblent s'animer et donner lieu à des « carrières » et des « biographies d'objets ».

² Voir le classique d'Alfred Gell, *L'art et ses agents*, trad. Olivier et Sophie Renault (Dijon : Les Presses du Réel, 2009).

Voilà qui pourrait expliquer, tout à la fois au titre de causalités intellectuelles que de symptômes esthétiques, l'étonnante actualité de la nature morte qui, du moins pour la France, a culminé en 2022–2023, dans une grande exposition au musée du Louvre, *Les choses. Une histoire de la nature morte*³, organisée par Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, précédée deux ans plus tôt par un grand essai de synthèse de la même auteure, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*⁴.

La nature morte donnerait peut-être de la sorte l'argument visuel le plus explicite de ce retour aux choses comme retour à *l'objet*. Retour aux choses ou retour aux objets ? Les deux notions semblent interchangeable, dès lors que le peuple de la nature morte se définit – c'est là son sens traditionnel – comme non-animé voire non-humain. L'objectivité de la nature morte tiendrait dès lors à son extériorité par rapport à l'homme, à sa capacité de « dénégarion de l'humain⁵ ». L'affaire est en réalité sans doute plus complexe, car en vérité, tout semble opposer l'indétermination des choses, dès lors qu'on y range tout ce qui ne vit pas (et il faudrait rappeler ici l'hésitation linguistique bien connue qui tantôt, en français, parle de nature morte, tantôt, notamment en néerlandais et en anglais, parle de *still-life*, toujours en vie⁶) à l'extrême détermination de la nature morte comme peinture d'objets. En considérant des choses, la nature morte mettrait en œuvre une sorte de poétique du quotidien, de l'ordinaire, une esthétique des choses banales⁷ – simples gaufrettes déposées sur une table, simples pots, ou corbeille de fruits – en même temps qu'elle agirait une sorte de « sublimation » de cette même banalité pour transformer le compotier en un objet. La nature morte scellerait ainsi

³ Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Les choses. Une histoire de la nature morte* (Lienart : Louvre Editions, 2022).

⁴ Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* (Paris : Gallimard, 2020).

⁵ Etienne Jollet, *La nature morte ou la place des choses. L'objet et son lieu dans l'art occidental* (Paris : Hazan, 2007), 13.

⁶ Voir la mise au point linguistique de Jan Blanc dans *Stilleven : peindre les choses au XVIIe siècle* (Paris : Éditions 1 : 1, 2020).

⁷ Voir par exemple Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*, 181 : « les objets de la vie quotidienne qui sont représentés étant souvent en soi sans grande fantaisie, leur banalité laissera aux artistes toute la liberté de les arranger à leur façon, sinon de les embellir et de les rendre plus vivants. [...] Les auteurs de natures mortes vont profiter de la banalité des choses pour innover ».

un procès de détermination, le passage de l'indéterminé des choses à un objet authentique, c'est-à-dire un objet d'art – de regard, de désir.

Toute pierre, écrit Gérard Wajcman, tout coquillage, tout quoi que ce soit tiré de la nature est d'abord ramassé, et puis posé, disposé, montré, exposé, livré à la vue, destiné à être vu. Par là, tout quoi que ce soit de naturel est en vérité produit. L'incréé est devenu art. La chose est devenue objet. [...] Une chose + un regard. L'objet n'est pas simplement ce qui est jeté devant nos yeux et qu'on peut voir, c'est qui est désiré, saisi par le regard⁸.

Mieux ; tout se passe comme si cette dynamique d'objectivation avait gagné la forme même de la représentation, pour faire de la nature morte même une réalité objective, un objet d'art, un *tableau*, au sens tout à fois symbolique et matériel. Symbolique, parce qu'il faut bien admettre qu'entre la fin du XVIe siècle et le début du XVIIe, entre l'Italie et la Flandre, « la nature morte, *en tant que genre*, naît dans le cadre d'un processus plus général d'autonomie de l'œuvre d'art⁹ » ; matériel, parce que dès lors, le genre nature morte s'incarne dans des œuvres d'art, des individualités physiques, des tableaux peints comme biens meubles, que l'on accroche et transporte, et qui font objet pour un sujet-spectateur¹⁰.

⁸ Gérard Wajcman, *Ni nature, ni morte. Les vies de la nature morte* (Caen : Nous, 2022), 13. Voir encore « l'essence de la nature morte. Soit cette opération de changement de substance, qu'on pourrait nommer en termes théologiques une hypostase, mais qu'il serait aussi simple d'appeler sublimation, soit la transformation merveilleuse de l'état de la matière réalisée par l'art. De la chose à l'objet, de la nature à l'œuvre, il y a un acte, un geste, rien d'autre, rien de plus que celui de montrer. La monstration c'est l'œuvre d'art. La nature morte est l'art qui accomplit la sublimation de la chose naturelle en objet d'art ».

⁹ Jollet, *La nature morte*, 14.

¹⁰ Voir Jollet, 73. Jollet voit un rapport étroit entre l'autonomie de l'œuvre et ce qu'il nomme sa « déplaçabilité », ie. son caractère transportable, la nature mobilière de ce qui est en train de s'individuer comme œuvres d'art. « Il y a selon nous une relation entre l'essor de la NM et la déplaçabilité des œuvres. La caractéristique essentielle est désormais la primauté d'une relation avec non pas le lieu lui-même, mais la personne du propriétaire : la notion de convenance en rend bien compte. Ce propriétaire, M. Schapiro y voyait de préférence un bourgeois. En tout état de cause, il s'agit d'un esthète. L'autonomie de l'œuvre d'art s'accompagne de la création de lieux spécialisés pour la contemplation des œuvres, les cabinets, elle contribue à la neutralisation de l'environnement ; c'est justement dans la seconde moitié du XVIe siècle que ce genre de lieu devient de plus en plus fréquent. »

C'est pourquoi il n'est pas sans intérêt de jouer, si l'on peut dire, *les choses contre les objets* ; comprenons : de parler des choses de la nature morte en les qualifiant autrement que par leur objectivité. De la même façon, il y aurait sans doute beaucoup à gagner à ménager la part de non-spécificité des choses, sans pour autant la rabattre sur de l'indéterminé. Car de quoi est-il question sinon de *sortir la nature morte de toute notion de genre*, au sens le plus classique d'un genre artistique – et l'on sait que c'est dans le fond relativement assez tard que la hiérarchie des genres s'est installée dans l'organisation esthétique et sociale de la pratique artistique ? Façon de ne plus considérer la nature morte comme une réalité spécifiquement artistique, fût-ce pour en dessiner la formation, la prise d'autonomie, mais pour l'ouvrir sur une extériorité qu'on dira *anthropologique*, autant dire sur une dimension non-spécifiquement artistique, pour dire son commerce avec tout ce qui ne relève pas des Beaux-arts et qui a suffisamment de puissance pour être toujours effectif même une fois la nature morte fixée en une catégorie artistique autonome. La question, pour la nature morte comme peut-être pour de nombreux objets symboliques, est de savoir avec quoi elle travaille, de saisir quelle extériorité s'enveloppe en elle : faire de la nature morte une chose, autant dire une chose *parmi d'autres choses*, non pas du tout un objet d'art isolé et autonome. De fait, cela revient bien à poser la question de l'unité de la nature morte, mais en partant du principe que cette unité n'est pas donnée d'avance, qu'il s'agit là d'une unité produite ou à produire, une unité problématique. On comprend déjà, au moins formellement, qu'invoquer une indétermination des choses objectives en tant qu'inanimées ne fournit aucune espèce d'unité aux choses de la nature morte.

Des choses, donc. Le vocable, pour l'époque qui voit l'inauguration de la nature morte (et qui ne doit justement pas se confondre avec une « origine »), à la charnière des XVI^e et XVII^e siècle, a encore tout le charme de ces réalités prémodernes qui nous empêche précisément d'y projeter les clivages que la modernité galiléo-cartésienne instituera. De toute évidence, les choses de la nature morte ne procèdent pas de ce régime de la collection qu'a si bien analysé Patricia Falguières : le trésor, la chambre des merveilles, les cabinets de curiosités où les œuvres de la nature se confondent avec les productions de la technique humaine, précisément sous l'horizon d'une *tekhnè* qui dépasse l'horizon humain :



Fig. 1 : Willem Claesz. Heda, Nature morte avec coupe Nautilus, 1654, huile sur toile, Budapest, Musée des Beaux-Arts, Yelkrokoyade / Wikimedia Commons (CC BY-SA 3.0).

*naturalia et artificialia*¹¹. Ce qui se recueille ici – choses singulières, merveilles, trophées – tient foncièrement de l’invention : qu’ils s’agissent d’inventeurs ou de la nature elle-même ou d’illustres possesseurs¹².

Avec la nature morte, au contraire, nulle héroïsation des choses, nul prestigieux possesseur, nul antique inventeur - rien d’extraordinaire. Pour autant, leur ordinaire

¹¹ Voir Patricia Falguières, *Les chambres des merveilles* (Bayard, 2003) ; et Patricia Falguières, « Qu’est-ce qu’une Kunst- und Wunderkammer ? Régimes d’objets, chronologie et problèmes de méthode », dans *Le trésor au Moyen Age. Discours, pratiques et objets*, dir. Lucas Burkart et al. (Florence : Edizioni del Galluzzo, 2010), 241–62.

¹² Voir Patricia Falguières, « Les inventeurs des choses. Enquêtes sur les arts et naissance d’une science de l’homme dans les cabinets du XVI^e siècle », dans *Histoire de l’art et anthropologie* (Paris : INHA, Musée du quai Branly, 2009), mis en ligne le 28 juillet 2009, consulté le 10 octobre 2025, <https://doi.org/10.4000/actesbranly.94>.

n'a rien de neutre ou d'objectif si l'on sait l'inscrire dans un régime singulier tout à fait déterminable : c'est celui de *maison*. Sans doute faut-il repartir de cette évidence selon laquelle les choses de la nature morte procèdent fondamentalement de l'univers domestique. Quel rapport en effet entre corbeilles de fruits, tables dressées, gâteaux et pâtés, bouquets de fleurs, viandes et poissons, ustensiles de cuisine, nécessaire à écriture, sinon, le fait de constituer des bien domestiques, modestes ou luxueux, sinon de dépendre d'un certain *art de la maison* (fig. 1) ? On rétorquera vite que les références explicites à l'espace domestique sont finalement assez rares dans les peintures de nature morte : fenêtre ouverte (ou fermée), et cheminée fonctionnant comme de rares notations d'un espace intérieur. Autant dire que l'espace des natures mortes donne plus volontiers l'impression de tenir d'un lieu abstrait ou pictural plutôt que proprement domestique.

Des objets hors-lieu ? Voire... Car l'espace domestique de la nature morte ne se confond pas (du moins peut-il le faire, mais secondairement, empiriquement) avec un intérieur de maison qui lui conférerait un sens locatif ou extensif, concrètement : un espace architectural. Maison doit en vérité s'entendre comme une réalité théorique consistant toute entière en un sens *possessif* : une habitation, un habitat, mais où l'avoir (*habere*) l'emporte sur la construction. Nul doute que l'opposition qu'offre la langue anglaise entre *house* (la maison construite) et *home* (le chez-soi) ne soit ici pertinente, mais à condition que l'on ne fasse pas du chez-soi un foyer qui fonctionne comme un lieu particulier voire essentiel. Une telle maison désigne d'abord une propriété : un espace propre, un lieu en propre, qui excède la limite matérielle des murs, puisqu'il peut englober jardin, terrain, champs et dépendances, mais qui excède surtout toute réalité matérielle. En tant qu'entité *idéelle*, sa structure dessine une multiplicité possessive qui détermine un entourage en rassemblant choses et personnes, biens et individus, objets et animaux, famille, femme et enfants selon une façon d'être particulière qui les fait être *siens*.

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Une maison, écrit justement Benoît Goetz, n'est ni un concept (telle idée de l'architecte), ni un objet empirique (elle n'a pas de forme précise : ce peut être une tente, une cabane, un appartement). Je considérerai plutôt la maison comme un schème, au sens d'un rythme et d'un dynamisme spatio-temporel. Une « maison » est une manière d'être à l'espace, ou de posséder un espace, c'est-à-dire un mode d'habitation ou d'inhabitation¹³.

¹³ Benoît Goetz, *Théorie des maisons. L'habitation, la surprise* (Lagrasse : Verdier, 2011), 101.



Fig. 2 : Garofalo, *Annunciation* (dét.), 1500–1502, tempera et huile sur toile, Venise, Galleria di Palazzo Cini.

Elle ne décrit pas autre chose qu'un « ensemble de biens, le lieu propre (*oikeios topos*) d'appropriation des choses », un mode de l'habiter qui « renvoie à la fois à l'*avoir* et à la *tenue*¹⁴ ». En un mot, c'est là faire essentiellement de la maison un *domaine*, une *réalité domaniale*, au sens le plus juridique du terme, si l'on se souvient que c'est le mot latin de *dominium* (et non pas *proprietas*) qui traduit (mal) ce que nous autres modernes nomons « propriété » : avoir une chose, c'est posséder son domaine. Autant dire que cela renvoie très concrètement à des modes de comportement appropriatifs, à des manières d'être possessives, qui peuvent prendre mille et une tournures : l'occupation, le soin, la gestion, l'attachement, etc. – nous y reviendrons.

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De fait, il y a bien des contextes figuratifs où se mêlent maison empirique et maison théorique, espace architecturé et espace propre, et qui donnent lieu,

¹⁴ Goetz, 105–6.

non par hasard, à une attention toute particulière pour une peinture des choses domestiques. Il s'agit de l'Annonciation et du *studiolo*, aussi bien sous sa forme représentée (pensons à quelque Saint Jérôme ou Saint Augustin dans son cabinet) que sous sa forme réelle (avec son décor). L'histoire de l'art a depuis longtemps bien remarqué ce genre de détails singuliers, qu'elle a tôt fait de ranger dans la catégorie d'une nature morte en train de s'autonomiser. Et de souligner l'étrange montage par lequel une étagère, une niche ou une armoire, riches de tout un fatras d'objets, viennent s'insérer dans l'ensemble figuratif de manière parfois très discontinue. Ainsi, dans une *Annonciation* de Garofalo peinte aux alentours de 1500, c'est un tout un petit cabinet qui, portes ouvertes, vient s'interposer entre l'Ange et la Vierge, et offrir très frontalement son contenu à la vue du spectateur : livres, sablier, plume, coupe-papier, ciseaux, quelques cerises, des œillets (*gorofani*) dans un petit vase, etc (fig. 2). Par-delà cette apparente discontinuité (dans l'*Annonciation* précitée, le fond noir du cabinet ne joue pas peu dans la fonction d'interruption ou de syncope visuelle), il faut au contraire souligner le lien profond qui attache ces objets à un espace domestique très singulier : l'espace propre *de la Vierge* en tant que cette chambre (*thalamus Virginis*) voire cette maison n'est pas un espace indéterminé mais un lieu à haute teneur possessive : la maison ou la chambre qui appartient à la Vierge. A la rigueur, s'il y a autonomie, elle concerne bien davantage la maison, puisque comme l'on sait, la maison de la Vierge jouit d'une existence en propre, qui lui donne la capacité de se mouvoir, de voler (à Lorette). Il en irait de même pour le *studiolo*, qui donne très souvent lieu à tout un étalage de livres, de matériel à écriture, d'objets de mesure (sablier et autres objets savants), qu'il s'agisse d'un *studiolo* en représentation (pensons par exemple aux *Saint Jérôme* de Van Eyck, fig. 3) ou d'un *studiolo* réel, avec ce décor d'*intarsia* caractéristique de l'Italie de la Renaissance figurant en trompe-l'œil des placards ouverts, recelant une multitude d'objets (on pense bien sûr au *studiolo* de Gubbio, fig. 4). Là encore, ce qui fait nature morte dans ces images n'est pas la (toute relative) autonomie de leur présentation, pas plus que leur description minutieuse. C'est d'abord leur inscription dans un espace possessif fortement personnalisé, leur attachement à une personne, mais en tant que « personne » ne renvoie pas tant ici à une identité qu'à une possession locale : l'espace *du prince-humaniste*, *son* cabinet de travail, *son studiolo*¹⁵.

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¹⁵ Sur le *studiolo* comme lieu *du prince* à la Renaissance, voir l'étude classique de Wolfgang Liebenwein, *Studiolo. Die Entstehung eines Raumtyps und seine Entwicklung bis um 1600*

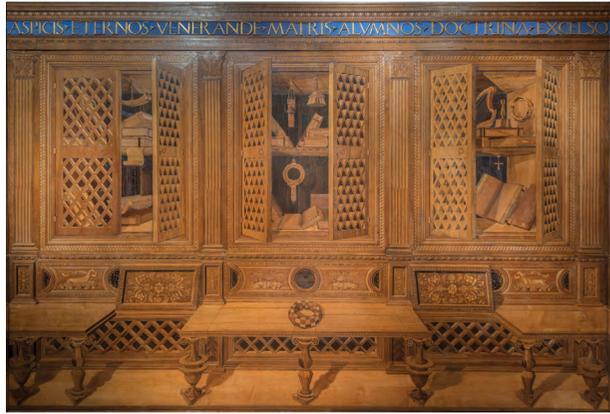


Fig. 3 : Van Eyck (atelier), *Saint Jérôme dans son étude*, 1442, huile sur papier contrecollé sur bois, Detroit, Detroit Institute of Arts.

Fig. 4 : Artistes divers, Studiolo de Gubbio, ca. 1478–1482, bois.

Voilà donc que commencent à se situer singulièrement les choses de la nature morte : *choses de la maison*, les objets de la nature morte ne sont pas d’abstraites « objets objectifs », si l’on peut dire, mais d’abord des *biens domestiques*. Il faut saisir toute la portée critique que suppose un tel déplacement. C’est bien là en finir avec l’indécrottable thèse naturaliste ou réaliste qui voudrait faire de la nature morte le théâtre le plus simple, et par là même le plus pur, de l’imitation. Mais *la nature morte n’est pas descriptive, elle est appropriative* ; elle ne se distribue pas selon le visible et l’invisible, pas plus que selon l’opposition de la nature et de la culture mais selon *le propre et l’impropre*, voire selon le comestible et l’inconsommable. Ce qu’elle « dépeint » ne tient pas d’abord à la réalité objective de choses à décrire dans leur pure visibilité mais ne prend son sens que dans le régime « économique » d’une maison (*oikos*), qu’en vertu d’une valeur d’appartenance – autant dire : des choses attachées, qui relèvent d’un attachement – comme le dit si bien l’italien : *le cose mie* (« mes affaires », « mes effets personnels ») ; bref, tout le contraire d’objets isolés et autonomisés. N’est-ce pas dans ce sens qu’il faudrait voir le clou qui fixe la perdrix et la paire de gantelets dans le célèbre tableau de Jacopo de’Barbari de 1506 (fig. 5) : une explicitation visuelle de l’attache, de la fixation comme marquage possessif ? Une

Fig. 5 : Jacopo de Barbari, *Nature morte avec perdrix et gantelets*, 1504, huile sur toile, Munich, Alte Pinakothek.



telle appartenance ne retire rien à leur anonymat, si tant est que la possession en question est foncièrement impersonnelle ; d'une certaine manière, couverts, fruits et légumes, livres, instruments de musique n'appartiennent à personne, à *personne d'identifiable*, à aucun propriétaire individuel. Ils n'en sont pas moins les propriétés d'un domaine, leur abstrait et impersonnel propriétaire.

Reprenons plus en détail. Quand Bruegel de Velours, Ambrosius Boschaert ou Jacques Linard (fig. 6) peignent des fleurs, ce n'est pas pour les décrire dans leur objectivité botanique, et les inscrire dans l'espace idéal et abstrait de l'illustration scientifique. Ce sont toujours des fleurs disposées en *bouquet* – dans un pot, un vase ou une corbeille ; toujours des fleurs coupées, cueillies, arrangées, qui viennent décorer un espace domestique, fût-il imaginaire, puisque si la culture des fleurs est une véritable « passion nationale » hollandaise au XVII^e siècle, « on les utilise très peu dans la décoration intérieure des maisons¹⁶ ». Et viendraient-elles du jardin que cela ne changerait rien à leur relation d'appartenance à la maison ; au contraire même, le jardin n'étant pas autre chose qu'une dépendance de la maison, qu'un attribut du domaine. Il en va de même avec tous les

¹⁶ Paul Zumthor, *La vie quotidienne en Hollande au temps de Rembrandt* (Paris : Hachette, 1959), 66.

Fig. 6 : Ambrosius Bosschaert l'Ancien, *Nature morte aux fleurs*, 1614, huile sur cuivre, The Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles.



Fig. 7 : Frans Snyders, *Nature morte aux choux*, ca. 1610, huile sur toile, Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle.



aliments, à commencer par les fruits et légumes : soigneusement disposés dans une corbeille ou dans un plat, sur un plateau ou dans des bocaux, ou encore tout simplement posés sur la table, ils se présentent d'abord comme des biens consommables et non pas comme des « fruits de la nature » que l'œil avisé du peintre devrait méticuleusement reproduire. Dans le cas le plus fréquent, ils sont montrés offerts à la consommation, destinés à être mangés : pastèques et melons coupés, citrons épluchés ; plus rarement, ils sont dépeints comme le fruit d'une production. Ainsi, dans sa *Nature morte aux légumes*, il faut voir comment Frans Snyders (fig. 7) monumentalise la récolte par le contraste entre l'immensité des choux au premier (le tableau mesure près d'un mètre cinquante de côté) et petit paysan au labeur dans son champ, à l'arrière-plan du tableau. De fait, c'est une même logique qui préside à tous ces lapins, faisans, perdrix, cailles, pièces de bœuf, volailles, poissons... (fig. 8, 9). Il ne s'agit en réalité jamais pour les peintres de décrire des animaux dans leur objectivité zoologique mais de présenter de la viande, du gibier, de la sauvagine, autant dire des matières carnées, des



Fig. 8 : Luis Eugenio Meléndez, *Nature morte avec des brèmes, des oranges, de l'ail, des condiments et des ustensiles de cuisine*, 1772, huile sur toile, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.



Fig. 9 : Frans Snyders, *Nature morte de gibier*, début XVIIe siècle, huile sur bois, Paris, Musée de la chasse.



Fig. 10 : Joachim Bueckelaer, *Scène de cuisine avec le Christ à Emmaüs*, 1560, La Haye, Mauritshuis.

produits alimentaires destinés à la consommation. Et quand Gérard Wajcman, au nom d'une « gastronomie transcendante » pose le principe que « la nature morte commence par la bouche¹⁷ », ce n'est certes pas pour accorder quelque privilège à

¹⁷ Wajcman, *Ni nature, ni morte*, 198.



Fig. 11 : Pieter Artsen, *Scène de marché*, 1569, huile sur bois, Stockholm, Hallwyl Museum.

la bouche en tant qu'organe, mais bien plutôt pour inscrire à même le corps une fonction d'appropriation qui se détermine comme ingestion ou incorporation.

De fait, on n'a pas manqué de saisir le lien génétique qui, dès la fin du XVI^e siècle, chez des peintres comme Campi, Passerotti, Beuckelaer ou Artsen (fig. 10, 11), arrimait la nature morte à tous ces étals de marché et leurs amoncellements de viandes, de poissons, de fruits, ces tables dégorgeant de nourriture, transformant d'humbles scènes de cuisine et de boucherie en authentiques trophées carnés et légumineux¹⁸. La nature morte trouverait ici quelque chose comme ses lieux théoriques, tant meubles (récipients, tables, plateaux, paniers, corbeilles, pots, gamelles, tonneaux...) qu'immeubles (cuisine, marché, rue, halle...). C'est

durant la seconde moitié du XVI^e siècle, [que] s'opère un glissement entre le genre des « cuisines » et celui des « banquets » [...] qui conduit à observer une forme d'autonomisation de l'espace de la table. Dans les tableaux de Pieter Arsen

¹⁸ « Trophée » s'entendant métaphoriquement et littéralement, du moins si l'on saisit la morphologie du tas, de l'amoncellement, de l'amas qui caractérise tant le trophée antique et son accumulation d'armes que ces monceaux de nourriture (et dans une moindre mesure la morphologie de la suspension). Sur ces peintres et dans l'optique d'une anthropologie visuelle de la scène de genre, voir Valérie Boudier, *La cuisine du peintre. Scène de genre et nourriture au Cinquecento* (Rennes : Presses universitaires de Rennes ; Tours : Presses universitaires François-Rabelais, 2010).



Fig. 12 : Juan Sánchez Cotán, Nature morte au gibier, légumes et fruits, 1602, huile sur toile, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

et de Joachim Bueckelaer, les tables ne constituent qu'une partie de la composition, accueillant les aliments, les victuailles et les mets. Pour des découpages et des recadrages successifs, ces tables finissent par être isolées, comme des motifs indépendants¹⁹.

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En sorte qu'au début du XVII^e siècle, « les *bancetten* ne sont plus considérés comme des tableaux représentant des tables mises ou garnies, mais comme des repas, voire de simples compositions d'aliments – les inventaires font alors une place croissante aux 'petits-déjeuners' (*ontbijtjes*), mais aussi aux plateaux et aux corbeilles de 'fruits' (*fruiten, vruchten*)²⁰ ». Et il faudrait sur ce point revenir à l'appellation espagnole de nature morte, « *bodegón* », qui renvoie explicitement

¹⁹ Blanc, *Stilleven*, 33–34.

²⁰ Blanc, *Stilleven*, 40.

à la *bodega* comme magasin, cave (à vin notamment), lieu de stockage, et par extension taverne, gargote. Le peintre Sanchez Cotán, dans ses célèbres natures mortes, cadrera directement son tableau sur l'espace intérieur de garde-manger (*cantareros*), où les aliments entreposés – fruits, légumes, volailles – sont suspendus pour les laisser hors d'atteinte des rongeurs²¹ (fig. 12).

Il y a bien là une *économie*, mais en un sens qui ne coïncide plus du tout avec le lien qui arrime traditionnellement le développement de la nature morte dans les pays du nord et l'essor du capitalisme marchand au XVII^e siècle. La nature morte, surtout hollandaise, donnerait une image de cette très forte dynamique économique en sa capacité à produire autant qu'à faire circuler une quantité impressionnante de biens, de choses entendues comme marchandises. Un tableau comme la célèbre nature morte de Kalf (fig. 13) viendrait ainsi « concentrer toute la richesse du monde avec sa porcelaine chinoise Ming, sa tapisserie perse et sa coupe en nautile ouvragée, dans une œuvre que l'on n'imagine que dans un salon feutré européen²² ». La nature morte célébrerait de la sorte un Nouveau

Fig. 13 : Willem Kalf, *Nature morte au vase Ming*, 1662, huile sur toile, Madrid, Musée Thyssen-Bornemisza, © Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid.



²¹ Sur cet aspect des *bodegones* de Cotán, voir Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked. Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London : Reaktion Books, 1990), 62–69.

²² Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*, 173–74.

monde marchand en le consacrant dans une « imagerie de la réussite dans l'accumulation des biens qui va de pair avec ses conquêtes commerciales voire militaires. [...] Nous comprenons mieux si l'on n'oublie pas que les artistes sont liés à une histoire, à une économie, à des contrats sociaux, à des acteurs, à des commanditaires, etc.²³ ». La thèse est bien connue. Faut-il d'abord rappeler que les œuvres d'art n'ont pas attendu le XVIIe siècle hollandais pour s'inscrire dans des réseaux marchands et plus profondément encore pour posséder une valeur d'échange, réelle ou symbolique ? Mais surtout, il y a économie et économie ; et de toute évidence, l'économie que l'on invoque ne se confond pas avec cette *économie politique*, qui naît au minimum comme discours théorique – au XVIIe siècle, et deviendra l'économie *tout court* dans le courant du XIXe, et qui attache la production à l'espace idéal d'un marché.

S'il y a économie de ou dans la nature morte, c'est au contraire en un sens fort ancien : c'est au sens de l'*économie domestique*, l'*oikonomia* : le *nomos* de l'*oikos*, la règle, l'ordre de la maison. Une économie domestique, donc, qui nous ramène aux premiers traités antiques – grecs, principalement ceux d'Aristote et de Xénophon, et qui connaît justement son grand renouveau dès le milieu du XVIe siècle : avec la traduction italienne du traité de Xénophon à Venise en 1540, mais encore avec toute une série d'autres ouvrages auxquels il ne faudrait pas manquer de compter les *Livres de la famille* de Leon Battista Alberti²⁴. A ne considérer que la chronologie, peut-être faudrait-il d'ailleurs s'interroger sur cet étrange déphasage historique qui voit la nature morte s'épanouir comme genre dans le moment même où l'économie domestique tend à disparaître au profit de l'économie politique.

Une telle économie n'est domestique qu'à condition d'extraire la maison de sa réalité architecturale pour y voir un ensemble apparemment hétéroclite de choses et de personnes unies par un lien possessif : père, mère, enfants, mari, épouse, maître et maîtresse de maison, domestiques, voire esclaves, métayers autant que maison (entendue comme construction), et à peu près tous les biens meubles qui l'habitent, jardin, terres, domaine, animaux, bétail... Bref, une multiplicité

²³ Bertrand Dorléac, 173–74.

²⁴ Sur cette littérature dans l'Italie des XVIe et XVIIe siècles, voir notamment Daniela Frigo, *Il padre di famiglia Governo della casa e governo civile nelle tradizioni dell'« economica » tra cinque e seicento* (Rome : Bulzoni, 1985).

possessive qui définit *une propriété*, dont toutes les composantes, tant humaines que matérielles, s’entre-possèdent.

Le patrimoine, écrit très justement Pierre Caye en s’appuyant sur un merveilleux passage d’une lettre de Pline Le Jeune, assure cette dimension symétrie des hommes et des choses, leurs entrappropriation et entrappartenance réciproques : ‘Comment se porte Côme, tes délices et les miennes ? Comment se porte ta villa pleine de charme ? [...] Te possèdent-elles et te partagent-elles tour à tour ?²⁵’

L’économie domestique est fondamentalement une mise en ordre, en sorte qu’elle ne porte que secondairement sur les modes de production, d’acquisition et de dépense ; et tout aussi secondairement sur le sens de la richesse. Elle est d’abord ce savoir-faire, théorique et pratique tout ensemble, profondément *gestionnaire* : elle décrit la gestion, l’administration, l’aménagement des biens et des personnes qui composent la maison et la maisonnée²⁶. Sur le plan des personnes, elle prend souvent la forme d’un « gouvernement de la famille », et règle les rapports du mari et de l’épouse, ou des enfants vis-à-vis de leur père. Sur le plan des choses, elle consistera fondamentalement en l’acquisition, la conservation et l’usage des biens, et en passera par tous ces gestes de rangement, d’organisation, de placement et de déplacement, de distribution et de redistribution... Ce n’est pas qu’elle récuse le profit, bien au contraire, mais elle le pratique toujours – au moins idéalement – depuis la production. Bref, on aura reconnu le mode de production typiquement antique – pour l’opposer ainsi à un mode de production capitaliste – qui relève d’une gestion « en bon père de famille » et qui suppose de ne pas prendre de risque, qui se refuse à toute forme d’investissement aventureux : une économie non du capital, mais de la rente, du patrimoine, et qui vise un idéal d’autarcie et d’autosuffisance²⁷.

²⁵ Pierre Caye, *Critique de la destruction créatrice. Production et humanisme* (Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 2015), 246, citant Pline le Jeune, *Lettres*, I, 3, 1.

²⁶ Pour un panorama général de la théorie grecque de l’économie, voir Étienne Helmer, *Oikonomia. Philosophie grecque de l’économie* (Paris : Classiques Garnier, 2021).

²⁷ Cela dit en reprenant le sens des analyses de Paul Veyne dans « Mythe et réalité de l’autarcie à Rome », dans *La société romaine* (Paris : Seuil, 2001), 130–62. La lecture de Moses Israel Finley, *L’économie antique*, trad. Max Peter Higgs (Paris : Minuit, 1975), chap. 1, est toujours utile.

C'est bien pourquoi l'économie domestique, précisément parce qu'elle cherche à « assurer ses arrières », repose presque toujours sur la propriété foncière et l'exploitation d'une terre : son terreau est fondamentalement campagnard ou rustique. De là encore la grande proximité entre les traités d'économie domestique et la littérature agricole ou agronomique, dont témoignent les nombreux traités antiques, ceux de Caton, Varron, Columelle, Palladius, justement traduits et commentés dès le XVIe siècle. Une place particulière doit être faite ici à l'ouvrage de Charles Estienne, *L'Agriculture et maison rustique*, publié à Paris en 1564, et qui connaîtra plusieurs dizaines de rééditions et reprises jusqu'au XVIIIe siècle (notamment sous la forme d'une *Economie générale de la campagne, ou Nouvelle maison rustique*, signée en 1700 par Louis Liger, un propriétaire bourguignon, qui connaîtra elle aussi de multiples rééditions jusqu'au XIXe siècle. Tous ces ouvrages, auxquels il faudrait encore ajouter celui d'Olivier de Serres, le *Théâtre d'agriculture et mesnage des champs* (1600)²⁸, ne se contentent pas d'être des traités d'agronomie ; ils touchent plus généralement à l'administration de la vie à la campagne, à l'organisation de la production rustique : élevage du bétail, culture de la vigne, aménagement des jardins, conception du potager, techniques de chasse, fabrication du vinaigre, de liqueurs, du vin et d'autres alcools, manières de produire le beurre et le fromage, fabrication des conserves de fruits, des confitures, recettes de cuisine, conseils de boulangerie et de pâtisserie, etc.

C'est tout l'univers visuel de la nature morte qui se déploie ici, si l'on sait y reconnaître non des choses abstraites, mais bien des *denrées*, non des marchandises mais des *produits*, et qu'il faut saisir tant dans leur objectivité domestique que dans la façon qu'elle a d'en reproduire l'ordre, voire de le recomposer. La nature morte procède bien d'une économie domestique en tant qu'*art ménager*. Jean-Marc Besse, dans son beau livre sur l'habiter, rappelle justement qu'en français, ménage et maison puisent à la même étymologie et que ménage doit d'abord s'entendre comme rangement, arrangement, par quoi le propre renvoie moins à la pureté qu'au disposé : « le propre, c'est ce qui est d'aspect convenable, ce qui est bien arrangé, ce qui est ordonné, et, partant qui a une certaine dignité et une

²⁸ Qui ne connaîtra pas moins de 19 rééditions tout au long du XVIIe siècle. Sur la dimension strictement architecturale de la maison rustique, voir Jean Cuisenier, *La maison rustique. Logique sociale et composition architecturale* (Paris : PUF, 1991).

certaine aptitude. Ce qui a été rendu propre est redevenu ‘propre à’ : toute une économie morale s’articule ici à la volonté esthétique d’obtenir une belle apparence et un ordre des choses de notre entourage [...]»²⁹. C’est exactement dans ces termes qu’il y a près de deux mille cinq cents ans, Xénophon s’adonnait dans son *Economique* à un éloge très concret de l’ordre domestique :

Comme il est bon que l’ensemble des objets soit rangé, comme il est facile de trouver dans la maison pour chacun d’entre eux une place pour l’y mettre qui convienne à chacun, je l’ai assez dit. Quel beau spectacle que des chaussures de toutes sortes alignées, quel beau spectacle que des vêtements de toutes sortes bien rangés, quelle belle chose que des couvertures, quelle belle chose que des vases de bronze, quelle belle chose que la vaisselle pour la table, quelle belle chose encore – voilà ce qui plus que tout ferait rire, non un homme sérieux, mais un bel esprit – de trouver un spectacle harmonieux dans des marmites, comme dit l’autre, distinctement rangées... De même, tous les autres objets offrent un plus bel aspect lorsqu’ils sont rangés en bon ordre. C’est un chœur que forment toutes ces sortes d’ustensiles et l’espace qu’ils entourent est beau à voir quand il est ainsi bien dégagé. De la même façon, un chœur cyclique n’offre pas seulement un beau spectacle par lui-même, mais le centre apparaît également beau et net³⁰.

C’est de toute évidence cette économie domestique qui aura fait le berceau des antiques natures mortes, si l’on suit la tradition vitruvienne, qui en fait la fixation par l’image de ces « cadeaux d’hospitalité » (*xenia*), provisions et victuailles, que le maître de maison laissait à ses hôtes durant leur séjour dans sa villa. Redonnons le passage de Vitruve :

Par ailleurs prennent place à droite et à gauche de petits appartements qui ont leur propre porte sur la rue, des *triclinia* et des chambres convenables permettant de recevoir les hôtes qui se présentent, non dans les péristyles, mais dans des logements conçus pour les hôtes. En fait, au temps où les Grecs connaissaient une vie plus raffinée et une situation plus prospère, ils préparaient pour leurs hôtes, à leur arrivée, des *triclinia*, des chambres, des resserres à provisions. Le premier

²⁹ Jean-Marc Besse, *Habiter. Un monde à mon image* (Paris : Flammarion, 2013), 18–19.

³⁰ Xénophon, *Economique*, trad. Pierre Chantraine (Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 2008), 81–83 (VIII, 18–20), cf. aussi 75 (VIII, 3) : « il n’est rien au monde, ma femme, d’aussi utile que l’ordre (*taxis*), ni d’aussi beau ».

jour, ils les invitaient à dîner et leur envoyaient le lendemain, des poulets, des œufs, des légumes, des fruits et d'autres produits de la campagne. C'est la raison pour laquelle les peintres donnèrent le nom de *xenia* à leurs peintures qui représentaient ce type de présents qu'on envoyait aux hôtes. Ainsi, même en situation d'hôtes, les pères de famille n'avaient pas le sentiment d'être loin de chez eux puisqu'ils jouissaient par cette hospitalité d'une générosité tout à leur intention (*habentes secretam in his hospitalibus liberalitatem*)³¹.

Il y aurait beaucoup dire de ce passage et de tout ce qui s'y cristallise³² : l'air de rusticité, l'ambiance champêtre d'une maison de campagne dans laquelle baigne la nature morte³³ ; le rapport étroit entre la production du domaine et la générosité du maître de maison, soit une manière de nouer de manière très serrée l'image avec le don, le cadeau, l'hospitalité.

Et c'est en tout cas dans les termes d'une nature morte *in vivo*, nature morte vécue, éprouvée comme pratique domestique, qu'il faut revenir à la Hollande du XVIIe siècle ; non pas, comme on l'a dit, pour en faire le théâtre d'un nouveau monde marchand, mais pour saisir à quel point l'essor de la nature morte doit s'entendre comme l'analogie visuelle d'une passion pour l'ordre domestique. Il faut relire ici les pages magnifiques que Paul Zumthor, dans *La vie quotidienne en Hollande au temps de Rembrandt*, consacrait à cette passion : « Quelle que soit sa condition, le Néerlandais nourrit pour sa maison un véritable amour. Pour l'homme, économe jusqu'à l'avarice, l'aménagement de sa maison est la seule occasion licite de dépense d'apparat. La femme, elle, voue totalement sa vie à la maison. La maison est le lieu, le temple de vie de la famille, et celle-ci à son tour constitue le centre de l'existence sociale³⁴ ». Si l'armoire est le meuble par excellence, en remplacement du coffre médiéval, il distingue entre deux types : l'une pour le linge, l'autre pour la vaisselle (« armoire à porcelaine, placée dans la pièce d'apparat, et sur les rayons de laquelle on expose assiettes,

³¹ Vitruve, *De architectura*, dir. et trad. Pierre Gros (Paris : Les Belles Lettres, 2015), 424–25 (VI, 7, 4) ; trad. mod.

³² On se réserve la possibilité d'y revenir ultérieurement.

³³ Au XVIe siècle, l'humaniste Blaise de Vigenère aura eu l'intelligence de traduire par « présents rustiques » le terme de *xenia*, dans sa traduction commentée des *Images* de Philostrate. Voir *Les images ou tableaux de platte peinture de Philostrate* (Paris : Abel Langelier, 1597), 487 sq.

³⁴ Zumthor, *La vie quotidienne en Hollande*, 64–65.

pots, plats décorés, parfois mêlés à des instruments de musique³⁵ ». Mais c'est surtout la cuisine qui s'impose comme le lieu idéal du rangement :

dans les habitations bourgeoises [...], la cuisine a été promue à une dignité fabuleuse et tient du temple et du musée. Des ustensiles de cuivre et d'étain reluisent le long des murs ; on a peint la table en rose ; parfois carrelé le sol de marbre. Une armoire vitrée contient la vaisselle. Dans une autre armoire, dite 'trésor', on conserve les provisions, le ligne de table en cours d'utilisation, les saucières, les tailloirs³⁶.

Ce qui compte finalement dans ces cuisines, ce n'est en rien l'activité culinaire, mais uniquement l'ordonnancement général de la batterie de cuisine. Un voyageur français du début du XVIIIe siècle, l'abbé Sartre, décrira en ces termes l'aspect des cuisines hollandaises : « Ils aiment mieux mourir de faim au milieu du brillant de leurs chaudrons et de leur vaisselle, que d'entreprendre le moindre mets qui dérangerait cette économie. Ils me montraient avec complaisance la propreté de leur cuisine qui était aussi froide aux heures avant le dîner qu'elle aurait pu l'être après³⁷ ».

Qu'il y ait nature morte en quelque sorte *avant même* son instauration comme genre artistique autonome, que la nature morte mette en œuvre une authentique

³⁵ Zumthor, 58.

³⁶ Zumthor, 60.

³⁷ Pierre Sartre, *Voyage en Hollande fait en 1719* (Librarie Lechevalier, 1896), 30, cité par Zumthor, *La vie quotidienne en Hollande*, 60 ; voir encore 84 sur la vaisselle de table : « L'aspect d'une table servie a quelque chose d'à la fois lourd et sommaire, d'abondant et de peu personnel. On distingue mal dans cette accumulation d'instruments, le couvert individuel, la place spécialement équipée pour chaque convive. Pourtant, la richesse, la variété, la commodité, la beauté de la vaisselle, même chez les plus humbles, passent aux yeux des étrangers pour l'une des caractéristiques de la culture néerlandaise. Plats, pots, assiettes, aiguères, mais aussi les sucriers, beurriers, saucières, salières, soupnières, coquetiers, les bols à eau-de-vie, les coupes et les hautes chopes à couvercle : tout cela se fabrique le plus souvent en étain, qui, depuis le XVIe siècle, est le métal domestique par excellence (l'argent reste un luxe rare). Seuls les très pauvres, ou certains paysans, utilisent encore, selon la tradition médiévale, une vaisselle de bois. » Sur la maison hollandaise au XVIIe siècle et notamment sur l'importance du ménage, voir encore Simon Schama, *L'embaras de richesses. La culture hollandaise au Siècle d'Or*, trad. P.-E. Dauzat (Paris : Gallimard, 1991), chap. VI. Schama écrit justement que « l'art hollandais fut le premier à célébrer cet ordonnancement idéal de la maison familiale, ainsi qu'à satiriser sa dislocation » (513), mais c'est pour enrôler les scènes de genres, autant dire des *représentations* d'un tel ordre, sans faire mention des natures mortes.



Fig. 14 : Samuel van Hoogstraten, *Bric-à-brac*, ca. 1670, huile sur toile, Karlsruhe, Staatliche Kunsthalle Karlsruhe.

pratique de la maison : voilà sans nul doute tout l'intérêt d'une anthropologie des images en ce qu'elle ne considère pas les phénomènes artistiques dans la limite de leurs spécificités artistiques, a fortiori quand elles s'autonomisent pour former un genre, mais qu'elle saisit l'efficacité réciproque de formes et de pratiques, autant dire la capacité de ces dernières à se configurer dans des formes plastiques, des dynamismes sensibles et inversement, la capacité de ces derniers à transformer et précipiter des pratiques³⁸. En l'occurrence, cela signifie que les modalités picturales de placement et de déplacement – objets isolés ou multiples, posés, placés, déposés, suspendus, en tas, en monticules, en amoncellements ou au contraire régulièrement ordonnés – que de telles modalités picturales, donc,

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³⁸ On a essayé ailleurs de dresser une ébauche théorique des enjeux d'une anthropologie des images à partir du travail de Georges Didi-Huberman ; voir Bertrand Prévost, « Sur l'anthropologie des images », dans « Georges Didi-Huberman », *Critique* 908–9 (2023) : 103–14.



Fig. 15 : Domenico Remps, *Cabinet de curiosités*, ca. 1690, huile sur toile, Florence, Opificio delle pietre dure.

sont impensables sans les non moins innombrables dispositifs d'exposition domestique : table, console, vaisselier, étagère, niche, corbeille, plateau, vase, cabinet, armoire, placard, tiroir, boîte, piédestal... C'est pourquoi il y aurait tout lieu non de minorer mais bien de majorer ce qui passerait vite pour un « sous-genre » de la nature morte, celle dite « de placard » : soit ces tableaux qui coïncident avec un espace de rangement – table, placard, tiroir... – et les objets qu'il contient. On pense bien sûr au célèbre *Bric-à-brac* de Samuel Van Hoogstraten (fig. 14), qui se décalque point par point sur un plan de rangement maintenant par des sangles nécessaire à écriture, peigne, livre, médailles, papier marbré... Etienne Jollet mentionne encore le cas de « Cornelis Gijsbrechts [qui] développe à Copenhague le genre des portes demi-ouvertes servant à habiller la porte réelle d'un cabinet de curiosités. [...] Ce genre triomphe dans les espaces intérieurs jusqu'au XVIIIe siècle, comme en témoigne la fausse *Bibliothèque* de Giuseppe Maria Crespi³⁹ » (fig. 15).

³⁹ Jollet, *La nature morte*, 116.

Il faut sur ce point reconnaître à Etienne Jollet d'avoir été bien inspiré de placer tout son livre sur la nature morte sous les auspices de la « place des choses » : la nature morte poserait moins un problème d'*objet* que d'*espace* : de localisation, de distribution, de disposition. Mais de tels dynamismes ne peuvent justement pas s'entendre dans les termes abstraits d'un lieu indéfini ou indéterminé. C'est au contraire très concrètement, dans les termes d'une économie domestique, qu'il faut envisager la « disponibilité » de la nature morte. Aussi picturalement autonome fût-elle, sa logique d'ordonnement empruntait moins à la « *ratio pingendi* » de la composition albertienne qu'aux arts de table et à la disposition des couverts⁴⁰, moins à la disposition rhétorique qu'au rangement de la maison et aux arts ménagers.

Déclaration de disponibilité des données

Le partage des données n'est pas applicable à cet article, aucune donnée n'ayant été produite ni analysée dans le cadre de la présente étude.

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⁴⁰ Voir notamment Pascal Reigniez, *Histoire des couverts* (Arles : Errance et Picard, 2024), 127–41.

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Changing Stillness: Notes on Rhetoric and Ontology in Sixteenth- and Seventeenth-Century Still Life

Keywords

Still life, rhetoric, ontology, episteme, metaphor-metonymy, allegory, naturalism

Abstract

This essay examines the distinctive knot of ontology and rhetoric woven by sixteenth- and seventeenth-century still life. Framed against a Foucauldian analysis of the *Âge classique* and its epistemic order, it seeks to illuminate the subtle shifts this minor genre introduced into the culture from which it emerged. The central argument is that, through its pictorial features—meticulous naturalism, the absence of a thematic centre, and indifference to the *historia*—still life made visible the onto-linguistic fabric that structured the classification of beings in its time. Moreover, these very features endowed the genre with a peculiar capacity to shift both the place and the “essence” of the things depicted. In doing so, still life stages a singular form of change that unfolds within the immobility of its representation.

Spreminjajoča se nepremičnost: zapiski o retoriki in ontologiji tihožitij šestnajstega in sedemnajstega stoletja

Ključne besede

tihožitje, retorika, ontologija, episteme, metafora-metonomija, alegorija, naturalizem

Povzetek

Prispevek preučuje značilen preplet ontologije in retorike, ki ga ustvarjajo tihožitja iz 16. in 17. stoletja. Na podlagi Foucaultove analize *Âge classique* in njegovega epistemološkega reda skuša osvetliti subtilne spremembe, ki jih je ta obrobni žanr uvedel v kulturo, iz katere je izšel. Osrednja teza je, da je tihožitje s svojimi likovnimi značilnostmi – natančnim naturalizmom, odsotnostjo tematskega središča in brezbriznostjo do

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historije – vizualiziralo ontološko-jezikovno strukturo, ki je v tistem času strukturirala klasifikacijo bivajočega. Poleg tega so prav te značilnosti žanru podelile posebno sposobnost, da je premestil tako mesto kot »bistvo« upodobljenih stvari. S tem je tihožitje uprizorilo edinstveno obliko spremembe, ki se odvija znotraj nepremičnosti njegove upodobitve.



The Boijmans Museum in Rotterdam houses a painting by Balthasar van der Ast dating from the first half of the seventeenth century (fig. 1). It consists primarily of a meticulous depiction of shells from across the globe (Indonesia, Cuba, Florida, and West and South Africa), interspersed with rare instances of fruit, insects, and small animals, and is known as *Still Life with Shells*. There is thus a predominance of objects linked to water, yet with forms that evoke earth and air. On the one hand, this still life belongs to the widespread tradition of cabinets and paintings that, through their collections of marvels, celebrated Dutch maritime commercial power.¹ On the other, it testifies to the taste for naturalistic description that was prevalent at the time, especially in Northern Europe.² Finally, insofar as it brings together mainly marine elements, it may also be read as an image of the Sea—or of Water—through the representation of the creatures inhabiting it, a common metonymic device used to allegorize the four elements. All these items are arranged on a table covered with a white cloth, a sign of the will to display and deliberately order the objects portrayed—that is, a sign of human agency. Everything here points toward a paradigmatic example of still life: an almost perfect stillness, interrupted only by scattered “symptoms” of life—a butterfly, a fly,³ a coiled lizard; a human presence that is implied but never seen; a set of animate and inanimate objects, each clearly defined in its individual

¹ On this, see Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 2018), 104–10.

² On this, see Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-Life Painting in the Seventeenth Century*, trans. Christina Hedstrom and Gerald Taylor (London: Faber and Faber, 1956), 30, 40–52; Svetlana Alpers, *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

³ On the history of the motif of the fly, see in particular Daniel Arasse, *Le détail: Pour une histoire rapprochée de la peinture* (Paris: Flammarion, 1996), 151–64.



Fig. 1: Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life with Shells*, ca. 1640, Rotterdam, Collection Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen.

character, gathered together in a partition of realms, genera, and species, whose ordering enables a metaphorical transposition of the work of art.

Things, however, are less straightforward than they might appear from this brief description. In fact, what to an attentive eye is clearly a lizard may, to a distracted gaze, resemble a mollusc emerging from its shell; likewise, the siphon of the murex, set against the pale background, might look like a branch to an unfocused viewer; and the leaves of the cherry branch in the left corner of the painting may appear, to an inattentive observer, to be a cluster of wings. Why do these errors of the eye occur? Their cause lies in the peculiar juxtaposition of the objects displayed: the lizard rests upon a shell; the siphon intersects with the cherry branch, whose leaves in turn rise against the background beside a butterfly. Each of these elements, taken in isolation, is rendered with perfect definition, entirely recognizable in its distinctive features. This, indeed, is one of the hallmarks of still-life painting: the clarity of representation, the realism, the naturalism of detail. The source of the perceptual fault lies in the combination of these sharply determined objects: without in any way losing their individuality,

they become—by virtue of their arrangement—something else in a moment of inattention; a transformation that, if only for an instant, calls into question the very classification of beings.

This essay takes its cue from the discovery of this strange metamorphic power of still life—the strangeness lying in the fact that the transformation can occur only by virtue of the stillness that defines the representation. Indeed, a peculiar, paradoxical movement takes place within the suspended state that inhabits these paintings: a movement without animation, without life; or rather, a movement unfolding in an undecidable space between absence, decay, and the mineralization of life. This implies that such metamorphoses will have little to do with nature understood as a creative force⁴; rather, they unfold on a different plane—one that intertwines the problem of the distribution of beings into realms, genera, and species; the rhetoric of representation (the dialectic between metonymy and metaphor); the peculiar naturalism of detail; and the oscillation between attention and distraction.

One might legitimately ask what is to be gained from this discovery. At its core, I believe, lies a possible reconfiguration of the idea of freedom: one that neither reverts to anthropocentrism, nor attributes to a vitalistic matter or nature the possibility of change,⁵ nor leaves the problem of being to objects *in themselves*.⁶ Rather, it tries to confront the fixity of ontology from the demure angle of a marginal genre, in which natural and artificial things, and all manner of “*cose piccole*”⁷

⁴ In this sense, the terms used by Romance languages to designate still life (French *nature morte*, Italian *natura morta*) acquire a meaning that goes beyond the academic denigration of a minor genre. On the question of the genre’s name, see Charles Sterling, *La nature morte de l’antiquité à nos jours* (Paris: P. Tisné, 1952), 41–42; Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Meta-Painting*, trans. Anne-Marie Glasheen (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 53–54; Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).

⁵ This tendency is characteristic of new materialism. On this, see Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁶ This is the case of Object-Oriented Ontology, which rejects anthropocentrism and privileges the autonomy of objects. Here I limit myself to referring to Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (London: Zero Books, 2011).

⁷ Giorgio Vasari, *Le Vite de’ più eccellenti architetti, pittori, et scultori italiani, da Cimabue, insino a’ tempi nostri*, vol. 1 (Turin: Einaudi, 2015), 53.

exist on the same plane. Here, by virtue of their combination and of the fluctuation of the eye's attention, all these things may become something else without ever blurring their contours—without undermining the clarity of painting.⁸

In this sense, still life articulates a paradigm positioned halfway—theoretical-ly and chronologically⁹—between two extremes: Boyle's laboratory, analysed by Bruno Latour as the original site where nonhuman objects and a proliferation of details exchange the medieval ontological hierarchy for the "variable ontologies" of modernity,¹⁰ and Winckelmann's Belvedere Torso, examined by Jacques Rancière as the object marking the emergence of the modern aesthetic regime, defined by the dialectic between suspension (of acts, passions, expression) and freedom.¹¹ At the same time, the peripheral position these canvases occupy within art history situates them in a marginal space in relation to the truth of the laboratory and the aesthetics of the masterpiece. It is by virtue of the smallness of their subjects, of their very triviality, that perceptual mistakes can occur without giving rise to falsity; likewise, the exchange of objects can take place precisely due to the absence of an ideal beauty that would otherwise fix forms. This tinniness, this "insignificance," places still life at the margins of modern revolutions and their most enduring achievements: the clarification of the confusion between qualities and quantities; the acquisition of the subject's perspective; the ordering of beings into classes (to confine ourselves to the cases most relevant to this inquiry). Moreover, insofar as the unimportance of still lifes keeps them on the sidelines of the great pronouncements of their age, it also enables them to register the uncertainties of that body of knowledge: the lingering residues of Renaissance correspondences between signs and nature; the approximate

⁸ The theoretical appreciation of still life has undergone increased fortune in the past decades. Besides the ones that have already been mentioned and that are central to this argument (Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*; Stoichita, *Self-Aware Image*), see also Hanneke Grootenboer, *The Rhetoric of Perspective: Realism and Illusionism in Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still-Life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Doriéac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte*; Gérard Wajcman, *Ni nature ni morte: Les vies de la nature morte* (Caen: Nous, 2022).

⁹ The rise of still life as an autonomous genre and its golden age span across the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. On this, see Sterling, *La nature morte*, 43–79.

¹⁰ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 85.

¹¹ Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2011), 64–65, 120–22.

character of the first modern classifications—in the withdrawal of a higher plane of being that once guaranteed the legitimacy and stability of the order, and in the absence of unifying scientific principles still to be defined.¹² At the same time, the inconsequentiality of these canvases keeps them removed from the effects of the “discovery” of the aesthetic in the folds of classical artworks and masterpieces at the end of the eighteenth century. Their minor character preserves them from the problem of beauty; therefore, the freedom they exhibit must be sought along a path different from the one that intersects with the “beautiful” forms of the ideal.

It is this very marginality that entails the artistic and theoretical “weakness” of still life, a weakness that, in turn, defines both its peculiar atemporal character and its specific metamorphic power—as well as its enduring actuality. In order to grasp the productive mechanism of this uncertainty—its implications for language, ontology, and the subject—it is necessary to study still life at the moment of its emergence and peak, which, tellingly, coincides with what Foucault termed the *Âge classique*. In this sense, the present inquiry unfolds as an archaeological analysis of a different possibility of freedom: a freedom grounded in the “tumult” and the “uprising [. . .] of details [that] displace the ‘political totality’ of the painting’ so that the ‘small’ do not depend on the ‘large,’ ultimately ending up prevailing on them.”¹³

The Uncanny of Arcimboldo's Heads

The peculiar knot of rhetoric, image, and ontology that characterizes still life finds a first configuration before the full rise of the genre, on the threshold between the Renaissance sign-nature nexus and its dissolution.¹⁴ Standing on this threshold is the work of Giuseppe Arcimboldo¹⁵—active at the court of Maximilian II and Rudolf II in the late sixteenth century—with his unusual portraits: the series of *Reversed Heads* (*The Cook*, 1570; *The Vegetable Gardener*, 1590) which, depending on the viewer's perspective, may appear to be human heads, a plate

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¹² On this, see Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences* (London: Routledge, 2005), 79–84, 136–77.

¹³ Arasse, *Le detail*, 309.

¹⁴ On this, see Foucault, *Order of Things*, 28–32.

¹⁵ On Arcimboldo and the origin of still life, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo: Visual Jokes, Natural History, and Still-Life Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 167–211.

Fig. 2: Giuseppe Arcimboldo, *The Earth*, 1566, Private collection, Austria.



of meat, or a basket of vegetables; and the series of *Composed Heads*, depicting either natural “characters” (*Elements*, *Seasons*)¹⁶ or human types (*The Librarian*, 1566; *The Jurist*, 1566), each assembled from items intrinsically related to the subject—fish, crustaceans, and pearls for *Water*, flowers for *Spring*, land animals for *Earth* (fig. 2), and so forth.

In many respects, it is safe to say that these works belong to the late Renaissance milieu in which they were conceived and produced, insofar as they give visual form to the idea—common in sixteenth century—of a correlation among all elements across every level of being: whether great or small, insignificant or grand, material or spiritual, all things mirror one another, establishing a perfect correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm.¹⁷ It is the theory of *signatura*, which Foucault examines at length in *The Order of Things*, grounded in the predominance of the tropes of similarity, “*convenientia*, *aemulatio*, analogy, and sympathy [which] tell us how the world must fold in upon itself, duplicate itself, reflect itself, or form a chain with itself so that things can resemble one

¹⁶ On the problems of dating Arcimboldo’s *Elements*, see DaCosta Kaufmann, 54.

¹⁷ DaCosta Kaufmann, 117–22.

another.”¹⁸ Within this framework, signatures are the signs that render this network of resemblances and correspondences visible: if “resemblance was the invisible form of that which, from the depths of the world, made things visible,” then “a visible figure [must] draw it out from its profound invisibility.”¹⁹ As such, signature reveals the “shadow and image of God” of which the things of nature bear traces.²⁰ Thus, both similarity and signature rest upon a concept of nature that coincides with the diffuse, veiled presence of God and, from there, with the idea of a “readability of the world”: “The face of the world is covered with blazons, with characters, with ciphers and obscure words [. . .] And the space inhabited by immediate resemblances becomes like a vast open book.”²¹

Arcimboldo’s *Heads* fit seamlessly within this framework: they render visible the correlation between the fragments of the world and its most magniloquent forces through signs that are as visual as they are linguistic—or, to stay with Foucault’s formulation, signs that occupy that space “filled with the murmur of words,”²² situated between things and images. The *stoicheia* (air, fire, water, earth) indeed find their correspondences in the smallest beings of which they are composed; at the same time, these beings occupy specific positions within the personified profiles of the elements, thereby combining two pervasive motifs of the time: the human body as a *locus* of correlations,²³ and a reimagining of the bestiary tradition, shaped by a taste for wordplay. For instance, Gregorio Comanini—a contemporary Italian poet and polygraph—explains that the choice of a mouse for the eye in the portrait of *Earth* draws on Pliny’s account, itself taken from Theophrastus, according to which mice were capable of gnawing through iron, just as “the light of the eye [. . .] gnaws at and tames the hardest minds with amorous passions.”²⁴ In the case of the *Reversed Heads*, by contrast, painting plays with and subverts the figure of the palindrome: while the sense

¹⁸ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 29.

¹⁹ Foucault, 30.

²⁰ Foucault, 30, quoting Crolius, *Traité des signatures*, 1633.

²¹ Foucault, 30.

²² Foucault, 30.

²³ Foucault, 147.

²⁴ Gregorio Comanini, *The Figino, or On the Purpose of Painting: Art Theory in the Late Renaissance*, ed. Ann Doyle-Anderson and Giancarlo Maiorino (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2001), 26.

is preserved in the inversion, its meaning shifts: in one direction, it is a plate of meat; in the other, a cook. One way, a gardener; the other, vegetables.

But despite their full integration within the culture of their time, these paintings also register a transformation taking place within that very culture—one that, on the one hand, anticipates later developments, and on the other, preserves them in their strangeness and radical alterity. This shift concerns both the conception of nature and the status of language. On the side of language, it is as if, at times, words take over: puns, allegory, metaphor, metonymy, prosopopoeia—all of these figures coexist simultaneously within the same canvas. The example of the palindrome is particularly telling: as Roland Barthes writes in his essay on Arcimboldo, “‘Everything is always the same,’ says the true palindrome; whether you take things in one direction or the other, the truth remains. ‘Everything can assume an opposite meaning,’ says Arcimboldo’s palindrome; i.e., everything always has meaning, whichever way you read, but this meaning is never the same.”²⁵ In this sense, Arcimboldo’s “canvas becomes,” as Barthes puts it, “a real laboratory of tropes,”²⁶ in that it records a superfetation of meanings.

As for the things that compose the *Heads*, they are extracted from familiar contexts and recombined to serve this excess of meaning, resulting in a series of uncanny, oneiric formations of sorts.²⁷ The dreamlike (or nightmarish)²⁸ character of these paintings was already observed by Comanini, who in 1591 writes a dialogue entitled *The Figino, or On the Purpose of Painting*, in which he discusses Arcimboldo’s work at length. The dialogue takes part in the late sixteenth-century debate on the purpose and essence of art, framing this discussion within the broader ontological and aesthetic distinction between *icastic* and *fantastic* images²⁹: the former are produced as imitation of the “things that are”—as the result of a *mimetic* reproduction—while the latter give rise to “things that do not exist”—as effects of a *poietic* representation.³⁰

²⁵ Roland Barthes, “Arcimboldo, or Magician and Rhétoriqueur,” in *The Responsibility of Forms: Critical Essays on Music, Art, and Representation*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 141.

²⁶ Barthes, 136.

²⁷ On this process of defamiliarization in Arcimboldo’s paintings, see Barthes, 133–34.

²⁸ Barthes, 145–47. See also Comanini, *Figino*, 19–25, on *Vertumnus*.

²⁹ On this, see Doyle-Anderson and Maiorino, “Introduction,” in Comanini, *Figino*, ix–xviii.

³⁰ Comanini, 17.

Comanini refers to Arcimboldo's *Heads* as the finest illustrations of "fantastic imitation," grounded in their peculiar combinatory logic. Arcimboldo's "extraordinary imagination" depends not so much on his ability to invent something entirely from nothing, but rather on his capacity to produce images of non-existent things by bringing together and arranging in an original manner various existing objects: "He unites the images of visible things and transforms them into strange inventions and images never before created by the power of fantasy. He makes anything he wants to make by skilfully joining things that seem impossible to link."³¹ Arcimboldo is thus the master of fantastic imitation because of his ability to assemble heterogeneous elements—objects that would not ordinarily coexist within the order of *mimesis*—into new chains of meaning and form. In this respect, his creative power is not compared to that of other artists, but rather to that of dreams.³²

It is, however, from within the very discourse on icastic and fantastic imitation that Arcimboldo's works manifest an oddness which places them in an ambiguous position with respect to Renaissance culture more broadly, and to the artistic debate in particular. While it is true that, due to their original combinatory technique—rooted in the excess of rhetorical figures—they perfectly exemplify the "*imitatione fantastica*," it is equally true that they also make use of the sharpest tools of the "*imitatione icastica*." The "new monster[s]"³³ they portray emerge through the uncanny precision and detailed rendering of the things that compose them. Arcimboldo's *Heads*, as monstrous images, thus result from the assemblage of signifying, self-contained, and sharply defined elements—objects that exist and carry meaning independently of the composition to which they belong. Each piece of his portraits is an existing, identified, and identifiable object: a shell, a fish, a wolf, an ear of wheat, a candle. What is more, these objects are reproduced in an overtly *mimetic* manner, rendered so precisely as to be immediately recognisable in their autonomous shape, function, and meaning. They enter the composition as fully formed and signifying elements that can interact—by virtue of their shape and meaning—with the shape and meaning of the other elements of the composition. Thus, the strangeness of Arcimboldo's work—its eccentricity with respect to the artistic theories of his time, as well as its peculiar

³¹ Comanini, 28.

³² Comanini, 28.

³³ Comanini, 19.

oneiric logic, so different from the “dreams of painting” seen in grotesques³⁴—lies precisely in its capacity to blend istic and fantastic imitation, *mimesis* and *poiesis*, that is, a poietic ability to rhetorically combine disparate elements, and a mimetic, *naturalistic* rendering of each one of them.³⁵ As Daniel Arasse notes, the law governing the “constitution of the figure” in Arcimboldo’s work makes those figures, on the one hand, “perfect examples of ‘fantastic imitation’ that ‘imitates what does not exist’”; and yet, on the other, this fantastic imitation is itself grounded in the most minute details of the figures, “in the meticulous, exact, istic imitation, an imitation ‘in the image of’ what exists.”³⁶ In this way, these portraits display a peculiar kind of exchange between fantastic and istic, one that can be translated in terms of a dialectic between naturalism and imaginary.

This leads from the matter of language (a visual language, that is—but a language nonetheless)³⁷ to the shift these works exhibit in the idea of nature. The indecision between rhetoric and naturalism seems to encompass many aspects of the late Renaissance relation to nature: a peculiar combination of natural and moral characters marks the two far ends between which similarity and its figures produce knowledge. Over all of this, the presence of Pliny and his *Historia naturalis* looms large—a sort of encyclopaedia of antiquity, mixing together natural history and morality.³⁸ At the same time, however, as Comanini reports, “Arcimboldo has taken every head from life, since the emperor was accommodating enough to let him see all these animals.”³⁹ Their strikingly realistic representation does indeed seem to imply a form of natural observation—if not from life, then at least from the naturalistic studies of the time, with which Arcimboldo had more than likely come into contact.⁴⁰ Furthermore, a collection of drawings (the so-called *Vienna Album*) attests to Arcimboldo’s deep commitment

³⁴ On this, see André Chastel, *La grottesque* (Paris: Gallimard, 1991), 12–18, 47–52; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, “The Allegories and Their Meaning,” in *The Arcimboldo Effect: Transformations of the Face from the Sixteenth to the Twentieth Century*, ed. Pontus Hultén (New York: Abbeville Press, 1987), 89–108.

³⁵ On this, see DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo*, 193–94.

³⁶ Arasse, *Le detail*, 469.

³⁷ Barthes, “Arcimboldo,” 134–35, 143–44.

³⁸ On this, see Sarah Blake McHam, *Pliny and the Artistic Culture of the Italian Renaissance: The Legacy of the Natural History* (New Haven: Yale University Press 2013). For Comanini’s use of Pliny in his analysis of Arcimboldo’s *Earth*, see *Figino*, 26.

³⁹ Comanini, *Figino*, 26.

⁴⁰ DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo*, 162, 154.

to reproducing animals and plants as accurately as possible.⁴¹ It is among the tightly woven mesh of this realism that something different begins to emerge in the representation of nature—something that touches directly upon the rhetorical form of the paintings.

There are numerous sources that can be—and have been—identified for Arcimboldo's compositions. Alongside Renaissance grotesques and the monstrous figures decorating medieval and early modern manuscripts, his *Heads* are undeniably indebted to the tradition of the bestiaries. These were organized as collections of animals whose traits were considered relevant in relation to human morality.⁴² During the Renaissance, these collections gave way to the systems of correspondences that, as seen above, structured the world through similitudes and analogies.⁴³ Arcimboldo's assemblages, however, distance themselves from both traditions: the natural, animate, and inanimate objects brought together belong to the same class; their realism places them within the same frame—both metaphorically and literally.

This means that, alongside the rhetorical motives guiding the composition, a new rule of taxonomy begins to emerge among the tropes. Furthermore, it reconfigures those tropes into a structure that is part and parcel of the classificatory turn of the *Âge classique*⁴⁴: a network of similarities (as in the theory of signatures), to which differences are now added in order to reorganize knowledge. If, on the one hand, the traits of the animals depicted in the allegory of Earth are essentially moral, their naturalistic representation nonetheless displays a series of resemblances and divergences that brings the question of naturalism into the domain of rhetoric. In turn, while—as Barthes argues—reading Arcimboldo's paintings requires both metaphorical and metonymical awareness,⁴⁵ both tropes are inscribed within a structure that establishes which things belong together and in what way they differ: fish for water, birds for air, and so on.

⁴¹ DaCosta Kaufmann, 138, 153.

⁴² On bestiaries, I limit myself to referencing Debra Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries: Text, Image, Ideology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

⁴³ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 19–50.

⁴⁴ Foucault, 144–50.

⁴⁵ Barthes, "Arcimboldo," 143–44.

All this seems to suggest a kind of anticipatory quality in Arcimboldo's art with regard to later developments in the theory of language and the study of nature. This quality, however, is not interesting in itself, but rather due to the peculiar emancipatory power it entails for those very classifications of nature—and their ontological implications—that it anticipates: a power that rests upon the dialectic between the *icastic* forms drawn by natural classification and the *fantastic* effects of their rhetorical compositions. We have already seen how the late sixteenth century was marked by a coincidence of God, world, and nature. The *Heads* remain part of this *episteme*, insofar as they do not call into question the epistemic value of similitude and the network of correspondences it sustains—from the most trivial elements up to the emblems of Empire.⁴⁶ However, the *irresolution* in which they operate—a language *almost* freed from its ties to nature, a nature *almost* already structured in classes—produces a paradoxical effect: this irresolution lends the transformative power of language (a mouse for an eye, an oyster for an ear, a face made of birds) to the emerging science of natural classification. This classification, in turn, confers upon language the ontological implications of which it still bears traces—an ontology no longer constrained by the hierarchical order of things that the new epistemic paradigm was beginning to discard, yet still an ontology nonetheless. It is by virtue of this peculiar knot of nature, language, and being that Arcimboldo's *Heads* display an original form of freedom. As Barthes states, Arcimboldo's "painting is *mobile*,"⁴⁷ insofar as all elements, by virtue of their clarity, can be reassembled over and over again, without any loss of meaning: "What has been combined forms aggregates which can combine again among themselves a second, a third time. I imagine that an ingenious artist could take all of Arcimboldo's composite heads, combine them with a view to a new effect of meaning, and from their arrangement produce, for instance, a landscape, a city, a forest."⁴⁸

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The realism and precision of the representation guarantee the conservation of meaning within a constant shift of sense. What is more, this mobility does not concern language and art alone: it extends to natural classifications and the order of animate and inanimate beings. It is through the interplay of mimesis—the naturalism of detail—and rhetorical figures that "an authentic catastrophe

⁴⁶ As in the case of the portrait of Rudolf II as Vertumnus.

⁴⁷ Barthes, 142.

⁴⁸ Barthes, 141–42.

of appearances” occurs: a stumbling in meaning from which there emerges “a figure able to elaborate and transmit its own sense.”⁴⁹ Or rather, it is a figure changing along with the never-ending shifts of sense, shifts which both presuppose and produce a transformation in the order of beings—without either the figure or the sense being lost.

The Stillness of Still Life

Arcimboldo’s work, despite its widespread imitations, remains an isolated case⁵⁰—both due to its liminal position between two epistemes, and because of the quaintness of his combinatory art, its mixture of naturalism and imaginary. Thus, the peculiar emancipation (of language from its verbal limits, of nature and ontology from the hierarchical order, before the fixity of classifications is asserted) that his paintings display would seem too specific and irregular to serve an archaeology of the freedom we are looking for—let alone a theory thereof.

However, if one follows the trail of the concurrence of realism and rhetorical tropes within art history, one is led down a path to an ideal lineage of this peculiar ontological and rhetorical dialectic, one that leads from Arcimboldo to still-life painting—where the term “ideal” must be understood here simply in opposition to a historical reconstruction of the genre. This does not mean that his *Heads* must be excluded as possible historical sources of still life⁵¹; but if one is to embark on a historical reconstruction, one would have to go back to ancient illusionism and the tradition of *xenia*,⁵² then pass through the *parerga* of medieval and Renaissance art—the vegetal, animal, and monstrous decorations of manuscripts, the discovery of the grotesque, and so on.⁵³ Along this line, a range of interpretations unfold, depending on whether the focus is placed on symbolism, socio-economic aspects, or artistic techniques. Here instead—and this bears repeating—the interest in still lifes depends on the side position they occupy, and the role they play form such a position, within the *épistémè classique*. It is in this sense that they share an ability to question the *order of things*,

⁴⁹ Barthes, 466.

⁵⁰ On Arcimboldo’s fortune, see *Arcimboldo Effect*, 207–363.

⁵¹ On this, see DaCosta Kaufmann, *Arcimboldo*, 167–211.

⁵² Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 17–69.

⁵³ On the birth of still life as the effect of the autonomization of the study of detail, see Arasse, *Le detail*, 174–79; Stoichita, *Self-Aware Image*, 53–65.

which goes hand in hand with their marginality—similar to that of Arcimboldo’s works—thus placing them side by side on an ideal continuum. Yet an important difference separates still life from the *Heads*: its codification as a proper genre; the subalternity of that genre; its diffusion; and the absence of clear allegory—that is, in most cases,⁵⁴ a “withdrawal” of its rhetoric, as opposed to the tropological discernibility of the *Reversed* and *Composed* portraits—render its challenge to the natural and ontological order less visible, and therefore, as will be seen, all the more pervasive.

The connection between still-life painting and the forms of knowledge developed in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—particularly with the emerging organization of natural studies—has been well documented. As Norman Bryson notes in his analysis of Ambrosius Boschaert’s *Bouquet in a Niche* (1618) and its “naturalistic eye,” in still life, the painting “is a space of diagrammatic clarity, of *tabulation*. This is the reason why flowers, shells, and specimens of insect or saurian life enter into the same scene (with, to our eyes, such *surreal results*). All are subject to the labour of classification, in an era of natural history when taxonomy is the dominant mode of producing scientific knowledge.”⁵⁵ It is fair to say that all still-life paintings, at least to some extent, fit this description—from Francisco de Zurbarán’s pottery and lemons and Pieter Claesz’s breakfasts, to Willem Kalf’s tableware—insofar as they all bring together objects that are related to one another by some analogy and differ from one another in their details. Furthermore, despite their differences, still lifes share a fundamental representational scheme: they portray a collection of various objects in the absence of *historia*⁵⁶ and in a near-perfect stillness. In this context, the subject of the representation is nothing but this very assortment of things.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ This is less true in the case of the series of *vanitas* paintings, regarding which, see Stoichita, *Self-Aware Image*; Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 114–21.

⁵⁵ Bryson, 106; my italics.

⁵⁶ This stands explicitly in opposition to Leon Battista Alberti’s prescriptions, according to which the painter must select objects in relation to the narrative. On this, see Arasse, *Le detail*, 194–95. On the opposition of northern European art and Italian Renaissance art on the basis of the preponderance or absence of narration in favour of a taste for description, see Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xvii–xviii.

⁵⁷ On this, see Anne W. Lowenthal’s introduction in *The Object as Subject: Studies in the Interpretation of Still Life*, ed. Anne W. Lowenthal (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 3–12.

The homogeneous character of still life is such that one could almost imagine removing the frames⁵⁸ and arranging all the paintings side by side, forming a continuum of knives, glasses, fruits, vegetables, flowers, animals, books, skulls, vases, clocks, tables, rugs, tablecloths, pipes, and plates. Some parts would appear more similar, others would differ greatly, but all would fit in a structure—in the most general sense of the term: a complex of elements defined in their specificity by their similarities and differences.⁵⁹ Within this “structural” framework and its taste for classification, still lifes seem to perfectly reflect the epistemic paradigm of their time, insofar as they make visible the rules that organize reality into classes of beings—whether animate or inanimate, artificial or natural.

Yet, when one examines more closely the composition of these collections, a heterogeneity at odds with this paradigm comes to light. To grasp the reasons for such diversity, it is necessary to look at these canvases with greater attention. The first and most evident feature is the variety of the items represented on the canvas: even within subgenres that follow a clear thematic unity—breakfasts, banquets, flowers, garlands—the painters often play,⁶⁰ within a same class, with the multiplicity and the improbability of the assemblage. In Jan Davidsz de Heem’s *Still Life with Fruit and Lobster* (1649), for example, a lobster lies on the same table with prawns, shrimps, bunches of grapes, peaches, apricots, pears, lemons, tangerines—fruits associated with different seasons⁶¹—and is accompanied by shells and an array of glasses and dishes (fig. 3). Here, two main classes (food and tableware) are brought together, suggesting a network of associations related to various modes of human nourishment. At the same time, the presence of the shells introduces a chain of connections to the sea, shifting the interpretation of the lobster, the prawns, and the shrimps from food items to aquatic beings. Moreover, the prunts on the rummer, and on the stem glass to

⁵⁸ On the peculiar status of the frame in northern European art, see Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xxv. For a theory of the frame, I limit myself to referencing Louis Marin, “The Frame of Representation and Some of Its Figures,” in *On Representation*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001), 352–72.

⁵⁹ This is not to suggest that the still-life genre lacks significant—even radical—differences within itself. On this, I limit myself to referencing Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 61–95.

⁶⁰ There are cases in which, on the contrary, the unity of the composition prevails over the variety of the objects depicted. This is the case with Pieter Claesz and Willem Claesz. Heda’s *Ontbijtjes* (on this, see Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 39, 71–73).

⁶¹ A similar effect is found in the treatment of flowers and shells in Ambrosius Boschaert the Elder’s *Bouquet in a Niche* (Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 105–6).



Fig. 3: Jan Davidsz. de Heem, *Still Life with Fruit and Lobster*, 1648–1649, Berlin, Gemäldegalerie.

the left are painted in the same way as the grapes—in form, glare, and colour—thus creating a correlation between artificial and natural units, grounded in the techniques and elements of painting itself, and almost ironically alluding to the age-old debate on the relation between nature and *techne*.

This canvas, like many other still lifes, stages—consciously or unconsciously—different series of associations based on both a metaphorical principle, grounded in formal analogies between different objects (as in the case of the glasses and the grapes), and a metonymical one, grounded in contextual and material links (as in the case of shells and crustaceans belonging to the same realm, and of shellfish and fruit as edible items). Here, unlike in the canvas by van der Ast analysed above, the “critique” of classificatory fixity does not result from the ambiguity concerning a single object—its undecidability between two options (crustacean or lizard, leaf or wing)—but rather from the simultaneous presence of the

same elements in different *signifying* chains (sea, food). Indeed, as Arasse argues, in the proliferation of the “‘accessory parts,’ the eye [. . .] unravels the overly serious chain (*the concatenation, the syntax, syntagm*) of the painting.”⁶² Yet this work of disentanglement does not lead to a loss of meaning; on the contrary, as in the case of Arcimboldo, it generates an excess of meaning that follows the displacement of things from one class to another, from one form to another.

Within this framework, it becomes clear that in still life the difference in structure concerns not only the characters but the beings themselves. These indeed shift because of the immobility of the representation (as we shall see), both in position, as in the case of de Heem’s *Still Life*, and in essence, here understood as the point at which something coincides with itself, as in the case of van der Ast’s *coquillages*. The reference to the ancient and magniloquent question of essence is here softened by the rhetorical perspective from which it is approached, bringing us back to the metaphor and metonymy already examined through Barthes’s reading of Arcimboldo. Yet compared to his *Heads*, in still life these tropes take on a different configuration: whereas there they were both framed by and served to frame a clear allegory—the land animals made it possible to attribute the outline they formed to the personification of Earth, just as the fish and shells did for Water—in still life this allegorical dimension is far less pervasive.

This does not mean that allegory is entirely absent: the *Vanitas* series is a clear example. Moreover, most still lifes depict objects that are symbolically charged: walnuts, pomegranates, and fish (to name but a few) were at the time transparent Christian symbols, just as the depiction of fallen objects, food remnants, and decaying fruits or leaves had a clear allegorical meaning.⁶³ What is of interest here, regarding this symbolism, is the way in which its undeniable presence is forcefully countered by the naturalism with which these symbolic objects are rendered. This naturalism disrupts any transposition of the object’s form, as perceived by a “descriptive” eye, into a rhetorical trope.⁶⁴ What obstructs the rhetorical dimension of still life, then, is precisely this attention to description and the realism it entails—both of which hold the allegorical translation of the objects in check. These objects are never fully exhausted (not even in *vanitas*

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⁶² Bryson, 309; my italics.

⁶³ Bryson, 121–23.

⁶⁴ On this, see Alpers, *Art of Describing*, xxv.

canvases) by the symbolism attached to them, since their visual rendering continually shifts them from rhetorical figures to classificatory tables. If this is the case—that is, if rhetoric and naturalism appear to contradict one another—one might legitimately ask how it is possible that, as argued here, rhetoric, ontology, and art are nonetheless interlinked in a way that produces the heterogeneous character of this genre in relation to the episteme of the time.

The Weave of Language

To address this contradiction, one must look more closely at the complexity of rhetoric—its ambiguities and variations. The best way to do so is to return to De Heem's still life. Here, the distance can be measured between an allegorical interpretation of the canvas and what emerges along the lines of its naturalistic features. In the first case, a web of Christian symbols unfolds: empty shells as an allusion to the sepulchre, the lobster as a reference to Christ's resurrection, the grapes as symbols of the Eucharist, the glasses of wine as indicators of the Last Supper.⁶⁵ In the second case, the naturalism of the representation and its details opens up a series of associations that are able to shift both the syntax of the painting—that is, the composition of its elements (the lobster with the bunches of grapes, or with the shells)—and, in turn, the position of the objects within the structure (the lobster as part of the marine world, or as food on the table).

In both instances, the issue remains one of rhetoric, although it operates in markedly different ways. In the first case, the dialectic between metaphor (two similar voids) and metonymy (the connection of grapes with wine, leading to the Last Supper, and from there to the Eucharist) forms a coherent ensemble in which every element is held together by Christian symbolism. All the objects, therefore, stand for something else, and the painting itself stands for the allegorical meaning it displays. Here, the rhetorical function is governed by metaphor, understood as the overarching figure encompassing allegory, symbol, and all figures of similarity and substitution—while also drawing metonymic associations along with it. Within this framework, everything depends on pulling the right thread (glasses–grapes–shells–lobster): from there, everything else falls

⁶⁵ Lucia Impelluso, *Nature and Its Symbols*, trans. Stephen Sartarelli (Los Angeles: J. P. Getty Museum, 2003), 352.

into place, the enigma is deciphered, and the unity of meaning preserved, along with the wholeness of the painting.

By contrast, on the side of syntactical variations, the naturalistic and realistic character of the painting produces connections of proximity (the lobster next to the grape, or the lobster next to the shells) and similarity (the spheres of the grape, the spheres of the glasses) between objects, but these do not lead to a series of substitutions. These connections too unfold within a rhetorical structure—juxtaposition and resemblance—but here, the metonymic and metaphoric threads (food, sea, nature—*techne*) lead in different directions. The objects are caught between these threads, unable to determine which path to follow, trapped—as one might say using Lacanian vocabulary—in the absence of a “master signifier” that would order the elements (the other signifiers) into a coherent discourse, into a coherent allegory. And they are further trapped in the immobility into which the lack of *diegesis* plunges them. This configuration, however, does not correspond—as in the case of metaphor within allegorical hermeneutics—to a simple predominance of metonymy over metaphor: things are far more complex than in a specular system.

Clearly, as the discussion now turns to matters of syntax, meaning, and signifiers, a different register of rhetoric has come into focus—one concerned less with persuasion or the ornamentation of discourse than with language itself. It is the register discovered by Roman Jakobson, for whom language is to be conceived as a structure unfolding along two axes: metaphor, signifying through similarity and substitution (on the nominal axis), and metonymy, signifying through contiguity and proximity (on the syntactic axis). It is within this theoretical horizon that the present analysis seeks to address the apparent contradiction between the naturalism of still life and its rhetorical character.

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In 1981, the Italian philosopher Luisa Muraro took up Jakobson’s theory against its Lacanian reinterpretation. According to a certain phase in Lacan’s thought, there must be a predominance of metaphor over metonymy, insofar as the metaphorical substitution is what anchors the chain of metonymical shifts from one signifier to another to a single signifier capable of linking signifier and signified,

and thereby instituting meaning.⁶⁶ This is, famously, the role of the phallus around which the symbolic order is structured, an order that is above all an order of language. Outside of it, there seems to be only madness.⁶⁷ Muraro's return to Jakobson challenges precisely this dominance of metaphor over metonymy. For Jakobson, it is in fact the equal participation of both figures that enables language to unfold. The usual predominance of metaphor in Western culture does not result from an intrinsic necessity of linguistic structure, but from a series of social, political, and historical causes that have produced—and continue to sustain—this particular configuration of meaning.⁶⁸

Building on these premises, Muraro pushes the theory of the rhetorical nature of language to its extreme: if language is constituted by the combination of—or rather, the conflict between—metaphor and metonymy, there is no need to posit, as linguists have often done, a zero degree of language, that is, a non-rhetorical level at which language names things as they are. Or, to put it more precisely, the zero degree of language corresponds to the “point of equilibrium or compromise that can establish itself—in symbolic production—between the metonymic and metaphoric directrices.”⁶⁹ This equilibrium is so close to the things it names that it gives the impression that those things simply exist on their own, that they simply *are*. This is the case in most scientific contexts—laboratory experiments, botanical collections—where things seem to “impose themselves on an objective registration” by virtue of the way in which “the metonymical and metaphorical procedures are articulated together in a manner that is both elastic and stable.”⁷⁰ In such cases—and this is what interests us the most—“the rhetoricity intrinsic to language becomes *almost invisible*: what stands out are only those rhetorical figures about which something is no longer apparent—either what

⁶⁶ Here I limit myself to referencing Jacques Lacan, *The Psychoses, 1955–1956*, trans. Russell Grigg (London: Routledge, 1993), 196–230, 258–69.

⁶⁷ Luisa Muraro, *Maglia o uncinetto: Racconto linguistico-politico sulla inimicizia tra metafora e metonimia* (Rome: Manifestolibri, 1998), 83. This book is partially translated as “To Knit or to Crochet: A Political-Linguistic Tale on the Enmity Between Metaphor and Metonymy,” in *Another Mother: Diotima and the Symbolic Order of Italian Feminism*, ed. Cesare Casarino and Andrea Righi, trans. Mark William Epstein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 67–120.

⁶⁸ Muraro, *Maglia o uncinetto*, 83–86.

⁶⁹ Muraro, “To Knit or to Crochet,” 81.

⁷⁰ Muraro, 81–82.

relation they might have with the constitutive processes of language or whatever destabilizing [squilibrante] opposition might occur between them.”⁷¹

This distinctive interpretation of the zero degree of language can serve to illuminate the rhetorical dimension of still life—a dimension that weaves through still-life canvases and operates within their realism: the precision of their descriptions, the “scientific” gaze that names things as they are and organizes them into classes, corresponds to the faint presence of a withdrawn rhetoric. It is within this framework that the opposition between allegory and naturalism—and the apparent contradiction it entails—can be understood. Allegory belongs to those rhetorical figures that remain “visible” precisely because their linguistic involvement can no longer be recognized. Naturalism, by contrast, names the apparent transparency of reality—one that exists only along the fault line between metaphor and metonymy, where rhetoric is so tightly bound to language that it becomes indistinguishable from it.

There is, however, a fundamental difference between the apparent transparency of scientific language and the naturalism of still life—a difference on which the genre’s heterogeneity and its ontological emancipatory power depend. On the one hand, in comparison to vegetal collections (to stick with Muraro’s example and move beyond it), still-life paintings bring together—as previously noted—all kinds of objects, not only those belonging to the same class. On the other hand, in comparison to objects in the laboratory, which are always arranged within a temporal framework and follow the order of cause and effect, the objects in still life are immobile, frozen in perfect stillness. It is precisely due to this stillness, which removes them from the order of time and its necessity, and because of the “boredom” brought about by the absence of stories and natural movements, that other kinds of transformations can occur: leaves that become wings, the metamorphosis of a shell into a branch, or the passage of a lobster from the table back to the sea.

It is here that the elasticity and stability of metonymy and metaphor become apparent, revealing both the rhetorical nature of language and its ontological implications. The changes in form and function observed so far always take place within a framework of sense, since in still lifes there is no place for nonsense:

⁷¹ Muraro, 82; my italics.

a glass sphere remains what it is on a goblet, and shifts into a grape by virtue of its proximity to the bunch, never losing its shape—just as metaphorical and metonymical movements lead from one thing (an object, a detail, or a set of details) to another without ever passing through the “formless.” These movements, however, complicate the apparent simplicity and unity of the being of these things with linguistic threads that the stillness of pictorial fiction brings to the foreground, making them (barely) visible. It is this faint visibility of rhetoric that connects the naturalism of still life to ontology: in the clarity and realism of still representation, this subtle, almost imperceptible rhetoric slips between things and their details, altering their position, and infiltrating their essence.

It is now possible to better measure the distance of still-life canvases and Arcimboldo’s *Heads*. Arcimboldo’s oneiric, nightmarish art is imbued, as seen above, with the Renaissance conception of the monstrous as “what transgresses the separation of the realms, mingles animal and vegetal, animal and human.”⁷² Its metamorphic power transforms all of its figures into a “*malaise of substance*”⁷³ where “the swarm of living things [. . .], arranged in a close-packed disorder [. . .] evokes an entire larval life, the entanglement of vegetative beings, worms, [. . .] which are at the limits of life, not yet born and yet already putrescible.”⁷⁴ Behind his painting lies the “principle [. . .] that *Nature does not stop*.”⁷⁵ In seventeenth-century still life, the opposite is true: nature has finally come to a halt, along with agitations and metamorphoses. Furthermore, the Renaissance conception of nature is dissolving, while a proper concept of life has not yet fully formed.⁷⁶ In this suspension of movement, animate and inanimate things stand side by side, with the hierarchy of realms giving way to the horizontality of classification. Here, objects change places and substance not by virtue of monstrous transformations, but through the naturalism of the details, which allow us to glimpse the rhetoric that structures the composition—and, more importantly, to perceive shifts within that very structure.

It is these movements between heterogeneous objects from different classes, brought together on the same surface without hierarchy or directionality, that

⁷² Barthes, “Arcimboldo,” 147.

⁷³ Barthes, 146.

⁷⁴ Barthes, 146.

⁷⁵ Barthes, 147.

⁷⁶ Foucault, *Order of Things*, 174–75.

open the way to a peculiar epistemic and ontological freedom. This freedom relies on rhetorical tools within the framework of a fictional paralysis of nature: a lizard can be—and for a moment is—a crustacean, just as a shell becomes a branch; a lobster occupies its place on the table as food and, simultaneously, its position on the classificatory table, alongside other specimens of its kind. These are just a few of the “surreal results” of still-life composition.

The Slip of the Eye

So far, the ontological and linguistic metamorphoses that occur in still life were discussed from the perspective of things and structure: how these transformations depend on the relations among heterogeneous objects and how they interact with scientific classification and ontological order. There is, however, still a missing piece and a question that needs to be answered: How do these movements actually happen? If it is true that they occur in and through language—a language that does and undoes things and their being—then something else must be involved. Or rather, someone or something else must be able to witness and register these transformations. This “something” has already made occasional appearances in the discourse: the eye—intent, distracted, naturalistic, descriptive. It is now a matter of defining the characteristics of this eye in relation to the ontological and rhetorical entanglement that still life brings to the surface.

If rhetoric, as argued, functions as a device that shapes reality along the axes of metaphor and metonymy—and even, in rare cases, when the balance between the two is good and everything can stand still for a while, transform it—then the eye, too, must be caught within this onto-linguistic web. Its analysis must therefore account for its involvement in the same compositional process that touches upon the nature of things, their being, and their linguistic dimension. To understand how this participation takes place, it is useful to return to Barthes’s reflections on the “mobility” of Arcimboldo’s paintings. As Barthes writes, his art

dictates to the “reader,” by its very project, the obligation to come closer or to step back, assuring him that by this movement he will lose no meaning and that he will always remain in a vital relation with the image. [. . .] Including the reader’s gaze within the very structure of the canvas, Arcimboldo virtually shifts from a Newtonian painting based on the fixity of the objects represented to

an Einsteinian art according to which the observer's movement participates in the work's status.⁷⁷

In the *Heads*, the change in composition depends not only on how the elements are assembled, resemble one another, and differ, but also on the shifts of the gaze. In this sense, Barthes's "ingenious artist" is able to create new profiles from the same set of objects by means of a "deferral of perception," which entails a series of movements—back and forth—on the part of the observer.⁷⁸ Thus, in Arcimboldo's paintings, the eye participates in the metamorphic process through its capacity to move, and through the dialectic between proximity and distance that this movement entails.

If one compares this eye to the one mentioned in relation to van der Ast's painting, a key difference emerges: while in the *Heads* metamorphoses are monstrous outcomes of an engaged gaze, in still life they appear as errors of a distracted, absent-minded gaze. Moreover, this distraction seems to reside not only in the subject who looks: the objects themselves seem to "lose interest" in human presence and care. As Bryson writes of Kalf's still lifes, "divorced from use, things revert to absurdity; anticipating nothing from human *attention*, they seem to have dispensed with human attention, whose purpose and even existence they come to challenge."⁷⁹ In still-life canvases, the objects exist on their own—they derive their reason for being neither from human use and comfort, nor from human contemplation or pleasure. This implies a detachment of the objects from the subject and, reciprocally, of the subject from the objects depicted. Thus, their oscillation between classes and kingdoms—a crustacean or a reptile, a shellfish or a plant, a plant or an insect—depends on the observer's inattention rather than on his or her attention: the less attentive the gaze, the more readily things shift place and substance.

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Still life thus seems to stage yet another paradox. On one side, it demands a taste for description and a pleasure in the minutiae of detail, requiring intense focus and close proximity to the canvas. On the other, it is marked by the neglect reserved for a minor genre, in which the absence of a clear thematic centre

⁷⁷ Barthes, "Arcimboldo," 142.

⁷⁸ Barthes, 142. A similar argument can be seen in Arasse, *Le detail*, 364.

⁷⁹ Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 128.

entails a lack of interest on the part of the observer. It is in the swing between these two poles that the transformations described above take place. So, to the dialectic of proximity and distance that Barthes identifies, still life adds another: that between attention and distraction, which involves both object and subject, and which, rooted as it is in the rhetorical fabric, gives rise to the onto-linguistic shifts that have been analysed.

Within this framework, this peculiar subject–object reciprocity should not be mistaken for a perceptual chiasm in the Merleau-Pontian sense—just as the aforementioned divorce from use does not lead to a Heideggerian *Dasein*. A subject who carelessly looks at indifferent objects and mistakes them for something else—thus participating in their rhetorical and ontological shifts—has little in common with phenomenological consciousness or its variations.⁸⁰ Rather, it belongs to the side of language that accounts for mistakes, distractions, and nominal or syntactical errors. That is, it aligns more with the unconscious than with consciousness. Since the framework is that of the “surreal results” of onto-linguistic visual operations of disbanding and reassembling, it is worth clarifying that the unconscious referenced here is not the Surrealist unconscious—nor the censored contents excluded from consciousness that the Surrealists sought to unlock through various techniques. There are at least two reasons for making this distinction. First, as seen above, still life distances itself from the oneiric formations of Arcimboldo—those very formations on which the Surrealists would later insist.⁸¹ This is because its emancipatory power, unlike the Surrealists’ conception of freedom, does not depend on imagination (*phantasia*),⁸² but rather on the tension between realism and rhetoric that defines the genre. Secondly, Surrealism requires practice and, as Breton notes, “concentration of your mind upon itself,”⁸³ whereas the onto-linguistic movements of still life occur largely in a state of distraction, when it becomes easier to “mistake” one thing for another.

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Therefore, the analogy—imperfect, as all analogies are—is not with the dreaming process emphasized in Breton’s 1924 *Manifesto*, following Freud’s *Interpretation*

⁸⁰ On this, see Grootenboer, *Rhetoric of Perspective*, 35–42.

⁸¹ On this, see André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974).

⁸² Breton, 4–18.

⁸³ Breton, 29.

of *Dreams*, but rather with the segmentation errors that occur in moments of fatigue or drowsiness: when, for instance, one mistakes a sheet and a purse on a chair for a person, or—remaining within Freud’s framework—one makes a slip of the tongue or any other kind of mistake associated with a lack of concentration. In this analogy, the relation between a distracted eye and an attentive one mirrors the relationship between a slip of the tongue and the discourse in which it occurs: the latter provides the frame within which the mistake “makes sense.” Yet, here, meaning does not stem from a constellation of individual drives and desires.⁸⁴ Moreover, there is no “correct” sense to be recovered, because, within the stillness of fiction, and in the rhetorical balance between metaphor and metonymy, there is no master signifier—only a language that seeps into the cracks of being. The distracted eye, therefore, does precisely this: it goes along with the absence of a fixed signifying chain and records the shifts in meaning that unfold within it. There is always meaning—or better stated: as many meanings as there are possible combinations and rearrangements of things and their being. Thus, in the stillness of still life, the absence of a master signifier does not entail the collapse of the linguistic and social order—beyond which lies madness—but rather opens the possibility of a freedom of language and being yet to be discovered.

This is, perhaps, where the freedom we have been seeking is to be found: in the infinite possibilities of meaning and being that arise within the context of a fictional stillness—one that illuminates the entanglement of rhetoric and ontology. Such freedom appears, for the first time in so pervasive and radical a form, in the still lifes of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—a pervasiveness and radicality made possible, paradoxically, by the modesty and marginality of the genre itself, which enabled the still lifes of the *Âge classique* to question the very *episteme* they also recorded. What is found here, then, is a paradoxical freedom that exists only in the immobility of stillness—a freedom that may serve as a fragment of a new paradigm for rethinking the relations between subject, object, language, and ontology in an age of shifting boundaries between the human and the nonhuman.

⁸⁴ On this type of psychoanalytical interpretation of still life, see Meyer Schapiro, “The Apples of Cezanne: An Essay on the Meaning of Still-life,” in *Modern Art: 19th & 20th Centuries; Selected Papers* (New York: George Braziller, 1982), 1–38.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Still Life in Movement: A Commentary on the Order of Things of the Order of Things

Keywords

still life, historical painting, hierarchy of genres

Abstract

By the juxtaposition or the intertwining of the two arguably seminal texts on still life, Charles Sterling's comprehensive art historical study and Gérard Wajcman's theoretical, philosophical commentary thereon, the interpretative net is firmly established; the impression is given that all that is left is the reiteration of the well-trodden paths. However, neither the historical presentation of still life's linear emancipation from *historia* nor the following ontological definition of the emancipated still life is so simple. Still life as a specific iconographic genre is shown to be, contrary to its name, in a perpetual state of becoming, of movement. And more, as soon as the goal of emancipation from the historical painting is achieved, the movement becomes inverted: a renewed relationship between still life and *historia* follows on another level. On the other hand, it is shown that still life is only rarely completely devoid of some narrative content.

Tihožitje v gibanju: komentar o redu stvari reda stvari

Ključne besede

tihožitje, historično slikarstvo, hierarhija žanrov

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Povzetek

S sopostavitvijo oziroma prepletom dveh ključnih tekstov o tihožitju, vsezajemajoče umetnostnozgodovinske študije Charlesa Sterlinga ter teoretskega, filozofskega komentarja Gérarda Wajcmana, je ustvarjen vtis, da je bilo o tihožitju povedano že vse, da preostanejo le še uhojene poti. Vendar niti zgodovinska predstavitev linearne emancipacije tihožitja od historičnega slikarstva niti ontološka definicija emancipiranega tihožitja,

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ki sledi, nista tako preprosti. Tihožitje kot specifična ikonografska zvrst se izkaže za nekaj, kar je – v nasprotju s svojim imenom – v nenehnem stanju postajanja, gibanja. Še več, takoj ko je cilj emancipacije od historije dosežen, se gibanje zaobrne: osamosvojitvi od historičnega slikarstva sledi ponovna vzpostavitev razmerja med tihožitjem in historijo na drugi ravni. Poleg tega se izkaže, da je tihožitje le redko povsem izpraznjeno določene narativne vsebine.



What else is there to say about still life? The interpretative net seems to be firmly established. The progressive steps in the development of this specific iconographic motif have been meticulously registered in Charles Sterling's still unsurpassed classical art historical study, beginning in antiquity and ending in the 20th century.¹ The actual works of art are described and analysed and explained, constituting an inventory (or *the* inventory) of practically all the then known examples of still-life paintings. On the other hand, much later Gérard Wajcman's theoretical, philosophical commentary on this art historical presentation endeavoured to explicate those art historical presuppositions in greater detail and to define the essence of still life.² While Sterling strove to include every image with at least some still-life content—for his narrative, every image even as a mere potential still life or just a residue of still life, is relevant—Wajcman eventually discriminated between general, approximate still-life content (“*nature-morte*”) and true, proper still life (“*nm*”). Together, these two seminal studies of still life represent the screen through which still life continues to be perceived and discussed.³ The historical presentation of still life's emancipation

¹ Charles Sterling, *Still Life Painting: From Antiquity to the Present Time* (Paris: Pierre Tisné, 1959).

² Gérard Wajcman, *Ni nature, ni morte: Les vies de la nature morte* (Paris: Nous, 2022).

³ Other major studies on still life, however valuable in themselves, affirm and elaborate the established positions. See, for example: Max J. Friedländer, *Landscape, Portrait, Still-Life: Their Origin and Development* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1949); Ingvar Bergström, *Dutch Still-life Painting in the Seventeenth Century* (London: Faber and Faber, 1956); Norman Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked: Four Essays on Still Life Painting* (London: Reaktion Books, 1990); Norbert Schneider, *Still Life: Still Life Painting in the Early Modern Period* (Köln: Taschen, 1999); Victor I. Stoichita, *The Self-Aware Image: An Insight into Early Modern Metapainting* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015); Laurence Bertrand Dorléac, *Pour en finir avec la nature morte* (Paris: Gallimard, 2020).



Fig. 1: Workshop of Robert Campin, *Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece)*, c. 1427–1432, oil on oak panel, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

from *historia* leads to the ontological definition of emancipated still life. The linear movement towards self-realisation seems to be arrested once the goal of self-definition is achieved. However, neither the history nor the ontology of still life is so neat. Namely, even though *historia* is thought to be left behind, it returns as a point of reference as soon as the emancipation of still life is accomplished. Then, still life is explained as *historia*'s other, even though still life is actually rarely completely devoid of some narrative content.

The Movement

The backbone of the art historical preoccupation with still life is the development of still life as an autonomous iconographic motif within the early modern period of European art (along with other “lesser” types of paintings, i.e. landscape and genre). At the beginning of this slow and gradual process of emancipation, in 14th- and 15th-century Italian and Netherlandish painting, objects appear accompanying a Christian story, bearing a symbolic meaning, identifying the figures depicted, accentuating their qualities, highlighting the message. In Robert Campin’s *Annunciation Triptych*, the extinguished candle (fig. 1) is probably a reference to the Holy Spirit, the white lily in a jug on the table and the white towel on the wall represent Mary’s virginity and purity, and the open book on the table most likely alludes to Mary’s secluded and pious life. The beginning is thus *historia*, a meaningful story composed of several human figures forming a scene as if on a stage, taking place in familiar surroundings and accompanied by accessories that heighten the reality effect of the depicted scene.⁴ The emerging naturalism answers the expectations of the *devotio moderna* and facilitates the interpellation.

Development then follows by which the accessories—for various and also still largely unknown reasons—become the self-sufficient subjects of singular paintings, the *parergon* becomes *ergon*.⁵ The emancipation of the still-life motif into a self-sufficient genre of painting is not just visual or formal. A story with human figures is not simply omitted: the objects also lose their symbolic content. The emancipation of the still-life motif is also a profanation, the objects cease to be subordinated to a sacred context.⁶

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This development gains in intensity in 16th-century Antwerp and is completed in 17th-century Holland, the two great moments not only for the emerging still

⁴ Norman Bryson, *Word and Image: French Painting of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 1–28.

⁵ Stoichita, *Self-Aware Image*, 53–65.

⁶ In the context of the present contribution, the great discussion whether still life is a consequence of a realistic tendency of Northern Renaissance painters (Bergström) or whether the Antique models and Italian painters played their part in it as well (Sterling) will be disregarded.



Fig. 2: Joachim Beuckelaer, *Well-Stocked Kitchen (Christ in the House of Mary and Martha)*, 1566, oil on panel, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

life genre but also for the establishment of the capitalist world order.⁷ The crucial turning points on the way are Pieter van Aertsen's and Joachim Beuckelaer's genre pieces. In Beuckelaer's *Well-Stocked Kitchen* (fig. 2), the story of Christ visiting Mary and Martha is pushed to the back, we glimpse the scene through an opening in the background. The small biblical figures are depicted in paler colours than the rest of the painting. The foreground is occupied by a more colourful genre scene, the anonymous figures are bigger, an abundant still life has taken over a great part of the painting. Mere things, unimportant in relation to the holy story, are pushed to the fore, the hierarchical relation is inverted. The viewer is supposed to be seduced by the plenty, and to be affected by the moralistic parable only in the next step. Here one can see still life in movement: moving

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⁷ The emergence and development of still life are often set into and explained by the capitalist framework of the time: interest in depicting things and especially in depicting a wealth of things is often connected to the acquisitive principle of capitalism. See, for example, Elizabeth Alice Honig, *Painting and the Market in Early Modern Antwerpen* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1998).



Fig. 3: Balthasar van der Ast, *Still Life of Fruit and Flowers*, 1620, oil on panel, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

from the back to the forefront, displacing the connection to the holy figures (the function of the objects in fig. 1 is to explain Mary) and replacing it with the connection to ordinary people (the function of the objects in fig. 2 is to define their everyday milieu). One can see still life in the process of becoming. From subordination to *historia* on the way to autonomous existence, for still life there is a middle station. Still life is juxtaposed with genre painting. Everyday things are part of everyday life. Saints are substituted for by common people, and, finally, human figures vanish from the picture entirely (fig. 3). Once the human figure is eliminated from the painting, only still life is left. Still life finally appears as the remains of some wider narrative and of some larger composition. Still life eventually takes place not in itself but as a result of a crushed relation, as a residue after an operation of elimination. Still life is what is left after all the more important parts are taken out of the picture.⁸

The goal is achieved by the Dutch still lifes of the 17th century, such as Willem Claesz. Heda's *Breakfast Table with Blackberry Pie* (fig. 4).⁹ There is only a table, with a few glasses and a few plates, a partially eaten pie, some crushed nuts, and a watch against a neutral background. A painting like this possesses the components, which, according to Wajcman, constitute still life proper, "la *nm*."¹⁰ A painting is an *nm* if *nm* is the unique and exclusive subject of a painting.¹¹ An *nm* is a type of a painting, representing an assembly of utensils, presenting a group of juxtaposed solitary objects, which are borrowed from the domestic sphere, private or intimate, and which are situated in the interior of a

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⁸ "Ces natures mortes sont comme ce qui reste d'une histoire." Wajcman, *Ni nature, ni morte*, 247.

⁹ This, of course, is a very neat and very simplified version of the art historical vision, but it does constitute its core truth.

¹⁰ Wajcman, 313.

¹¹ Wajcman, 314.



Fig. 4: Willem Claesz. Heda, *Breakfast Table with Blackberry Pie*, 1631, oil on oak panel, Dresden, Gemäldegalerie Alte Meister.

domestic space.¹² An *nm* is an assembly of objects which can be handled, held in hand, which can be accompanied (or not) by inanimate beings or natural products; an assembly of objects of pleasure, of banal objects, modest objects, looked upon from close-up.¹³

But in Dutch painting of the 17th century, as in the previous century, there was not just one still life, there were many. A still life is not a presentation of just any kind of object, of whichever objects, of whatever one finds at home, at hand. On the contrary, still lifes present specific and eventually predictable kinds of objects. There are specific types of still lifes, with particular meanings or messages, within which variations are minimal and—for further art historical interpretations—quite unimportant. The message in question concerns the type, rather than the actual specific painting. Still-life paintings are eventually more meaningful as a type, rather than each specific instance—each particular painting is

¹² Wajcman, 313–16.

¹³ Wajcman, 317–18.



Fig. 5: Paul Cézanne, *Still Life with Apples and Pears*, c. 1891–1892, oil on canvas, New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.

only an example of the type, but, on the other hand, there is also not a single word that encompasses all the types of still lifes (“*stilleven*,” “*nature morte*”) until much later. There is no *nm*—only flower pieces, *fruytagies* (“fruit pieces”), *ontbijtjes* (“a little breakfast”), *banketjes* (“banquets”), game pieces, *vanitas*, *bedriegertjes* (“a little deception,” “little trickster”), and so on, exist.

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Once still life is established in its autonomous state of being, it stays there in subsequent centuries. Occasionally a new motif or type is added to the array, but in general, the purposeful movement seems now to be arrested, the goal has been reached. The many still-life paintings which are still being painted seem to be stuck in the prescribed itineraries. Still life has not been absolutely stilled; still life as such has, of course, not simply ended, the movement is not absolutely finished—but it no longer possesses a direction. Once still life has developed into itself, it merely continues to exist. It marks time, it stands still. It is stuck in its itineraries, until at the end of the 19th century it seems to become devoid of a

particular prescribed meaning. For Paul Cézanne, the established iconographic motif of a still life is a useful starting point for his experiments in form precisely because the motif is so well accepted that it does not draw the spectator's attention to itself, to the content of the picture. *Still Life with Apples and Pears* (fig. 5) does not attract attention and interest as a still life, but as a new way of representing known, old, boring things, i.e. four apples and four pears on two plates on a table. Cézanne's audacity in form is foregrounded even more by the banality of content. The motivation for depicting mere objects thus becomes very personal. Now, one could say, finally, still life's movement has finished; still life has been absolutely stilled.¹⁴

The Order of Things

When one attempts to reduce this variety of still lifes to a common denominator, to compress all these different types of paintings into "still life," into *nm*, one risks making these modest and banal objects even more modest and banal, and empty. Wajcman explicates the platonic ideal of Sterling's narrative scheme, although this ideal, *nm*, is constantly being negated by actual still-life paintings: by not quite yet being still life, or by being slightly more than just still life. Still life is both, at the same time, a too much (of various empirical content) and a too little (of inherent complexity). A still-life painting is too simple, too evident, too boring, and at the same time there are too many different motifs, too many contexts, and too few connections between them.¹⁵

¹⁴ Various artworks from the 20th and 21st centuries focused on the object and the objectness are often connected to and incorporated into this art historical narrative of still life, as if the object and the objectness are the primary criteria of the genre. However, still life is not only objects; still life is particular objects comprehended and presented in a certain way. Once this specificity is gone, still life is also gone, and something else takes its place. To name the most well known and notorious example, Duchamp's *Fountain* is not a still life, since it is not about the object that is being (re)presented. The point of Duchamp's *Fountain* is not the object, but the gesture; Duchamp's *Fountain* is not a still life, but a Dada provocation.

¹⁵ It seems that all that is left are particular art historical studies of particular paintings, discovering, perhaps, some new information about the buyer of the still-life painting in question, or its original location, etc., which would not considerably change the general understanding of still life as such.

As various residues of *historia* are thus established as autonomous iconographic motifs, once still life is emancipated, it is considered best not to be left on its own, to its own devices. Once still life acquires an existence comparable to *historia*, on the material level, an existence of an autonomous picture (*tableau*), the hierarchy, which was obliterated and overcome by the emancipation of still life (along with landscape and genre painting), needs to be re-established. Once the material autonomy is set, the autonomous pictures need to be ordered, brought into line, adjusted, and subordinated to a higher principle once again. The movement of still life towards autonomy is then inverted. After the movement towards being on its own follows the movement back towards inclusion in a bigger picture. Still life needs to be inserted into its proper place within the larger order of things. The old hierarchy is reinstated, although on different premises.

It is now the painter's ability that is the foundation of the hierarchy of genres in academic theory, clearly and firmly posited just at the time when still life with its Dutch flourishing came into its own. From the painter's point of view, depicting mere objects is deemed too easy, too shallow. It is a matter of the painter's reputation: the question of a still life versus a *historia* is a matter of his irrelevance or his greatness. Since it is more difficult to paint many human beings in movement than just things lying still, someone who paints something alive and moving is more estimable than someone who paints only dead things without movement: "*celuy qui peint des animaux vivans est plus estimable que ceux qui ne representent que des choses mortes & sans mouvement.*"¹⁶

The Representation that is made of a Body by Lines or Colours is considered as a mechanical Employment; for this Reason as there are different Workmen in this Art, who apply themselves to different Subjects; it is certain that in Proportion as one employs himself in the most difficult and noble Parts, he excells those which are low and common, and aggrandises himself by a more noble Study. Thus he who paints fine Landskips, is above him who only paints Fruits, Flowers, or Shells: He who paints after Life is more to be regarded than he who only represents still Life; and as the Figure of a Man is the most perfect Work of God upon Earth, it is also certain that he who imitates God in painting human Figures, is by far more excellent than all others. Moreover though it be no small Matter to make

¹⁶ André Félibien, *Conferences de l'Academie Royale de peinture et de sculpture* (Paris: Frederic Leonard, 1668), n.p.

the Picture of a Man appear as if it was alive, and to give the Appearance of Motion to that which has none; one who can only draw Portraits, has not as yet attained to this high Perfection of Art, and cannot pretend to the same Honour with abler Painters. He must for that end advance from Painting one single Figure to draw several together; he must paint History and Fable; he must represent great Actions like an Historian, or agreeable ones as the Poets. And soaring yet higher, he must by allegorical Compositions, know how to hide under the Vail of Fable the Virtues of great Men, and the most sublime Mysteries. He is esteemed a great Painter who acquits himself well in Enterprizes of this Kind. 'Tis in this that the Force, the Sublime and Grandeur of the Art consists.¹⁷

One who paints “only dead things without movement” only transcribes what he sees, his inventiveness does not need to be involved; in still-life painting, the painter’s imagination, too, remains still.¹⁸ His mind does not need to be activated, his imagination is not set in motion. A still life appears to be the very opposite

¹⁷ André Félibien, *Seven Conferences Held in the King of France’s Cabinet of Paintings* (London: T. Cooper, 1740), xxvi–xxviii.

“La representation qui se fait d’un corps en trassant simplement des lignes, ou en meslant des couleurs est considerée comme un travail mēchanique; C’est pourquoy comme dans cēt Art il y a differens Ouvriers qui s’appliquent à differens sujets; il est constant qu’a mesure qu’ils o’occupent aux choses les plus difficiles & les plus nobles, ils sortent de ce qu’il y a de plus bas & de plus commun, & s’anoblissent par un travail plus illustre. Ainsi celuy qui fait parfaitement des paisages est au dessus d’un autre qui ne fait que des fruits, des fleurs ou des coquilles. Celuy qui peint des animaux vivans est plus estimable que ceux qui ne representent que des choses mortes & sans mouvement; Et comme la figure de l’homme est le plus parfait ouvrage de Dieu sur la terre, il est certain aussi que celuy qui se rend l’imitateur de Dieu en peignant des figures humaines, est beaucoup plus excellent que tous les autres. Cependant quoy que ce ne soit pas peu de chose de faire paroistre comme vivante la figure d’un homme, & de donner l’apparence du mouvement à ce qui n’en a point; Neantmois un Peintre qui ne fait que des portraits, n’a pas encore atteint cette haute perfection de l’Art, & ne peut pretendre à l’honneur que reçoivent les plus sçavans. Il faut pour cela passer d’une seule figure à la representation de plusieurs ensemble; il faut traiter l’histoire & la fable; il faut représenter de grandes actions comme les Historiens, ou des sujets agréables comme les Poètes; Et montant encore plus haut, il faut par des compositions allegoriques, sçavoir couvrir sous le voile de la fable les vertus des grands hommes, & les mystères les plus relevez. L’on appelle un grand Peintre celuy qui s’aquite bien de semblables entreprises. C’est en quoy consiste la force, la noblesse & la grandeur de cēt Art.” Félibien, *Conferences*, n.p.

¹⁸ And yet there can be a contradiction: some art historians call attention to a still life as an opportunity to flaunt the painter’s virtuosity, especially in the *pronk stilleven*, with which there is a confluence of material affluence, symbolised by the expensive and rare objects



Fig. 6: Johannes Vermeer, *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, c. 1655, oil on canvas, Edinburgh, Scottish National Gallery.



Fig. 7: Willem Claesz. Heda, *Still Life with a Roemer and Watch*, 1629, oil on panel, Den Haag, Mauritshuis.

of a *historia*. At the opposite end of the scale, at its very bottom, there are dead things without movement, such as the fruits, the flowers, and the shells. Landscapes are already one step higher, even higher still the depiction of animals, while the top level is for the human figure. The academic hierarchy of genres, concerning the painter's admirability, follows the great chain of being in nature (*scala naturae*) from God in the heavens, down to dead things on earth, the chain from (pure) spirit to (heavy) matter. Man as a creature just in the in-between sphere, made of matter and spirit, a being made from matter in God's likeness, is thus the most proper subject of painting. Still life, with its modest and banal objects, makes no sense on its own, it only makes sense in comparison

depicted, and the painter's mastery in depicting their fine textures and glitter. See, for example, Schneider, *Still Life*, 108.

with *historia*. Still life, even if eventually independent, does not exist in itself, but in the final instance, too, only in relation to *historia*.

The ontology of *historia* is (unbearably) easy. Tied to a literary source, its origin is well defined, obvious, real. *Historia*, being an illustration of a story, a representation of a tale, remains tied to the story, keeps the story as its constant reference. For every iconographic motif, there is a fixed point of departure, a fixed reference, no matter how creative and imaginative the painter is, no matter how far he departs from the original text, the origin is there and it does not change. The ontology of still life is not so simple. Still life's origin are bits and pieces within *historia*, unrelated to each other, without a shared origin, apart from all serving as accessories to the main story. For *historia*, no terminological difficulty exists: at the very beginning, with Leon Battista Alberti's foundational text, *historia* gets named and defined, one and only, whereas still life remains scattered into various names for certain kinds of objects for a long time. And when it finally receives a collective noun, it is in fact doubled: it is split into *still life*, *stilleven*, *Stilleben*, *tihožitje*, *zátiší*, on the one hand, and *natura morta*, *nature morte*, *mrtva priroda*, and *natureza-morta*, on the other. Even in its final and single definition, still life is not just one thing; it is two things, each with its own set of associations. It is life that is stilled, a life with movement arrested, and/or it is nature with its life extinguished, nature that is dead.

A continuous art historical or iconographic development is possible only for *historia*, since it is the only genre with a proper continuity, because of its well-defined origin and the continuity in its demand.¹⁹ *Historia* is an axis of the entire art of painting; all other genres are conceived as a declination, a deviation, a deflection therefrom. Sporadic and coincidental, they are always the other, sprouting in the random cracks, in the gaps between one and another *historia* that open up accidentally, or appear by chance.

A *historia* (fig. 6) is a picture that can always return to its primary origin, to the text, whereas a still life (fig. 7) is a picture of many and various things of this

¹⁹ There is no such continuity for still life; there is no constant demand for these kinds of pictures (at least not until much later, in the 18th century), and art historians still do not know very much about the buyers or patrons of these kinds of images, or about their function and role.

world. A *historia* is a picture of a great public gesture, a gesture of a worldly resonance, and a still life is a picture of small, private things. In *historia*, a gesture is movement and movement is an expression of a spirit that is alive; in still life, things are still and quiet, they are matter that is dead. Imagination is required to depict the spirit in movement, whereas in order to depict dead matter mere copying will do. Still life is thus presented as *historia*'s absolute other.²⁰

The Dead Life

And yet, those dead things are not merely things, things themselves; they are always already things in some kind of relation to the human being: they are things for man, they are man's things. They are the things man makes, the things man desires, uses, consumes and contemplates. Perhaps they are dead in themselves, but they become enlivened by the human presence. They narrate about the human beings that make, desire, use, consume, and contemplate them.

Accordingly, there are two courses of interpretation of still-life paintings that are the most general. On the one hand, a still-life painting can be seen as a means of expressing an aspiration to or of boasting about one's wealth and prosperity.²¹ On the other, it can be understood as a means of reminding the viewer of one's mortality, the brevity and fragility of life. The things of a still life are the things that a man identifies with, the things that display his character and/or his social position; and they are the things that comment on and judge his

²⁰ Still life is *historia*'s absolute other in one more sense: landscape, the next on the ladder just after still life, for example, can contain human figures and can still be defined as a landscape, whereas the "removal of the human body is the founding move of still life." Bryson, *Looking at the Overlooked*, 60; see also Wajcman, *Ni nature, ni morte*, 329. A painting of things with human figures is no longer a still life, but is straightaway promoted to a genre piece.

²¹ Elizabeth Alice Honig, "Making Sense of Things: On the Motives of Dutch Still Life," *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 34 (Autumn 1998): 166–83, <https://doi.org/10.1086/RESV34N1MS20140414>; Julie Berger Hochstrasser, "Imag(in)ing Prosperity: Painting and Material Culture in the 17th-Century Dutch Household," *Nederlands Kunsthistorisch Jaarboek* 51 (2000): 194–235, <https://doi.org/10.1163/22145966-90000664>; Joanna Woodall, "Laying the Table: The Procedures of Still Life," *Art History* 35, no. 5 (November 2012): 976–1003, <https://doi.org/10.1111/J.1467-8365.2012.00933.X>; Miya Tokumitsu, "The Currencies of Naturalism in Dutch 'Pronk' Still-life Painting: Luxury, Craft, Envisioned Affluence," *RACAR: Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review* 41, no. 2 (2016): 30–43, <https://doi.org/10.7202/1038070ar>.

endeavours and way of life. In Heda's breakfast piece (fig. 4), the white napkin partly covering the table, pewter plates, a silver drinking cup, a roemer, and a golden watch bespeak an affluent household. The painting's owner thus has his wealth and social standing mirrored back to him, or he beholds the painting as a representation of his strivings towards prosperity. But then again, an overturned vessel signifying a finished meal, a half-eaten pie, or a watch marking the passing of time also speak of the transiency of worldly possessions and carnal pleasures. The beholder is reminded that his striving for affluence is in the final instance futile. The two interpretations are related to—one could even say conditioned by—each other: the admonition against the vanity of earthly pleasures and material wealth makes sense only if this danger is obvious and ostentatiously presented. Still life thus assumes a function that echoes *historia's* task: to teach the beholder a lesson.

To conclude, the depicted objects are never merely objects, they are never mere things. The life of still life is rarely absolutely still, the nature of the *nature morte* is rarely completely dead, the objects depicted are rarely just mute and meaningless things. Not only in *vanitas*, a particular type of still life, but in many "ordinary" still lifes there are signs and symbols, presenting a little story, that draw a still life near or at least slightly closer to a *historia*.²² Not only the most obvious one, a human skull, but also half-eaten meals and fruit, withered leaves, fallen-off flower petals, rotting fruit, cracked nuts, watches, and insects crawling over fruit and flowers, intent on devouring them, signify the warning that everything is destined to wither, disintegrate, expire, pass away, die, in its time. Not things already totally still or finally dead, but things in movement towards their final demise. Life is stilled and quietened so that it can proclaim, quite loudly, that everything in nature—everything that is alive and spirited and moving—will eventually die.

²² Even when disengaged from (great) *historia*, still life becomes a (little) story in itself. For Wajcman, a *vanitas* still life cannot be an *nm*, precisely because of its narrative character (*Ni nature, ni morte*, 329). For Wajcman, a still life ceases to be a still life when the historical enters it. It thus seems that, in his view, not many still lifes could attain the platonic status of *nm*.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Death in the Image: Allegory, Autopsy, Ornament¹

Keywords

death, visual regime, epistemology

Abstract

This article examines death in visual art as a process that exceeds mere representation; death is not treated as a passive theme but as an active structure that produces knowledge about violence, history, and collective relations. The analysis focuses on three distinct visual regimes in early modern European art. In Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, death appears as a mechanized system, where the serial repetition of skeletons and the absence of transcendence generate a sense of rationalized violence. In the painting *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*, death is depicted as the brutal autopsy of the political body. Vanitas still life presents death as an introspective reminder while simultaneously concealing the material conditions of luxury and its colonial background. In all three cases, the image of death operates as a visual regime that structures vision and as an epistemological apparatus that produces knowledge of historical, political, and economic processes.

Smrt v podobi: alegorija, avtopsija, ornament

Ključne besede

smrt, vizualni režim, epistemologija

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Povzetek

Članek obravnava smrt v vizualni umetnosti kot proces, ki presega zgolj reprezentacijo; podoba smrti ni razumljena kot pasivni nosilec pomena, temveč kot aktivna struktura,

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ki proizvaja vednost o nasilju, zgodovini in kolektivnih razmerjih. Analiza se osredotoča na tri različne vizualne režime evropske umetnosti zgodnjega novega veka. V Brueglovem *Zmagoslavju smrti* se smrt pokaže kot mehaniziran sistem, kjer serijska ponavljanja okostnjakov in odsotnost transcendence ustvarjajo občutek racionaliziranega nasilja. V sliki *Trupli bratov de Witt* je smrt prikazana kot brutalna avtopsijska političnega telesa. Vanitas tihožitja smrt predstavljajo kot introspektivni opomin, hkrati pa prikrivajo materialne pogoje razkošja in njegovo kolonialno ozadje. V vseh treh primerih podoba smrti deluje kot vizualni režim, ki strukturira pogled, in kot epistemološki aparat, ki proizvaja vednost o zgodovinskih, političnih in ekonomskih procesih.



Introduction

Death has always haunted European art, not only as one of its most persistent themes but also as one of its most elusive problems. Never reducible to biological cessation, death emerges as a cultural and historical phenomenon, inscribed into images not only through symbols but also through the very structures of visual form. This article begins from the premise that death in art is not simply represented—as if the image were a passive mirror of reality—but is actively produced as knowledge through visual means. Composition, colour, perspective, and repetition do not merely illustrate death; they generate its intelligibility. In this way, death functions simultaneously as an aesthetic object and as an epistemological apparatus: it structures vision and organizes understanding, linking the act of seeing with the act of knowing.

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While Panofsky's iconological method interprets the image primarily through external references, texts, myths, and cultural codes,² this article shifts the emphasis to the operative logic of visual composition. Symbols and contexts are not dismissed but examined in terms of how they are materially inscribed into the image itself. In this way, the analysis treats the image not as a passive bearer of meaning but as an active structure that produces its own epistemological effects.

² Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1939); Erwin Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (Garden City: Doubleday Anchor, 1955).

The article analyses three selected depictions of death through a double optic: visible representation and its reverse side—that which the image does not say, yet nevertheless shows. Iconography serves here as an entry point rather than the final aim of analysis. Instead of halting at the semantic values of symbols, the focus shifts to the visual mechanisms that determine how death operates within the image: how it is structured as a system, articulated as trauma, and concealed as aesthetic form. In this perspective, death emerges as an operative structure with concrete effects: it organizes vision, shapes affective responses, and establishes relations of power between what is visible and what remains hidden.

The analysis unfolds through three examples from European art of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries: Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death*, Jan de Baen's *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*, and Dutch vanitas still life. In the first, death appears as a mechanized system that does not moralize but operates productively. In the second, the death of the body manifests as a collective traumatic rupture. In the third, death seems introspective, silent, aesthetically ordered—yet it is precisely this contemplative form that conceals colonial exploitation.

Bruegel's Allegorical Machine: The Visual Regime of Instrumental Death

Among the most monumental depictions of death in European allegorical painting stands *The Triumph of Death* (fig. 1), a work by Pieter Bruegel the Elder, the Flemish Renaissance master. Measuring approximately 117 × 162 cm, the painting presents an apocalyptic scene saturated with symbols of death, triumphant destruction, and human helplessness. On the densely populated canvas, skeletons—allegorical figures of death—confront people from all social strata, underscoring the universality of mortality. Bruegel draws on the medieval iconography of the *danse macabre*, where death appears as an equalizing force that dissolves social hierarchies and privileges. Death here is democratic, relentless, omnipresent: before death, all are equal.

Although Bruegel relies on the tradition of death as a universal fate, he simultaneously distances himself from it. If we accept the premise of this article—that the painting does not merely represent death but produces it as a specific form of knowledge through visual means—then a perspective emerges that explains why the image instills in the viewer a sense of inevitability. This sensation is



Fig. 1: Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Triumph of Death*, c. 1562, oil on panel, Madrid, Museo Nacional del Prado.

not only unsettling but also intellectually disruptive, arising from the realization that death in the image is articulated as an industrial process: rationalized, standardized, and mechanized.

This insight is revealed through the painting's visual regime itself. The landscape, once human, has become a stage of apocalyptic destruction, overrun by a mechanized invasion of skeletons marching with unwavering precision. The composition is built on rhythmic repetition: scenes of death unfold without a central focus, hierarchy, or narrative progression. Diagonals guide the eye through scenes of violence, yet never toward resolution. The colour palette is muted: earthy tones, bloody hues, grey contrasts. The spatial organization is dense, almost chaotic, yet simultaneously systematic. Each skeleton is a replica of another, each scene a variation of the same act. This serial logic generates a sense of mechanization—as if death operates according to a production plan, endowing it with instrumental power.

Here Bruegel surpasses classical depictions of the *danse macabre*, such as the fifteenth-century fresco in the Church of St. Margaret in Basel, where death in a grotesque dance unites all social classes. Similarly, the fourteenth-century *Trionfo della Morte* in Pisa portrays death as an allegorical force that destroys luxury. But Bruegel goes further: his death does not dance, does not warn, does not moralize. It acts. The skeletons do not appear as symbols of transcendence but as executors of historical violence. Their actions are systematic, almost bureaucratic: burning, hanging, drowning, smashing; pulling carts and dispatching victims with administrative precision. The tools in their hands are no longer metaphysical attributes but historically recognizable instruments of destruction: axes, swords, cannons.

The painting does not construct a narrative of the Last Judgment, does not weigh souls, does not open transcendence. In Hieronymus Bosch's *The Last Judgment* (c. 1482), death is embedded in an eschatological framework, where violence and grotesquerie reveal divine judgment. Bruegel dismantles this framework: his image leads not to judgment but to disintegration. Its apocalyptic quality arises not from a revelation of the future but from the disclosure of a present collapsing in on itself. Death does not advance forward but circulates in its own reproduction. This transformation of death from fate into operative system is crucial. Bruegel does not depict death as an end but as a process that reproduces itself. Death, which should signify rupture, here multiplies—destroying only in order to continue destroying. The painting does not construct a narrative of judgment or open transcendence; it is a machine without a redemptive horizon. While Bosch still painted hell as a metaphysical space, Bruegel, in *The Triumph of Death*, shows that hell is already here: structured, organized, reproduced.

Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* transforms allegory into a visual regime that, through its compositional logic, generates a significant epistemological effect: death appears as a system operating within history. The painting does not repeat stories familiar from biblical or didactic texts: the armed skeletons are not sent by God or transcendental punishment but are visual manifestations of a historical logic produced by humans themselves. Death here is humanized, instrumentalized, technically mediated. Humanity is not only that which dies, but also that which produces death—systematically, with tools, with organization, with intent. Bruegel's composition demonstrates what happens when the extreme consequences of historical and civilizational conduct become a system. Once death

enters a regime, it no longer functions as judgment but as operation—without the distinction of status, age, or gender, without the evaluation of deeds or merits.

This is established operativity both through the visual regime of the image, which structures the gaze, and as an epistemological apparatus, which produces knowledge of death as a systemic, humanly produced process. If the painting's surface layer is a moral reminder of the universality of death, its hidden layer is the universality of violence generated by human rationality. The visual regime of the painting—its repetitions, mechanization, depiction of human weaponry, and absence of eschatological meaning—reveals that the viewer does not see death as an isolated event but as a systemic principle of the world's functioning. The radicality of Bruegel's image does not lie in the explicitness of violence, but in the revelation that this violence is ordered—cold, systematic, efficient. It is precisely this rationality, not blind cruelty, that transforms death into a visual-epistemological regime: it structures our gaze through the mechanization of violence and produces knowledge of death as a historical, humanly generated process.

The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers: An Autopsy of Collective Violence

Within the canon of the Dutch Golden Age, few images are as viscerally disturbing as *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers* (fig. 2), attributed to Jan de Baen. This is a painting that refuses consolation. It does not mourn, commemorate, or redeem. It confronts. The mutilated bodies of Johan and Cornelis de Witt, hung upside down at the Groene Zoodje near the Gevangenpoort in The Hague, testify to one of the most brutal episodes of political violence in Dutch history. On 20 August 1672, the brothers were lynched, torn apart, and displayed like slaughtered livestock. The painting seizes upon this event with stark realism, and in doing so it exceeds the role of mere record: it transforms art into a witness, not only to history, but to historical violence itself.³

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The historical context here is crucial. In 1667 Johan and Cornelis stood at the height of political power: Johan, as *raadpensionaris*, the de facto leader of the

³ Frans Grijzenhout, "Between Memory and Amnesia: Posthumous Portraits of Johan and Cornelis de Witt," *Journal of Historians of Netherlandish Art* 7, no. 1 (Winter 2015), <https://doi.org/10.5092/jhna.2015.7.1.4>.



Fig. 2: Jan de Baen, *The Corpses of the DeWitt Brothers*, c. 1672–1675, oil on canvas, Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum.

republic; Cornelis, as mayor of Dordrecht and a military delegate, a key architect of naval strategy. Their alliance with Admiral Michiel de Ruyter led to the Raid on the Medway, a stunning victory that humiliated England and secured naval

supremacy for the Dutch. De Baen's earlier *Apotheosis of Cornelis de Witt* celebrated this triumph. But history turned. In 1672—the *Rampjaar*, the year of disaster—the republic was under siege. France invaded, England threatened, and internal panic transformed into political hysteria. Once symbols of republican strength, the De Witt brothers were turned into trophies of mob violence. In The Hague, an enraged crowd, backed by the local militia, stormed the Gevangenoort prison, where Cornelis was confined. Johan came to rescue his brother, but both were seized, savagely assaulted, and abandoned to the fury of the mob.⁴

The obvious content of Jan de Baen's *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers* is a shocking historical chronicle: the depiction of a brutal political execution and lynching during the *Rampjaar*, immediately communicating the consequence of political defeat. Yet this surface message—a spectacular display of violence—is merely the visible front. The painting's deeper power, its invisible counter-message or epistemological underside, emerges not from the subject matter alone but from its visual structure. This structure refuses to elevate the dead, instead rendering the brothers inverted, their bodies torn, skin flayed, limbs dismembered (their genitals were reportedly eaten). It is rare in Dutch art to find a history painting that refuses to glorify but instead exposes. Here, the corpses are not martyrs but mere flesh. The palette is cruel, dominated by livid purples, bluish reds, and pallid yellows. Flesh is rendered through *carnatio*, a technique Hegel described as the pinnacle of painting—the glow of blood beneath the skin, the animation of flesh from within. Yet here, *carnatio* is not merely aesthetic but epistemological: it reveals the body not as a symbol but as an irrevocable site of trauma, punishment, and rupture. The visual regime of the image—brutal flesh tones, a mutilated face, a torn abdomen—produces an epistemological effect: death is not allegory, but reality condensed into mutilated corpses.

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Jean-Luc Nancy writes that the dead body has “nothing to say.”⁵ In a certain sense, this holds true for the De Witt brothers: death here is truly dead. Nothing remains that would allow the body to speak or signify. They are enclosed within brutal *carnation*, within the mutilated faces, and the torn abdomens emptied of organs. This silence is echoed in the eye sockets, which capture the final gaze of a once-living being, forged in unimaginable physical agony. The vacant mouth

⁴ Grijzenhout.

⁵ Jean-Luc Nancy, “Mrtvo telo,” *Filozofski vestnik* 33, no. 3 (2012): 76.

holds no breath, no final scream. These mute bodies bleed death into the world quite literally and in silence.

Yet for the painter, the mute presence of death alone does not suffice. A single corpse risks becoming an aesthetic object, symbolically reanimated by representation. To forestall this danger, the painter inscribes a sequence of deaths into the corpses themselves: traces of torture before death, the mark of killing, and the desecration of the body after death. Each layer insists that death is not symbolic but real, irreducible, and final. Even this cascade of deaths appears insufficient; the painter intensifies the scene with yet another body, a dead cat placed before the inverted brothers. Its presence is grotesque, but it functions as a guarantee: a reminder that what we see is not allegory, not symbol, but the raw theatre of mortality. In this way, the painting strives to prevent the brutality of the event from being idealized, forcing the viewer to confront death as an undeniable historical reality.

The multiplication of death finds its confirmation in fragmentation, where the body is rendered as anatomized matter that cannot be reanimated. The corpses are not whole but torn into pieces, their dismemberment evoking the procedures of anatomy and dissection. Fingers severed, flesh bitten, organs absent—the body is presented as something taken apart, analysed, exposed. In this sense, the painting performs more than historical documentation: it stages a visual anatomy, a pictorial dissection that transforms the brothers' bodies into a medium through which history suspends humanity and reveals its obscene underside.

The hidden layer of the painting is therefore the political autopsy not only of the brothers themselves but of the community that killed them. The image dissects history, revealing the mechanisms through which violence is normalized, ritualized, and aestheticized. In doing so, it forces the viewer to acknowledge that death is not simply an individual fate but a collective operation—a macabre feast that exposes the social body as a mechanism capable of its own cannibalism.

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Vanitas Still Life: Contemplation and Concealment in the Economy of Death

Among the quietest genres of Western painting, still life long occupied a modest place in the hierarchy of pictorial forms. Yet it is precisely this quietness—its

compositional restraint, focus on everyday objects, and absence of narrative—that enables the vanitas still life to articulate death with a unique visual force. Unlike Bruegel’s *The Triumph of Death*, where mortality is spectacular, allegorical, and animated, vanitas still life weaves death quietly into the texture of the visible world. It does not dramatize; it insinuates. In these paintings, death is fully integrated into ordinary objects, appearing not as an external event but as a fundamental condition of reality for each individual. In contrast to Jan de Baen’s *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers*, where death erupts into the mutilated corpses and shocks us through its visual violence, vanitas still life remains disciplined: it does not force death into violent forms but embeds it in the humble surfaces of everyday things.

Drawing on the biblical refrain from *Ecclesiastes*—*Vanitas vanitatum, omnia vanitas*—seventeenth-century Dutch vanitas painting transforms Scripture into a visual philosophy. *Memento mori* functions here as a universal reminder of one’s own mortality. The core objects within the composition—the skull, the extinguished candle, the withered flower, the fragile glass sphere—serve as visual affirmations of absence and impermanence. The arrangement of worldly goods—books, instruments, fruit, flowers—is never neutral. Each element carries symbolic weight, gently reminding the viewer that life is fragile, time merciless, and death inevitable.

This visual philosophy finds its most eloquent articulation in the still life of the period, where individual compositions stage mortality through objects that quietly correct the vanity of worldly pursuits. Harmen Steenwijck’s *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life* (fig. 3) presents trophies of human achievement, such as a globe, a Japanese sword, shells, fruit, and flowers. Yet, centrally placed is a skull, a silent correction that places human accomplishments within the context of their inevitable end. The painting thus quietly communicates the transient nature of worldly power, beauty, and luxury. In Jan Davidsz. de Heem’s *Still Life with Books* (1628–1629, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam), worn parchment lies alongside decaying fruit, while the word *finis* visually marks the concept of finitude. Pieter Claesz’s *Vanitas Still Life* (1630, Mauritshuis, The Hague) offers a space where the faint flame of a candle barely pierces the darkness. The extinguished candle, the resting watch, the overturned glass—all speak in the language of silence. The jawless skull recalls a hollow without echo. Time spares no one. This message deepens in Claesz’s *Still Life with Violin*



Fig. 3: Harmen Steenwijck, *Still Life: An Allegory of the Vanities of Human Life*, c. 1640, oil on oak panel, London, National Gallery.

and *Glass Ball* (1628, Germanisches Nationalmuseum, Nuremberg), where the violin dominates the composition. Behind it, a skull; beside it, a glass orb that captures the artist's own reflection. The orb recalls the image of a soap bubble—a conventional symbol of life's fatal fragility. The reflection is not merely a self-portrait but a visual meditation on transience, a silent gesture toward disappearance. In the visual regime of the still life, death appears as a reminder—subtle, insistent, and soft.

Yet this contemplative surface conceals a deeper problem. In *Caterpillars*, Harry Berger Jr. offers a critical perspective on the interpretation of Dutch vanitas still life.⁶ He understands vanitas as a rhetorical distraction, a “McGuffin”—a

⁶ Harry Berger Jr., *Caterpillars: Reflections on Seventeenth-Century Dutch Still Life Painting* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2011).

term popularized by Hitchcock for an element that appears crucial but in fact merely propels the narrative forward.⁷ Within the still life genre, *vanitas* assumes precisely this role: symbols of transience (shards, clocks, withered flowers) are supposed to encourage moral reflection, but Berger warns that such interpretation is simplistic and misleading, since it obscures the relationship between luxury and its moral and political justification.

Berger first rejects the notion that painters merely reproduced existing scenes. The painter is not a passive observer but an active director who shapes the scene with intention. He places the objects, arranges them into a composition, and illuminates them in such a way that they generate a specific visual and symbolic message. In this sense, the act of painting is not mere reproduction but a deliberate construction of meaning, where light, placement, and order collaborate to guide the viewer's perception and reflection. What appears to be a faithful mirror of reality is in fact a carefully staged artifice. Floral compositions, for instance, are "horticultural fantasies": tulips, roses, irises, and carnations are often depicted blooming together, even though they belong to different seasons and sometimes even different regions.⁸ Painters such as Jan Davidsz. de Heem or Jan Brueghel the Elder assembled bouquets that could never exist in nature, combining exotic imports with local blossoms to create impossible spectacles of abundance. These arrangements remind us that realism in Dutch still life is not a neutral record of the world but a deliberate construction, one that both dazzles the eye and quietly reveals its own artificiality. The painting plays with reality through inconsistent perspective, objects sliding off tables, and details that defy the natural order.

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The painter knows how to stage a scene that diverts our attention, for instance, from the fact that luxury, violence, and death are presented together within the same frame. But which death? What violence?

The answer lies in colonial plunder, slavery, and global trade. Luxury objects—begonias, spices, porcelain—are not innocent ornaments but products of Dutch colonial extraction. In this context, *vanitas* is no longer simply a device for easing the conscience; it becomes an active instrument of deception, a McGuffin

⁷ Berger, 2.

⁸ Berger, 71.

that conceals the true cost of luxury. The visual regime of still life—the arrangement of objects, the fantastical composition, the illusionistic hyperreality—produces an epistemological effect of concealment. Vanitas, therefore, cannot be understood merely as painting that embellishes wealth with reminders of transience. The caterpillar gnawing at a leaf becomes, for Berger, a metaphor for the Dutch merchant gnawing at colonial resources. The violence required to produce sugar or acquire spices is encoded in the painting as natural decay. The very title *Caterpillarge* fuses caterpillar and pillage. Berger emphasizes that insects in still life are not innocent symbols of time but agents of destruction—embodiments of a natural “small but violent” passion (*rapacitas*).⁹ Damaged leaves are not signs of transience but evidence of attack. This is caterpillarge in action.

In this respect, Berger distances himself from the analysis offered in Simon Schama’s *The Embarrassment of Riches*.¹⁰ Schama argues that the Dutch society of the Golden Age was marked by a profound ambivalence toward its own wealth. Economic power and material abundance stood in apparent contradiction to the Calvinist values of modesty, thrift, and religious humility. The wealthier one became, the more one had to develop strategies to manage the embarrassment of riches. The Dutch navigated this discomfort in various ways: wealth could be morally justified as a divine blessing, interpreted as a sign of God’s favour, or aesthetically adorned with moral lessons—precisely through vanitas symbolism in painting. According to Schama, still life acknowledges this moral tension while simultaneously resolving it. It allows the enjoyment of wealth with a cleansed conscience, transforming the painting into a space where luxury may unfold, yet veiled in a mantle of humility.

Berger, however, finds Schama’s influential theory insufficient. He proposes a deeper and darker motive: *pleonexia*, from the Greek *pleon* (more) and *echein* (to have).¹¹ Pleonexia is not merely greed but an infinite, obsessive desire for more—more power, more wealth, more status, more domination. It entails aggressive competitiveness and the compulsion to possess more than others. At the same time, it carries the drive toward self-sufficiency, toward complete and

⁹ Berger, 62, 90.

¹⁰ Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches: An Interpretation of Dutch Culture in the Golden Age* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997).

¹¹ Berger, *Caterpillarge*, 22.

immortal independence, achievable only by depriving others. In a competitive society, pleonexia also entails the necessity of seizing something before someone else does. Whereas Schama speaks of “embarrassment” as a response to already acquired wealth, Berger points instead to the disgust and violence hidden behind that embarrassment: an active, unquenchable force that produces wealth at the expense of others. Schama’s theory focuses on an internal moral dialectic, while Berger’s concept of pleonexia shifts attention to the external, material, and violent conditions that make such wealth possible in the first place. Wealth is not merely a moral dilemma; it is a product of global exploitation. In this light, Berger’s notion of pleonexia illuminates the deeper function of *vanitas* still life: what appears as a moral meditation on transience is in fact the aesthetic mask of an insatiable desire for more.

Vanitas still life thus performs a double gesture. On the surface, it invites contemplation, humility, and moral reflection. Beneath, it conceals violence, exploitation, and the colonial cost of luxury. It is not merely a meditation on death but an epistemological choreography of concealment. The skull does not only remind us of our own mortality; it diverts us from the mortality of others—those whose lives were consumed in the production of the objects we admire. In this sense, *vanitas* is not only a genre of silence but of displacement. The arrangement of objects produces an epistemological effect of redirection: violence becomes ornament, exploitation becomes elegance. And this occurs not through falsehood but through composition. The painter arranges objects, meanings, and absences. The viewer contemplates what is shown while forgetting what is hidden. What emerges, then, is that still life is pleonexia in image. This is the epistemological power of *vanitas*: it redirects the gaze from colonial exploitation to introspective contemplation of one’s own mortality.

Conclusion

In this discussion of death in visual art, we have moved away from metaphysical questions and turned toward visual structures that not only depict death but, through their visual regime, produce it as an epistemological category. In the selected examples, death does not appear as a singular event but as a process—a logic that structures the image and the viewer’s gaze. In all three cases, the image does not merely represent but actively participates in the formation of knowledge about death, violence, and history. A comparative perspective

discloses three distinct regimes of death: Bruegel's *The Triumph of Death* presents death as the universal fate and as a system operating within history; *The Corpses of the De Witt Brothers* reveals death as political trauma and collective responsibility; vanitas still life transforms death into an introspective reminder while simultaneously masking economic colonial exploitation. Each of these images functions as a visual regime that structures vision and, at the same time, as an epistemological apparatus producing knowledge of death as a historical, political, and economic process.

Data availability statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Angèle Tence*

Un « grand fracas de figures ». Matérialité picturale et formes en crise dans *La chute des damnés* de Rubens

“A Great Clash of Figures”: Pictorial Materiality and Forms in Crisis in Rubens’s *The Fall of the Damned*

Keywords

Rubens, Piles, form-matter duality, colour, painting, art theory, modern reception

Abstract

Rubens’ *The Fall of the Damned* (1619–1621) has been widely acclaimed by critics since the end of the 17th century. However, few studies have focused on its “material effects,” their perception and critical reception. This article starts with the materiality of the damned body falling in hell, before exploring more theoretical and aesthetic aspects. The notion of *grand fracas de figures* (“great clash of figures”), inherited from Roger de Piles, marks the introduction into historiography of a vision of colour as constructing pictorial forms. Rubens’s brushwork and the fluidity of his material (Focillon) encourage to re-evaluate the stains, coloured masses, and effusions that put precise forms in crisis. The “rain of fire” (duc de Richelieu) and erupting volcano (Antoine Wiertz), compared to the materiality of painting, finally manifest the unexpected richness of matter in commentaries from the 17th to the 19th century.

»Veliki trk figur«: likovna materialnost in forme v krizi v Rubensovem *Padcu prekletih*

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Ključne besede

Rubens, Piles, dvojnost materija-forma, barva, slikarstvo, teorija umetnosti, moderna recepcija

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Povzetek

Rubensovo delo *Padec prekletih* (1619–1621) je že od konca 17. stoletja deležno širokega priznanja kritikov. Vendar se le malo študij osredotoča na njegove »materialne učinke«, njihovo percepcijo in kritično recepcijo. Članek se sprva ukvarja z materialnostjo prekletega, v pekel padajočega telesa, nato pa raziskuje bolj teoretične in estetske vidike. Pojem *grand fracas de figures* (veliki trk figur), ki ga prevzemamo od Rogerja de Pileasa, v zgodovino pisje uvaja vizijo barve kot gradnika likovnih form. Rubensova tehnika slikanja in fluidnost njegovega materiala (Focillon) spodbujata k ponovni oceni madežev, barvnih mas in izlivov, ki natančne oblike postavljajo v krizo. »Ognjeni dež« (vojvoda Richelieu) in izbruh ognjenika (Antoine Wiertz), kot primerjavi z materialnostjo slike, končno razkrivata nesluteno bogastvo materije v komentarjih od 17. do 19. stoletja.



Le 26 février 1959, l'écrivain Walter Menzl (1906–1994) se rend à l'Alte Pinakothek de Munich et jette sur *La Chute des damnés* de Peter Paul Rubens (fig. 1) près d'un litre de décapant du commerce. Le rapport de Hermann Lohe, alors conservateur en chef du musée, fait état d'un jet d'acide ayant atteint le tableau « 40 centimètres en-dessous du bord supérieur¹ ». Sur la photo prise avant la restauration (fig. 2), la matière corrosive impose son empreinte. Par accident elle se divise en petites coulées et en éclaboussures débordant sur le cadre. Deux trajectoires se font écho : la chute des figures humaines, formant une cascade de la partie supérieure droite au dernier tiers du tableau, et la lente coulure blanchâtre, légèrement transparente, qui grignote la surface picturale. Par son abrupte verticalité, surgissant devant nos yeux, cette trace d'acide semble triompher de la chute oblique des damnés de Rubens, dont l'effet pourtant spectaculaire est nettement diminué.

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Menzl n'avait sans doute pas choisi *La Chute des damnés* au hasard. Utopiste ayant fui le régime nazi, de retour en Allemagne dans les années 1950 après de nombreuses années passées en Amérique du Sud, il se croyait investi d'une

¹ Hermann Lohe, « Über die Schäden am 'Höllenzur' von P. P. Rubens », *Kunstchronik* 12, no. 4 (1959): 89, <https://doi.org/10.11588/kc.1959.4.69937>. Voir également W. A. München, « Mit Säuren gegen Rubens », *Die Zeit*, 24 juillet 1959, <https://www.zeit.de/1959/30/mit-saeure-gegen-rubens>.



Fig. 1 : Peter Paul Rubens, *La Chute des damnés*, 1619–1621, huile sur bois, Munich, Alte Pinakothek, inv. 320, photo de l'autrice.



Fig. 2 : Peter Paul Rubens, *La Chute des damnés* (avant restauration), Munich, Alte Pinakothek, reproduit d'après Lohe, « Über die Schäden », 103.

mission ainsi résumée par David Freedberg dans son récent essai *Iconoclasm* : « instaurer un nouveau monde dans lequel la guerre n'existerait plus² ». Les autorités de Constance lui ayant confisqué ses livres, Menzl aurait voulu à travers cet acte de destruction marquer les esprits et surtout attirer l'attention sur l'idéal de paix universelle au centre de sa pensée. L'auteur de l'attentat ne sera jamais pris au sérieux. Au début de *Selige Zeiten, brüchige Welt* paru en 1991, l'écrivain autrichien Robert Menasse prête à Menzl (« Walmen » dans le roman) les mots d'un activiste illuminé : « avec la bombe atomique, ce serait autre chose qu'un

² David Freedberg, *Iconoclasm* (Chicago : University of Chicago Press, 2021), 286, n. 33; Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art. Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London : Reaktion Books, 1997), 193 et 198–200. Cet idéal de paix universelle est notamment exprimé dans un texte intitulé *Die Welt von Morgen. Aufgang einer glücklicheren Zeit* (Überlingen Bodensee : Freies Philosophisches Institut, 1958). Pour avoir attenté au tableau, Walter Menzl est condamné à trois ans de prison ferme et à une amende de 800 000 D-Mark qu'il n'acquittera jamais.

petit décapage à l'acide !³ » Le tableau de Rubens lui aurait-il évoqué une (nouvelle) catastrophe nucléaire, une terrible prophétie de troisième guerre mondiale, ou simplement la fin du monde, le retour au chaos à travers la chute de l'humanité pécheresse ?

Car dans *La Chute des damnés*, ordre et désordre s'affrontent à tous les niveaux. La saisie visuelle – au sens d'acte aventurier du regard qui cherche à identifier ce qui lui est donné à voir – est vite contrariée par une apparence de surenchère et de chaos. La manière de peindre de Rubens, son processus de création, ses écrits et les aspects matériels et techniques de sa peinture intéressent toujours aujourd'hui un grand nombre de spécialistes⁴. Toutefois, à propos du tableau de Munich, l'oscillation constante entre le net et le flou, entre motifs intelligibles et tumulte des couleurs tirant vers l'indistinct n'a jamais été interrogée d'un point de vue théorique et esthétique. Très tôt pourtant, la réception critique de *La Chute des damnés* s'intéresse aux multiples effets plastiques et chromatiques qui relèvent d'un excès ou d'une irrépressible poussée de la matérialité picturale. Cet article a ainsi pour but d'examiner comment les formes entrent en crise et comment la matière colorée (amas, jet, éclats de couleur) prend l'avantage sur la lisibilité des « figures » sans jamais détruire le projet mimétique de Rubens. Il s'agit de réévaluer la place de ces effets de matière dans l'œuvre comme dans l'historiographie, et de voir comment les auteurs, entre la fin du XVII^e et le début du XIX^e siècle, ont su décrire et réinterpréter une dualité « matière-forme » à plusieurs visages, que Rubens fait surgir au cœur de son tableau⁵.

³ Robert Menasse, *La pitoyable histoire de Leo Singer*, trad. Christine Lecerf (Lagrasse : Éditions Verdier, 2000), 7.

⁴ Jeffrey M. Muller, « Rubens's Theory and Practice of the Imitation of Art », *The Art Bulletin* 64, no. 2 (1982): 229–47 ; Svetlana Alpers, *The Making of Rubens* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1995) ; Nadège Laneyrie-Dagen, « Peindre la chair », in *Coloris Corpus*, dir. J. P. Albert et al. (Paris : CNRS Éditions, 2008), 37–8 ; Nico van Hout et Arnout Balis, *Rubens Unveiled. Notes on the Master's Painting Technique*, (Gand : Ludion, 2012) ; Cordula van Wyhe, dir., *Rubens and the Human Body* (Turnhout : Brepols, 2018) ; Cordula van Wyhe, « Matter Over Mind: The Resurrected Body in Rubens' 'Great Last Judgement' », dans *La sovrabbondanza nel Barocco*, dir. Valeria Viola, Rino La Delfa et Cosimo Scordato (Leonforte : Euno edizioni/Siké edizioni, 2019), 249–85 ; Alexander Marr, *Rubens's Spirit. From Ingenuity to Genius* (London : Reaktion Books, 2021).

⁵ Cet article est issu d'une communication donnée lors du Congrès International d'Histoire de l'art 2024, consacré au thème « Matière, Matérialité ». J'adresse mes plus vifs et sincères remerciements à Rok Benčín et Anna Montebugnoli pour m'avoir invitée à présenter mes

Le corps, la chair et la matière

Au début du XVII^e siècle, les thèmes de la damnation et de la punition divine se multiplient dans la peinture religieuse, en particulier dans les églises catholiques. C'est ce que nous montrent les nombreuses commandes adressées à Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640) quelques années après son retour à Anvers. Le peintre réalise *La Chute des damnés* environ cinq ans après son « grand » *Jugement dernier*, commandé par les Jésuites de l'église de Neuburg, en Bavière⁶. Dans une autre version également conservée à Munich, le « petit » *Jugement dernier*⁷, le déferlement oblique des réprouvés domine l'ascension des élus, reléguée dans le lointain. À cet ensemble de peintures se joignent trois représentations de la chute apocalyptique de Satan et des mauvais anges : le retable perdu de *La Chute des anges rebelles* destiné au décor du maître-autel de l'église des Jésuites de Lille⁸ ; un *Saint Michel terrassant les anges rebelles* (1621–1622) qui s'inscrit dans un ensemble de peintures pour le Prince Électeur du Palatinat-Neuburg ; enfin, le retable de *La Vierge de l'Apocalypse* (1623–1624) qui devait décorer le maître-autel de la cathédrale de Freising⁹.

On ignore pour qui le tableau de *La Chute des damnés* a été peint. Il est accroché sur un pan de mur du musée de Munich, dans une salle remplie d'autres peintures du maître dont une grande part provient de la Galerie de Düsseldorf¹⁰. L'ancien propriétaire de ce tableau, le dominicain Marius Ambrosius Capello, en fait don à sa mort en 1676 à l'abbaye bénédictine de Gand¹¹. Un an plus tard, le théoricien de l'art Roger de Piles (1635–1709) informe Philippe Rubens, le neveu

recherches dans le panel *Rethinking the Form-Matter Nexus after the Material Turn*, et pour me permettre d'en publier les fruits.

⁶ David Freedberg, *Corpus Rubenianum Ludwig Burchard. VII. The Life of Christ after the Passion* (Oxford : Harvey Miller, 1984), 201–6 ; Conrad Renger et Claudia Denk, *Flämische Malerei des Barock in der Alten Pinakothek* (Munich : Pinakothek-DuMont, 2002), 320–23.

⁷ Freedberg, *Corpus Rubenianum*, 213–19 ; Renger et Denk, *Flämische Malerei*, 324–29.

⁸ Copié par Lucas Vosterman dès 1621. Le tableau est mentionné dans Dezailler d'Argenville, *Abregé de la vie des plus fameux peintres* (Paris : De Bure, 1745), 147, t. 2.

⁹ Sur ces dernières peintures, voir en priorité Renger et Denk, *Flämische Malerei*, 312–19. Au sujet des commandes catholiques de Rubens : Willibald Sauerländer, *Der Katholische Rubens* (Munich : Verlag C. H. Beck, 2011), 33–49.

¹⁰ En 1691, le Prince Électeur du Palatinat fait l'acquisition de *La Chute des damnés* pour enrichir sa collection dans la Galerie de Düsseldorf. L'œuvre est transférée à l'Alte Pinakothek en 1806. Voir Renger et Denk, *Flämische Malerei*, 330–33.

¹¹ Freedberg, *Corpus Rubenianum*, 226.

du peintre, que le tableau vient d'être acquis par le duc de Richelieu et installé dans son cabinet, à Paris¹². Armand-Jean de Vignerot du Plessis (1619–1715), petit-neveu du cardinal et deuxième duc de Richelieu, compte parmi les plus grands admirateurs de Rubens. Jusqu'à preuve du contraire, on lui doit la première description de l'œuvre. Ce texte est publié en position inaugural dans *Le Cabinet de Monseigneur le duc de Richelieu*, qui lui-même figure dans la *Dissertation sur les ouvrages des plus fameux peintres*, imprimée aux presses de Nicolas Langlois en 1681¹³. *Le Cabinet* inclut également le commentaire de Piles sur « La Chute des Réprouvez » ainsi que onze descriptions des autres tableaux de la collection¹⁴. Seuls les proches du duc pouvaient accéder à son cabinet. Toutefois, au moment de la publication de la *Dissertation*, l'œuvre de Rubens était déjà connue en France. Bon nombre de ses tableaux, dont *La Chute des damnés*, avaient été reproduits en intégralité ou en partie par le biais de la gravure à l'eau-forte¹⁵.

« Quelle vive peinture de ce jour fatal et malheureux qui doit révéler, confondre et punir tous les crimes de l'Univers !¹⁶ », s'exclame le duc au début de sa description. Rubens peint une grande cascade de nus partant des nuées noires de la

¹² Freedberg, 226.

¹³ L'édition de 1681 a été reproduite en fac-similé : Roger de Piles, *Dissertation sur les ouvrages des plus fameux peintres, Le Cabinet de Monseigneur le duc de Richelieu, La vie de Rubens* (Minkoff Reprint, 1973). Voir aussi Bernard Teyssèdre, « Une collection française de Rubens au XVII^e siècle : le cabinet du Duc de Richelieu, décrit par Roger de Piles (1676-1681) », *Gazette des Beaux-Arts* 62 (1963) : 241–300.

¹⁴ Les tableaux de Rubens comblent en partie le vide laissé par les vingt-cinq œuvres, dont treize tableaux de Poussin, que le duc de Richelieu est contraint de céder au roi de France en 1665, après avoir perdu à une partie de jeu de paume. Voir Emmanuelle Delapierre, Matthieu Gilles et Hélène Portiglia, dir., *Rubens contre Poussin. La querelle du coloris dans la peinture française à la fin du XVII^e siècle* (Gand : Ludion, 2004), 33–34.

¹⁵ Pieter Claesz Soutman en 1642 reprend la partie droite de l'œuvre (*La Chute des damnés*, 1642, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art). Richard van Orley, vers 1700, restitue l'ensemble (Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France), l'estampe portant l'inscription *Ducunt in bonis dies suos, et in puncto ad inferna descendunt* (« Leur vie s'achève dans le bonheur, et ils descendent en un instant aux enfers »). Voir notamment Nico Van Hout, dir., *Rubens et l'art de la gravure* (Gand : Ludion, 2004).

¹⁶ Roger de Piles, *Dissertation sur les ouvrages des plus fameux peintres. Le Cabinet de Monseigneur le duc de Richelieu, La vie de Rubens* (Paris : N. Langlois, 1681), 79–80. Nous transcrivons le texte en le modernisant (ponctuation et accents) à partir d'un exemplaire de la Bibliothèque nationale de France, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k111896j/f1.item>.

partie droite pour brusquement s'interrompre au dernier tiers, là où des figures féminines sont traînées à l'horizontal. On repère ici et là, en dépit du tumulte des corps, quelques marqueurs délimitant les contours de l'histoire. En haut à gauche, saint Michel muni de sa rondache renvoie à un passage du chapitre 9 de l'Apocalypse de Jean : l'armée des anges vengeurs précipite le « grand dragon rouge » et « ses anges » sur la terre (Ap 12, 7-9). Satan est lui aussi représenté : une hydre gigantesque, aux têtes emmêlées, tombe dans la partie droite de l'œuvre. Toutefois, Rubens donne préséance aux damnés du Jugement final : « Allez loin de moi, maudits, dans le feu éternel qui a été préparé pour le diable et ses anges » (Mt 25, 41). Cette sentence prononcée par le Christ lui-même explique la réunion, dans le tableau, des damnés, du diable à travers la figure de l'hydre, et de « ses anges » qui tirent ou poussent les damnés en enfer¹⁷.

Dans la partie centrale (fig. 3), l'un de ces démons féroces tire entre ses dents un voile blanc tout emberlificoté autour du bras d'une femme, elle-même tirée par les cheveux. Celle-ci tient encore, coincé entre ses jambes, un voile froissé. Ces voiles perdus entre les chairs blanches sont les seuls vestiges du statut de ressuscité des figures. Suivant la doctrine de la résurrection de la chair, à la fin des temps les morts s'extraitent du sol ou de la tombe pour être jugés. Avec Thomas d'Aquin, la condition *sine qua non* de la résurrection des morts – l'union de l'âme au corps – s'explique à l'aune de la *Métaphysique* d'Aristote : « L'âme est unie au corps, non seulement comme l'agent à l'instrument, mais comme la forme à la matière¹⁸ ». L'âme (la forme) a préséance sur le corps (la matière). *Forma*, qui signifie aussi bien « forme » que « beauté », correspond au « principe de détermination » que la matière s'apprête à recevoir¹⁹. La matière quant à elle relève

¹⁷ Au moment de la création du monde, des anges frondeurs menés par Lucifer-Satan sont précipités en enfer par le même saint Michel. Nous renvoyons à nos travaux : Angèle Tence, « Le corps précipité. Chute et châtement dans l'art européen de la première modernité (XV^e-XVII^e siècles) » (PhD diss., Université Paris 1 Panthéon-Sorbonne, 2021), 28-126 ; Tence, « Aux origines des anges. Création et chute angéliques dans la peinture de la Renaissance, de la fin du XV^e aux premières décennies du XVI^e siècle », dans *La Renaissance des origines. Commencement, genèse et création dans l'art des XV^e et XVI^e siècles*, dir. Sefy Hendler, Florian Métral et Philippe Morel (Turnhout : Brepols, 2022), 73-87.

¹⁸ Thomas d'Aquin, *Somme théologique : supplément, tome quinzième* (Paris : Louis Vivès, 1880), 644 : « Ad tertium dicendum, quod anima non comparatur solum ad corpus ut operans ad instrumentum quo operatur, sed etiam ut forma ad materiam ».

¹⁹ Yves Meessen, « De l'usage du double concept aristotélicien matière-forme dans la pensée augustinienne de la Création », dans *La Création chez les Pères*, dir. Marie-Anne Vannier



Fig. 3 : Peter Paul Rubens, *La Chute des damnés* (détail), photo de l'autrice.

de l'accidentel. Dans le contexte de la résurrection des morts, la double dualité « âme-forme » et « corps-matière » est nécessaire pour que s'exerce le Jugement final. Sans l'union du corps à l'âme, il n'y a pas de rétribution possible. Les élus et les damnés recevront leurs dus – vision de Dieu face-à-face ou damnation éternelle – par l'âme et par le corps²⁰. Dans *La Chute des damnés*, la majorité des nus n'a pas encore atteint l'enfer. Tous néanmoins souffrent déjà en leurs corps. Aucun peintre avant Rubens n'avait donné aux supplices corporels des damnés une

(Berne : Peter Lang, 2011), 138.

²⁰ À propos de la résurrection de la chair dans la pensée occidentale et dans l'art de la Renaissance, nous indiquons les publications les plus récentes : Caroline Bynum, *The Resurrection of the Body in Western Christianity: 200-1336* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1995) ; Anne-Sophie Molinié, *Corps ressuscitants et corps ressuscités : les images de la résurrection des corps en Italie centrale et septentrionale du milieu du XV^e au début du XVII^e siècle* (Paris : H. Champion, 2007) ; Giovanni Careri, *La Torpeur des ancêtres. Juifs et chrétiens dans la chapelle Sixtine* (Paris : Éditions de l'École des hautes études en sciences sociales, 2013), 21–110 ; Jérôme Baschet, *Corps et âmes : une histoire de la personne au Moyen Âge* (Paris : Flammarion, 2016), 51–56 ; *The Embodied Soul : Aristotelian Psychology and Physiology in Medieval Europe Between 1200 and 1420*, dir. Marek Gensler, Monika Mansfeld et Monika Michałowska (Cham : Springer, 2022) ; Angèle Tence, « Corps régénérés. La chair, la légèreté et la pesanteur des élus et des damnés au jour du Jugement », dans *Physique de l'Incarnation. Enfanter et prendre corps dans l'art italien de la Renaissance*, dir. Philippe Morel (Turnhout : Brepols, 2025), 257–79.

telle ampleur. Où que l'on regarde, les femmes comme les hommes sont mordus, griffés et tordus comme du caoutchouc par un attroupement de démons « déchânés²¹ », comme l'écrit le duc de Richelieu. La complaisance non dissimulée avec laquelle Rubens varie les actes de violence physique à connotation sexuelle renvoie à une longue tradition d'images du Jugement dernier : l'exaltation de la chair se traduit par l'érotisation exacerbée des figures et par la suggestion constante de leurs parties intimes²². Face à cette débauche de chairs, le duc ne se montre pas le moins du monde effarouché. Il justifie l'érotisation furieuse des damnés par la présence du péché de « Luxure, punie de ses plaisirs passés par la source mesme de ses plaisirs, que le Peintre ingénieux a dérobée par pudeur à la veüe²³ ». Difficile de savoir où il regarde, ce qu'il désigne. La représentation des sept péchés capitaux, également décrits dans le commentaire de Roger de Piles²⁴, relève davantage de l'imagination de ces deux auteurs que d'une observation attentive du tableau – ce qui ne signifie pas qu'elle en est totalement absente.

Pour Rubens, « peintre de la chair²⁵ », le corps et la chair sont deux grands motifs de peinture. Leur représentation permet de distinguer la peinture de tous les autres arts de la *mimesis*, en particulier de la sculpture. Dans son traité des *Cours de peinture par principes* (1708), Roger de Piles publie la première traduction française du traité de Rubens sur l'imitation, le *De imitatione statuarum*²⁶. Cette traduction, comme le remarque Thielemann, est « difficile à

²¹ Piles, *Dissertation*, 83.

²² Les peintres de la Renaissance donnent au thème eschatologique une orientation érotique, d'une part en objectifiant le corps du damné en général, de l'autre en multipliant les allusions sexuelles, que le châtement de la luxure (l'un des sept péchés capitaux) laisse imaginer. Nous pouvons mentionner, pour l'Europe du Nord, le *Jugement dernier* de Pieter Pourbus (1551, Bruges, Groeningen Museum, inv. 000.GRO0110.I) ou encore celui de Lucas van Leyden (1527, Museum De Lakenhal, inv. S 244), dans lequel l'érotisme du corps ressuscité concerne aussi bien les damnés que les élus.

²³ Piles, *Dissertation*, 83.

²⁴ Piles, 91–92. Le théoricien énumère les péchés en les associant aux animaux représentés dans la partie inférieure du tableau. Il considère par exemple le « dragon [du] jardin des Espérides » comme un symbole de « l'Avarice ». À la Renaissance, l'allégorisation zoomorphe des sept péchés capitaux a effectivement été traitée au sein du thème du Jugement dernier (*L'Enfer* de Federico Zuccaro de la cathédrale de Florence) ou encore de la Chute des anges rebelles (Raphael Sadeler I d'après Maarten de Vos, 1583, Dresde, Kupferstichkabinett).

²⁵ Alpers, *Making of Rubens*, 129.

²⁶ Muller, « Rubens's Theory and Practice », 229–47.

comprendre et criblée d'erreurs²⁷ ». Elle réaffirme cependant deux des prescriptions rubéniennes les plus importantes : un peintre qui s'adosse aux règles de la statuaire antique doit en « absorber » les modèles et veiller à en faire un usage « judicieux²⁸ ». Même les meilleurs peintres ont toutefois tendance à oublier les spécificités propres à la peinture : « on voit des peintres ignorants, et même des savants, qui ne savent pas distinguer la matière d'avec la forme, la figure d'avec la pierre, ni la nécessité où est le sculpteur de se servir du marbre d'avec l'artifice dont il s'emploie²⁹. » Le problème se situe dans l'inadéquation fréquente entre le matériau et sa mise en forme par la main de l'artiste. Trop de peintres, précise Rubens, confondent « la figure et la pierre », accentuent les volumes et restituent la matérialité dure du corps sculpté « au lieu d'imiter la chair³⁰ ». Derrière la formule « distinguer la matière d'avec la forme », à l'évidence héritée de l'aristotélisme, se glisse tout un pan de la tradition et de la pratique vénitienne du *colorito*. Durant ses dernières années en Italie, Rubens est marqué par la peinture de Titien, de Jacopo Tintoretto et de Paolo Veronese³¹. Il retourne à Anvers, en 1609, en étant convaincu de la nécessité de restituer ce qu'il nomme les « accidents³² » de la chair (ses irrégularités, ses palpitations, son hétérogénéité chromatique) en reformulant dans sa peinture la tradition du *coloris* vénitien. La partie gauche de *La Chute des damnés* (fig. 4) offre quelques exemples saisissants de chairs adipeuses où domine l'irrégularité de la texture épidermique. D'un côté, les corps s'étirent et se tordent sous la pression des bourreaux. De l'autre, c'est au contraire la mollesse des carnations que le peintre donne à voir, en particulier chez les trois damnés obèses empruntés à la gravure de *La Bacchanale au Silène* d'Andrea Mantegna³³. Dans son commentaire placé après celui du duc de Richelieu dans la *Dissertation*, Piles associe « l'artifice du Coloris » à « la variété

²⁷ Andreas Thielemann, « Stone to Flesh: Rubens' Treatise *De Imitatione Statuarum* », dans *Rubens and the Human Body*, 46.

²⁸ Thielemann, « Stone to Flesh », 59.

²⁹ Roger de Piles, *Cours de peinture par principes* (Paris : J. Estienne, 1708), 139 : « Nam plures imperiti et etiam periti non distinguunt materiam a forma, saxum a figura, nec necessitatem marmoris ad artificium ». Nous transcrivons en modernisant le texte.

³⁰ Piles, 140–41.

³¹ Michael Jaffé, *Rubens and Italy* (Oxford : Phaidon, 1977) ; Giuseppe Maria Pilo, *Rubens e l'eredità veneta* (Rome : De Luca Edizioni d'arte, 1990).

³² Piles, *Cours de peinture*, 141.

³³ Avant 1475, New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art. Voir Freedberg, *Corpus Rubenianum*, 225.

Fig. 4 : Peter Paul Rubens, *La Chute des damnés* (détail), photo de l'autrice.



de la carnation³⁴ ». Cependant, la couleur ne saurait être utilisée uniquement dans le but de rendre l'effet de la souplesse ou de la dureté, de l'élasticité ou de l'irrégularité de la chair. C'est aussi par le coloris, allié et non plus soumis au dessin, que Rubens parvient à maîtriser « l'effet du tout-ensemble³⁵ ».

Un « grand fracas de figures »

Quand paraît la *Dissertation*, la « querelle du coloris » occupe une place importante au sein des débats esthétiques qui animent peintres, théoriciens et académiciens français du dernier tiers du XVII^e siècle. Cette querelle qui prend, à certains égards, les atours d'une vive polémique, touche à l'enseignement de la peinture : elle concerne la définition des rôles, des fonctions et de l'usage pratique de la couleur et du dessin³⁶. Au dessin, opérateur de la forme, sont attri-

³⁴ Piles, *Dissertation*, 95.

³⁵ Le « tout-ensemble » fait l'objet d'une définition précise dans les *Termes de peinture*, à la fin des *Conversations sur la connaissance de la peinture* de Roger de Piles (Paris : N. Langlois, 1677) : « harmonie qui résulte de la distribution des objets qui composent un Ouvrage » (non paginé).

³⁶ Christian Michel, « Y a-t-il eu une querelle du rubénisme à l'Académie royale de Peinture et de Sculpture ? » dans *Le rubénisme en Europe aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, dir.

buées des fonctions d'ordonnance et de lisibilité qui depuis la Renaissance ont servi à justifier sa prééminence, voire sa supériorité sur la couleur. À l'inverse, la propension de la couleur à tromper les yeux en fait, depuis l'Antiquité, un artifice jugé dangereux, à subordonner au dessin³⁷. Mais Roger de Piles prend sa défense. Dans son *Dialogue sur le coloris*, il définit la couleur « artificielle », distincte des couleurs naturelles, comme une « matière dont les peintres se servent pour imiter ces memes objets³⁸ [les objets de la nature] », réaffirmant ainsi qu'un bon peintre atteint la vérité par son coloris. Pour rappeler l'efficacité du coloris en peinture (autrement dit de l'alliance de la couleur, de l'ombre et de la lumière), Piles se réfère à Titien, à Giulio Romano et surtout à Rubens³⁹.

Nous laisserons de côté l'histoire de ces débats aux ramifications complexes pour nous concentrer sur la manière dont Piles envisage ce « tout-ensemble » dans *La Chute des damnés* (fig. 1). Comme Dezailler d'Argenville s'en étonnera, lui aussi, en 1745, Piles est frappé par la disposition d'une si « grande quantité de figures⁴⁰ ». Il remarque que les « contorsions bizarres » de ces corps paradoxalement « ne sont que pour exprimer plus naturellement la violence de leurs tortures⁴¹ ». Tromper les yeux, donner l'illusion du naturel, voilà le but de la peinture. Bien vite, Piles en vient aux « liaisons d'objets ». C'est dans ce passage qu'il souligne le caractère indispensable du clair-obscur dans la construction des formes visuelles :

Michèle-Caroline Heck (Turnhout : Brepols, 2005), 159–71.

³⁷ Jacqueline Lichtenstein, *La couleur éloquente : rhétorique et peinture à l'âge classique* (Lagrasse : Flammarion, 1989).

³⁸ Roger de Piles, *Dialogue sur le coloris* (Paris : N. Langlois, 1673), 5.

³⁹ Piles, *Conversations*, 272–73. Au sein de l'abondante bibliographie sur la théorie de l'art de Piles, voir en particulier Thomas Puttfarken, *Roger de Piles' Theory of Art* (New Haven : Yale University Press, 1985) ; Victor Ginsburgh et Sheila Weyers, « De Piles, Drawing and Color. An Essay in Quantitative Art History », *Artibus et Historiae* 23, no. 45 (2002) : 191–203, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1483688> ; Everhard Korthals Altes, « Félibien, de Piles and Dutch Seventeenth-Century Paintings in France » *Simiolus: Netherlands Quarterly for the History of Art* 34, no. 3/4 (2009) : 194–211 ; Colette Nativel, « Ut pictura poesis : Junius et Roger de Piles », *Dix-septième siècle* 245, no. 4 (2009) : 593–608, <https://doi-org.ezproxy.inha.fr:2443/10.3917/dss.094.0593>.

⁴⁰ Piles, *Dissertation*, 86 ; Dezailler d'Argenville, *Abregé*, 146 : « la fameuse chute des réprouvés où il y a près de deux cent figures ».

⁴¹ Piles, *Dissertation*, 92.

[...] quelque débrouillés que soient ces groupes et séparés les uns des autres, ils concourent néanmoins tous à l'assemblage des lumières et des ombres, et à l'effet du Tout-ensemble, en sorte que ce grand fracas de figures se laisse voir avec autant de facilité et de repos, que s'il n'y en avoit qu'une seule⁴².

Rubens, comme à son habitude, associe l'invention à la disposition. Ce n'est pas uniquement le dessin mais aussi le clair-obscur, rendu possible par le coloris, qui laissent les formes advenir, se constituer en un « grand fracas de figures ». Les corps se donnent à voir séparés, dispersés, et malgré tout liés comme « une seule » figure homogène. En dépit du nombre d'individus, du mouvement complexe de la chute, le peintre met un point d'honneur à ce que l'histoire semble claire et compréhensible⁴³. L'unité structurale repose sur « l'assemblage des lumières et des ombres », autrement dit des couleurs qui seules peuvent restituer les effets plus ou moins contrastés du clair-obscur et ainsi accentuer la dimension tragique de l'histoire peinte.

Notons que Piles « voit » facilement *La Chute des damnés*. Sa description et celle du duc de Richelieu s'appuient sur des observations *in situ*. Or, les manières de voir évoluent autant que l'expression littéraire des sensations visuelles, des effets propres au tableau de Munich sur les spectateurs. Plus on s'approche de *La Chute des damnés* et moins la cascade des nus (le « grand fracas ») paraît nette et isolée par rapport aux autres éléments. Pour Emmanuelle Hénin, « le tableau de Rubens donne moins à voir des figures individuelles que des amas de corps, autant de taches blanches s'enlevant sur le fond rouge et noir du brasier infernal⁴⁴ ». Ce sont ces éclats qui frappent l'œil du visiteur. Plus encore que

⁴² Piles, 93–94.

⁴³ Sur ce point, Piles rejoint les thèses du linguiste Franciscus Junius (1591–1677), contemporain de Rubens. Au livre III du *De Pictura Veterum* (1637), traité sur la défense des arts, Junius applique le thème de *l'impetus animi*, que Socrate associait exclusivement aux poètes antiques, aux peintres et aux sculpteurs. Cet *impetus*, élan d'inspiration de l'âme, se double chez les artistes d'un irrésistible désir de créer au sens d'un jaillissement des formes sans entrave. La grande clarté que Piles contemple dans *La Chute des damnés* résulte de cet élan de l'âme que l'artiste exprime avec la liberté la plus totale. Voir Nativel, « Ut pictura poesis », 598–600 et Nativel, « Rubens et la rhétorique », dans *Charmer, convaincre : la rhétorique dans l'histoire*, dir. Jacques Jouanna, Laurent Pernot et Michel Zink (Paris : Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, 2014), 191–216.

⁴⁴ Emmanuelle Hénin, *Ut Pictura theatrum : théâtre et peinture de la Renaissance italienne au classicisme français* (Genève : Droz, 2003), 419.



Fig. 5, 6 : Peter Paul Rubens, *La Chute des damnés* (détail), photo de l'autrice.



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les « taches blanches » localisées au centre du tableau, les effusions de lumière et de feu (fig. 5 et 6), longues traînées de rouge, d'ocre orangé et de noir, ou petits points serrés tout près d'un damné englouti par l'une des gueules de Satan, rythment le mouvement de précipitation générale. Ces éclaboussures, nuages ou vapeurs assument le double statut de signe visuel (on devine des cendres ardentes, des gerbes de feu et de soufre) et, pour reprendre Emmanuel Alloa, d'« accidents de la matière, vestige du geste qui y œuvra⁴⁵ ». On rencontre dans la partie gauche un tumulte de chairs rouges (fig. 4). Les démons et les damnés

⁴⁵ Emmanuel Alloa, dir., *Penser l'image* (Dijon : Les Presses du réel, 2010), 15.



Fig. 7 : Peter Paul Rubens, *La Chute des damnés* (détail), photo de l'autrice.

pris dans ce tourbillon rougeâtre perdent leurs contours, entrent dans une dynamique de déformation et de refonte des corps. Certains damnés émergent à peine des turbulences chromatiques qui occupent la partie basse du tableau.

Par ailleurs, ce n'est pas un hasard si, dans une zone de transition, une cascade d'eau (fig. 7) redouble discrètement la cascade humaine au-dessus d'elle. Situé au croisement de deux registres et de deux groupes de figures, ce motif aquatique est directement inspiré du *Jugement dernier* de Jacopo Tintoretto (1518–1594), dont Rubens s'est manifestement souvenu au moment de peindre sa *Chute des damnés*⁴⁶. Verticalisée à l'extrême, la division des élus et des réprouvés chez Tintoretto se traduit par une nette césure entre intenses effusions de lumière (dont la source est le Christ Juge) et enfoncement des corps dans de profondes ténèbres. Représentée au dernier tiers, la cascade humaine chez Tintoretto fait

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⁴⁶ Daté vers 1562–1563, le tableau se trouve dans l'église vénitienne de la Madonna dell'Orto.

écho à une puissante chute d'eau, référence au fleuve de l'Achéron, que Rubens reproduit en miniature au registre inférieur gauche⁴⁷. Autour de cette chute d'eau, les figures nettes alternent avec les corps flous, « dissous » dans les lumières infernales. Le fleuve de l'Achéron s'inscrit donc dans une dynamique de dissolution des formes qui se traduit par l'excès d'effusions, d'amas, de taches et d'empâtement de matière colorée. Dans une perspective méta-picturale, ce motif de cascade associée à celle des damnés constitue aussi une métaphore de la fluidité de la peinture elle-même, puissamment animée par le geste du peintre. Comme le soulignait Henri Focillon, l'aspect de la peinture, en particulier dans la technique à l'huile, dépend de la manière dont elle est posée⁴⁸. Rubens et Anthony Van Dyck, son brillant élève, apparaissent aux yeux de l'historien de l'art formaliste comme deux « aquarellistes à l'huile » : la « fluidité de leur matière peinte a, dans leur œuvre, quelque chose d'aquatique⁴⁹ ».

Couleurs et matières en mouvement

Dans *Devant l'image : questions posées aux fins d'une histoire de l'art*, Georges Didi-Huberman s'intéresse à une typologie d'excès de matière peinte, entre signe iconique et pur effet visuel, dans plusieurs œuvres de Johannes Vermeer⁵⁰. Il relève dans *La Dentellière*⁵¹ la présence d'un fil, à l'avant-plan, parmi d'autres d'objets liés aux travaux de couture :

C'est une coulée de peinture rouge. Associée, là, à une autre, blanche, moins circonvoluée, mais non moins stupéfiante. Elle surgit du coussin, à gauche de la dentelle. Elle s'effiloche déraisonnablement devant nous, comme une affirmation subite, sans calcul repérable, de l'existence verticale et frontale du tableau. [...]. Un éclat vermillon, déposé, projeté, presque à l'aveugle, et qui dans le tableau nous fait front, et insiste : c'est un pan de peinture⁵².

⁴⁷ La chute d'eau est clairement inspirée de celle de Tintoretto, mais Rubens ne va pas jusqu'à reprendre la barque du passeur Charon, elle-même empruntée au *Jugement dernier* de Michel-Ange dans la chapelle Sixtine (1535-1541).

⁴⁸ Henri Focillon, *Vie des formes, suivi de Éloge de la main* (Paris : Presses universitaires de France, 1996), 54-55.

⁴⁹ Focillon, *Vie des formes*, 61.

⁵⁰ George Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image. Question posée aux fins d'une histoire de l'art* (Paris : Les Éditions de Minuit, 1990), 290-306.

⁵¹ Vers 1669-1670, huile sur toile, 24 × 21 cm (sans cadre), Paris, musée du Louvre, MI 1448.

⁵² Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 298-300.

Précisément parce que son traitement pictural n'est pas tout à fait le même que celui des autres objets du tableau, le fil rouge paraît couler. Il n'a pas l'aspect minutieux des fils très fins qui forment un « V » entre les mains de la dentelière. Contrairement au bouquet de rubans blancs plus rigides qui, eux aussi, s'échappent d'un sac de couture à l'aspect d'un coussin, cette coulure ose se répandre. Elle transgresse l'arête de la table sur laquelle le sac est posé pour tracer des ronds, des boucles, puis retourner dans son brouillis originel. L'élément rouge passe d'un objet textile (fil ou ruban), intégré de façon cohérente à un ensemble de motifs lisibles, à la matière picturale vivante, dynamisée vers le bas (« coulée ») ou atomisée sur la toile (« éclat »). Pour paraphraser de nouveau l'auteur, cet éclat rouge affirme la possibilité d'une opacité non figurative au sein même d'un petit tableau fait pour être vu de très près, et dont le projet est la ressemblance mimétique par rapport au modèle réel⁵³.

À l'appui des travaux de Didi-Huberman et de Svetlana Alpers, l'historienne de l'art Cordula van Wyhe en vient à s'interroger sur le statut de certains motifs dans l'œuvre de Rubens. Elle repère, dans *Le Débarquement de la reine Marie de Médicis à Marseille*⁵⁴, de fines gouttes d'eau perlant sur les corps à moitié immergés des néréides, tout près de circonvolutions blanches, nettement plus floues (fig. 8). Rapidement tracées, ces spirales aquatiques imitent la forme serpentine des jambes des trois figures. Pour Cordula van Wyhe, elles « présentent la matérialité de la peinture⁵⁵ » avant même de représenter l'écume des vagues. Certes, cela n'a rien d'inhabituel. Les peintres du XVII^e siècle transposent l'agitation de la mer ou la texture mousseuse de l'écume par des éclats et des empâtements de matière colorée⁵⁶. Cependant, dans *Le Débarquement de la reine*, la proximité des gouttelettes à l'évidence illusionnistes et des volutes blanchâtres manifeste l'« effondrement autoréflexif de la matière et de la forme » à la base

⁵³ Didi-Huberman, 300–2.

⁵⁴ Il s'agit de l'une des vingt-quatre toiles du cycle consacré à Marie de Médicis, exécuté entre 1623 et 1625 pour décorer la Galerie Médicis, à Paris.

⁵⁵ Cordula van Wyhe, « Introduction », dans *Rubens and the Human Body*, 31.

⁵⁶ Rubens lui-même, en Italie, peint une extraordinaire tempête maritime dans *Héro et Léandre* (vers 1604, Yale University Art Gallery, 1962.25). Sur la représentation de la mer de la Renaissance à la fin du XVII^e siècle : William Gaunt, *Marine Painting : An Historical Survey* (London : Secker & Warburg, 1975) 20–66 ; Rupert Preston, *The Seventeenth Century Marine Painters of the Netherlands* (Leigh-on-Sea : F. Lewis Publishers, 1974) ; Lawrence Otto Goedde, *Tempest and Shipwreck in Dutch and Flemish Art. Convention, Rhetoric, and Interpretation* (University Park : Pennsylvania State University Press, 1989).

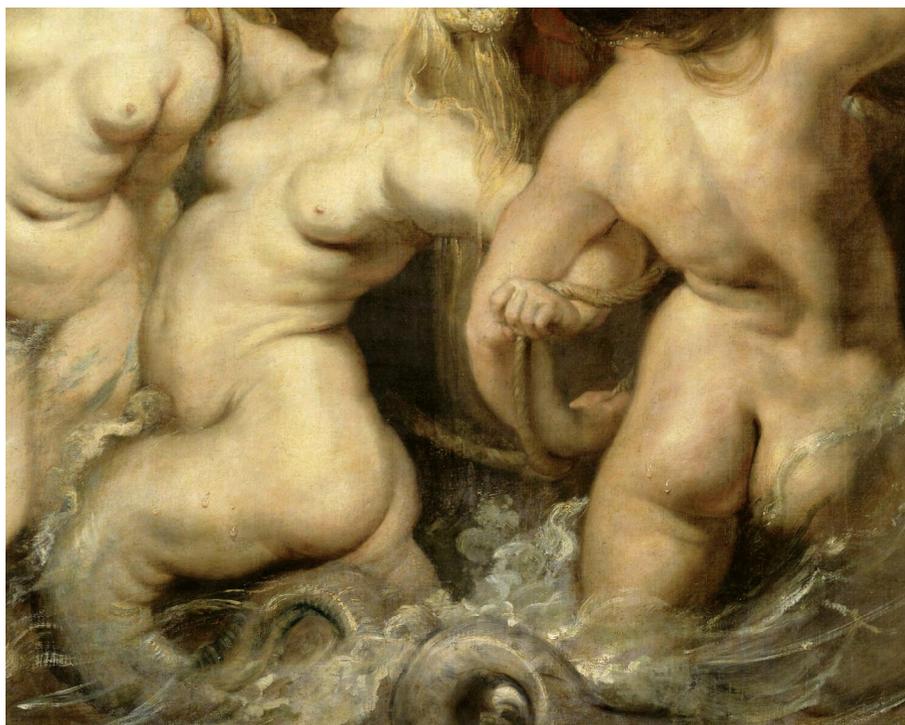


Fig. 8 : Peter Paul Rubens, *Le Débarquement de la reine Marie de Médicis à Marseille, le 3 novembre 1600* (détail), huile sur toile, Paris, musée du Louvre, Département des peintures, inv. 1774 © 2004 GrandPalaisRmn (musée du Louvre) / Hervé Lewandowski.

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de la création⁵⁷. Ce qui relève du signe lisible (la goutte) menace de retomber dans la matière inchoative (« effondrement »). Inversement, le geste rapide du maître qui transparait dans la fluidité de la matière colorée peut à tout moment se cristalliser dans des éclats de lumière très précis, perles transparentes judicieusement placées sur les cuisses et les fesses des néréides, comme projetées vers les spectateurs.

Dans *La Chute des damnés* (fig. 1) ce processus d'effondrement du signe est décuplé. La matière colorée brouille les catégories du lisible et du visible. Non plus

⁵⁷ Van Wyhe, « Introduction », 31.

figures mais « taches », non plus groupes mais « amas de corps », les damnés menacent-ils de replonger dans la *materia informis*, la matière informe des origines du monde⁵⁸ à laquelle se réfère déjà Didi-Huberman en parlant de la distinction entre le lisible et le visible⁵⁹ ? Pas exactement, car le tableau de Munich ne saurait abandonner son but de *mimesis*. Rubens, rappelons-le, vise la clarté, l'évidence, l'illusion de réel. Toutefois, dans les commentaires sur *La Chute des damnés*, les allusions à un processus de dissolution ou de confusion des formes se manifestent dès la fin du XVII^e siècle. Pour le comprendre, il faut revenir au commentaire du duc de Richelieu. « Il me semble que je sens crouler les fondements du monde⁶⁰ » : l'hypotypose se fonde sur un mélange de terreur et d'admiration soigneusement réfléchi. Elle repose sur l'incrédulité suspendue du collectionneur, absolument factice (il sait bien que l'histoire représentée est une fiction) mais incontestablement nécessaire à l'éloge du maître. Car ce qui fait la très grande valeur de tableau, c'est l'effet que produit le « merveilleux-vraisemblable » chez celui qui regarde⁶¹. Au cours de l'une de ses nombreuses envolées lyriques, le duc fait également l'expérience d'une véritable vision apocalyptique :

Quelles flammes de couleur mêlée de soufre, de poix, et de bitume, dont la sombre et triste lueur n'éclaire que pour ouvrir l'abyme de la mort éternelle, où le courroux céleste fait tomber en pluie de feu tous vivants et tous morts, ces malheureux criminels, accablés de repentirs inutiles⁶² ?

Le feu en peinture relève d'une catégorie de phénomènes dont l'efficacité mimétique est associée, dès le XVI^e siècle, aux sensations physiques qu'elle provoque. À ce propos, Rezio Buscaroli reprend la formule d'un certain Matteo de

⁵⁸ Dans la doctrine chrétienne, le mot *terra* (Gn 1, 1) se comprend à la lumière du second verset de la Genèse qui commence par *terra autem erat inanis et vacua* (« la terre était informe et vide »). La *terra* du premier verset est la matière prime ou *materia informis* que Dieu a créée *ex nihilo*, et à partir de laquelle il donne forme aux réalités corporelles au cours de la Création. Sur l'imaginaire de la matière informe et du chaos dans les arts visuels : M. A. Castiñeiras González, « From Chaos to Cosmos. The Creation iconography in the Catalan Romanesque Bibles », *Arte medievale* 1 (2002) : 35–50 ; Philippe Morel, « Figurer le chaos à la Renaissance », dans *La Renaissance des origines*, 45–72.

⁵⁹ Didi-Huberman, *Devant l'image*, 175.

⁶⁰ Piles, *Dissertation*, 80.

⁶¹ Sur le concept de « merveilleux-vraisemblable », voir Caroline Combronde, *De la lumière en peinture. Le débat latent du Grand Siècle* (Louvain : Peeters, 2010), 173–85.

⁶² Piles, *Dissertation*, 80.

Nasar : aux yeux de ce marchand, les « paysages de feu » dont fait l'acquisition Federico II Gonzaga, duc de Mantoue, en 1535, « semblent brûler les doigts si on les approche⁶³ ». En plus d'un signe clair de la réussite mimétique de l'œuvre (le feu paraît réellement brûler), l'effet prêté au feu souligne son statut de matière, capable de toucher physiquement ceux et celles qui regardent ce type de paysage. Chez Rubens, l'effusion de feu s'enrichit d'autres composants, d'autres textures. « Poix », « abyme », « pluie de feu » : le tourbillon des matières brûlantes et toxiques annonce le sort des damnés en enfer. Le but du duc de Richelieu, une fois encore, est de traduire le sentiment d'effondrement du monde qui le fait reculer, trembler devant l'œuvre, et tout autant l'apprécier.

Cette vision d'une chute de substances liées au feu n'a pas laissé la postérité insensible. En 1840, dans l'*Éloge de Rubens*, le peintre belge Antoine Wiertz (1806–1865) confrontait Michel-Ange et Rubens par le prisme de *La Chute des damnés*. Pour peindre « ces masses de chairs entassées⁶⁴ », Rubens se serait moins inspiré du *Jugement dernier* de la chapelle Sixtine (1536–1541) que de l'éruption d'un volcan. Wiertz construit en effet une comparaison saisissante entre le mouvement de la chute des corps, chez Rubens, et un phénomène d'explosion doublé d'une coulée magmatique. Les « figures suspendues perpendiculairement les unes sous les autres » restituent « l'effet des longs sillons que trace l'horrible pluie de pierres et de scories », ou encore les « traînées de feu qui s'échappent du cratère dans des directions transversales⁶⁵ ». L'esprit romantique des premières décennies du siècle plane sur toute la description. Le Rubens d'Antoine Wiertz puise l'inspiration dans la contemplation inquiète de la nature déchaînée⁶⁶. L'« espèce

⁶³ Cité d'après Rezio Buscaroli, *La Pittura di paesaggio in Italia* (Bologne : Società Tipografica Mareggiani, 1935), 56. Concernant les relations entre la représentation du feu et l'imaginaire apocalyptique, voir le chapitre « Peindre le feu » dans Victor I. Stoichita, *Figures de la transgression* (Genève : Droz, 2013), 53–73.

⁶⁴ Antoine Wiertz, *Œuvres complètes* (Bruxelles : Parent et fils éditeurs, 1869), 13.

⁶⁵ Wiertz, 13.

⁶⁶ Par ailleurs, le développement de la pyrotechnie donne lieu, sur les grandes scènes de toute l'Europe et au cours de fêtes monarchiques, à des incendies spectaculaires de monuments éphémères. Même si rien n'indique que Rubens a pu y assister, ces incendies n'en demeurent pas moins marquants du fait de leur gigantisme. Sur la mise en spectacle de la destruction par le feu, nous renvoyons à Frédéric Cousinié, *Beautés fuyantes et passagères. La représentation des « objets-limites » aux XVII^e-XVIII^e siècles* (Paris : Gérard Monfort, 2005), 205–33.

de trombe de feu, de fumée et de corps humains⁶⁷ » représente l'essence-même du sublime en peinture : pour faire croire à « l'image vivante » d'une chute en enfer, l'imagination du peintre s'arrime à un cataclysme aussi captivant que terrible.

La description ne s'arrête pas là. Dans un autre passage de son *Éloge*, Wiertz réinvente le geste du maître, sa manière de peindre, par d'étroites associations entre l'esprit et la main, entre l'idée et son jaillissement sans entrave :

Rubens, toujours absorbé dans sa pensée, n'a rien encore exprimé sur l'immense toile qui l'attend ; son génie seul agit et travaille : comme un ouragan impétueux s'amasse au loin dans un ciel enflammé d'éclairs, ainsi se préparent en silence, dans le cerveau du maître, les merveilles qui vont éclater à nos yeux. [...] Sa pensée mûrie, il saisit ses pinceaux, s'élance à la toile, y jette des flots de couleurs : les lignes, les masses, les formes, les ombres, les lumières naissent sous les coups de la brosse rapide : à droite, à gauche, en haut, en bas, la fée va, vient, vole, et la toile frémissante bourdonne comme un tonnerre lointain. C'est la digue qui se rompt, c'est le torrent qui bondit, c'est l'éclair qui passe, c'est le feu qui pétille, c'est la flamme qui dévore, c'est la force électrique qui agit, c'est la puissance d'un démon qui, tout à la fois, veut, crée, accomplit⁶⁸.

Masse d'air et de feu en gestation dans l'esprit du peintre (« ouragan » dans « un ciel enflammé »), l'idée n'a plus qu'à jaillir. Wiertz conçoit cette nouvelle explosion au sens littéral. D'abord volcan en éruption, image bien ancrée dans l'imaginaire du sublime, le sujet – la chute des damnés – tire son origine d'un jet. Par ce jet primordial, l'ouragan aérien se mue en lignes, masses et amas de couleurs. Une telle métaphore de la fécondation et de la naissance transforme le tableau en image animée, certes, mais Wiertz lui prête un frémissement – et même un bruit tonitruant, hérité du « grand fracas » de Roger de Piles – qui passe par une sorte d'affolement du pinceau. L'outil du peintre se change en « fée ». L'extrême agilité du génie fait écho à la formule plus ancienne de *furia del pennello* (« fureur du pinceau »). On la doit à Giovanni Pietro Bellori (1613–1696), théoricien de l'art et auteur d'un recueil de biographies d'artistes, *Le Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni*, publié à Rome en 1672. À propos de Rubens, Bellori souligne la rapidité avec laquelle le maître d'Anvers porte les formes picturales

⁶⁷ Wiertz, *Œuvres complètes*, 14.

⁶⁸ Wiertz, 39–40.



Fig. 9 : Antoine Wiertz, *La Révolte des enfers contre le Ciel*, 1842, huile sur toile cintrée, Bruxelles, Musées royaux des Beaux-Arts de Belgique.

à maturité : « à la richesse de ses inventions et de son esprit s'ajoute la grande promptitude et la furie du pinceau⁶⁹ ». Un pinceau furieux, parfaitement adapté à « la puissance d'un démon ».

En 1841, Wiertz réinterprète *La Chute des damnés* à travers une œuvre de grandes dimensions, *La Révolte des Enfers contre le ciel* (fig. 9). Le sujet insolite de cette représentation de chute angélique – les révoltés correspondant aux anges rebelles, au centre du tableau, précipités dans les gouffres inhospitaliers de l'enfer – s'inspire du *Paradise Lost* de John Milton⁷⁰ (1667), dont les traductions françaises se multiplient à partir du début du XIX^e siècle. Parlant de la partie inférieure du tableau de Munich, Wiertz s'avouait conquis par « ces bizarres contours qui se meuvent au lieu de choses sans nom et de formes indéfinissables⁷¹ ». Or, dans la partie basse de *La Révolte des Enfers*, la forme zoomorphe croise le

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⁶⁹ Giovanni Pietro Bellori, *Le Vite de' pittori, scultori et architetti moderni* (Turin : Einaudi, 2009), 1, 267 : « [...] alla copia dell'invenzioni e dell'ingegno, aggiunta la gran prontezza e la furia dell pennello ».

⁷⁰ Philippe Roberts-Jones, « L'image irréaliste chez Antoine Wiertz », *Bulletin de la Classe des Beaux-Arts* 59 (1977) : 57, <https://doi.org/10.3406/barb.1977.52747>.

⁷¹ Wiertz, *Œuvres complètes*, 15.

minéral, les volutes de feu et de fumée se confondent avec les membres entortillés des hydres et serpents crachant du feu. L'artiste emprunte également à Rubens son clair-obscur et les carnations parfois très contrastées des figures, tirant vers une peau pâle ou vers un teint hâlé.

Dans la partie droite du tableau de Wiertz, un effet de matière surgit qui ne relève ni d'une éruption volcanique, ni d'une pluie de feu ou d'un nuage de soufre. Il s'agit d'un élément très visible : un voile rouge étiré vers la gauche puis disparaissant dans le nœud des corps entrelacés. Ce drapé fend le tableau à l'horizontal. Ni voile du corps ressuscité, ni vêtement de l'ange révolté, il n'appartient à personne, ne peut être lié à aucun autre motif narratif et ne peut être considéré comme un accident. Couleurs constitutives des carnations humaines, le blanc et le rouge impriment sur la peinture une marque semblable à une éraflure. Par sa présence presque extradiégétique, cette déchirure nous en rappelle une autre : la longue traînée blanchâtre qui, en 1959, abîma gravement le tableau de Rubens (fig. 2). Dans *La Révolte des Enfers* (fig. 9), le lambeau constitue donc à la fois la blessure du tableau et le lien plastique entre les figures angéliques et l'architecture infernale – le tissu étant accroché à un arbre, ou pilier, en lui-même difficilement déchiffrable. Comme si le fragment de tissu assignait les corps précipités à leur prison, rapprochant la souffrance corporelle et psychologique des mauvais anges (préfiguration des damnés) à la déchirure (blessure) de la surface picturale elle-même.

Conclusion

Le « grand fracas de figures » magistralement disposé au centre du tableau de *La Chute des damnés* est la clé de cette invention rubénienne. À partir de la description de Roger de Piles commence à émerger l'importance de la couleur, et du clair-obscur, dans l'agrégation des formes. En réalité, les forces inchoatives qui régissent ce tableau étaient déjà exprimées dans le commentaire du duc de Richelieu. L'effondrement progressif des signes iconiques, qui n'est à aucun moment absolu, prend appui sur la *furia del pennello*, le geste de l'artiste peignant sans entrave : entre éclaboussures, traînées de couleurs, masses mouvantes et pointillés rapidement tracés, le coloris rubénien se déploie dans tous ses états. Cependant, à aucun moment le projet figuratif ne se trouve menacé par les excès de la matérialité picturale. Pour cela, il faudra sans doute attendre les expérimentations de l'art moderne. À l'opposé de la peinture d'Antoine Wiertz, *La*



Fig. 10 : James Ensor, *La Chute des anges rebelles*, 1889, huile sur toile, Anvers, Koninklijk Museum voor Schone Kunsten, Antwerpen (Collection KMSKA - Communauté flamande).

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Chute des anges rebelles (fig. 10) du peintre flamand James Ensor (1860–1849), achevée autour de 1889, ne rend pas spécifiquement hommage à la peinture de Rubens. Brillant technicien de la couleur, Ensor ne se retrouve ni dans la peinture académique, ni parmi les Impressionnistes. La modernité de son œuvre (dont il fait largement étalage dans ses écrits) se situe dans la recherche d'effets de matière et d'effets de lumière, les premiers étant indissociables des seconds. Composée de pleins et de vides, régie par des oppositions de courbes et de zig-zags, de net et de flou⁷², cette huile sur toile totalement affranchie du principe

⁷² Francis-Noël Thomas, « Rogier van Der Weyden and James Ensor: Line and Its Deformation », *New England Review* 35, no. 1 (2014) : 98–108.

de *mimesis* représente une angélomachie – un combat entre les anges de Dieu et les anges de Satan. Le geste saccadé du peintre exprime la gesticulation d'un combat d'ampleur cosmique. C'est un autre type de *furia del pennello*. Car Ensor, lui aussi, donne l'illusion de peindre vite. Son geste dilue les formes dans le chaos de la matière colorée. Il s'ingénie, dans ce « spectacle visionnaire⁷³ », à faire du combat entre bons et mauvais anges une sorte de grand précipité chromatique. Comparé à *La Chute des damnés* de Munich, ce tableau peut être considéré comme l'aboutissement de la dilution des formes nettes dans le magma de la matérialité picturale. Dans tous les cas, la réception critique et les réinterprétations visuelles du tableau de Rubens, au fil de siècles, permettent de mettre en relation les différentes acceptions de la dualité entre la forme et la matière – corps et âmes, dessin et couleur, contour et masses – et d'éclairer plus encore notre perception des forces qui s'affrontent au sein de cet *unicum* de la peinture occidentale.

Déclaration de disponibilité des données

Le partage des données n'est pas applicable à cet article, aucune donnée n'ayant été produite ni analysée dans le cadre de la présente étude.

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⁷³ Susan M. Canning, *The Social Context of James Ensor's Art Practice: « Vive La Sociale! »* (London : Bloomsbury Visual Art, 2023), 129.

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Social Bond

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Afropessimism's Ethics

Keywords

antiblackness, afropessimism, Willy Apollon, ethics of the real, Jacques Lacan, Frank B. Wilderson

Abstract

By analyzing the xenopathic status of the gaze and the voice during the “mental breakdown” described in Frank B. Wilderson III's latest memoir, this essay reads afropessimism as a formalization of the lived experience of psychosis. It argues that Wilderson's understanding of antiblackness is significantly modeled on the imaginary mechanisms and ruses that define neurotic reality and confer psychic coherence to the neurotic subjects of liberal multiracialism. Treating psychosis as an immanent critique of antiblackness, this essay concludes by offering a clarification of the stakes of afropessimism's ethical imperatives: to end the antiblack world (of neurotic misrecognition) and to assume the position of social death (of a desire outside-of-language).

Etika afropesimizma

Ključne besede

protičrnskost, afropesimizem, Willy Apollon, etika realnega, Jacques Lacan, Frank B. Wilderson

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Povzetek

S pomočjo analize ksenopatskega statusa pogleda in glasu med »duševnim zlomom«, opisanim v najnovejših spominih Franka B. Wildersona III, ta prispevek afropesimizem razume kot formalizacijo žive izkušnje psihoze. Avtor trdi, da je Wildersonovo razumevanje protičrnskosti v veliki meri oblikovano po imaginarnih mehanizmih in zvijačah, ki opredeljujejo nevrotično realnost in dajejo psihično koherentnost nevrotičnim

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subjektom liberalne večrasnosti. Psihotično stanje obravnava kot imanentno kritiko protičrnske, prispevek pa sklene s pojasnitvijo etičnih imperativov afropesimizma: končati protičrnski svet (nevrotičnega napačnega prepoznavanja) in prevzeti položaj družbene smrti (želje zunaj-jezika).



Introduction

Among other things, afropessimism formulates an ethics of desire that responds to the lived experience of psychosis. In his latest memoir, *Afropessimism*, Frank B. Wilderson III dates the birth of this field to a “mental breakdown” in his life.¹ Afropessimism emerges in his memoir as a theory developed out of the *savoir* of a paranoid delusion about antiblackness. In the past,² Wilderson half-seriously wondered whether he suffered from a “major mental disorder,” but it is only in this latest life writing that he more or less affirms a *de jure* psychotic episode and presents afropessimism as a theory of—even his personal solution for—his schizophrenic response to the “lived experience of blackness,” as Frantz Fanon put it in his own theoretical self-analysis.³ Given the psychotic’s unique hyperbolization of a truth about the limits of the speaking-being, there may be no better case from which to draw up the borders shared between (and territories disputed by) psychoanalysis and afropessimism.

What Wilderson first called “afropessimism” in 2010—and it is strictly his interpretation of a far more heterogeneous field I treat here⁴—is also a critique of any

¹ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (New York: Liverlight, 2021).

² Frank B. Wilderson III, *Incognegro: A Memoir of Exile and Apartheid* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015).

³ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Markmann (London: Pluto Press, 2008).

⁴ In 1997, when Saidiya Hartman published *Scenes of Subjection* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2022), and thrust the archive of American slavery into a new debate about the ends of abolition, afropessimism emerged as a particularly serious elaboration of its consequences for contemporary politics and the critique of everyday life. Inaugural afropessimist statements by Wilderson (in 2003 and 2010) were joined by those of Jared Sexton (2008), Fred Moten (2013), and David Marriot (2018), whose diverse readings of post-slavery culture—from film and music to politics, history, and philosophy—pivot to a significant degree on

number of theories of life and power in the critical and cultural studies. However, if his irreverent, even passionately disinterested attempts to convince his scholarly targets or defend against his ideas' detractors are any indication, afropessimism's conceptual *bona fides* are not his main concern. Afropessimism does not aim to persuade, to accrue value in the marketplace of ideas. It aims to invoke an experience outside of language and beyond political articulation, one in which the existence and believability of the world has already come into question. Afropessimism secures the only credentials it seeks from the unconscious response it evinces from the subject it addresses.⁵ The different ethical position it consequently assumes makes it less of an argument against a given theoretical premise and more of a response to an extraordinary experience—madness—as well as a theory of antiblackness reverse-engineered from that experience. That theory, in turn, I understand as an *ethical* means to one of afropessimism's ends. This end is to produce a change of position in the subject that it addresses: a shift, that is, from persecuted object to desiring subject.

A close companionship between the ethics of afropessimism and the ethics of psychoanalysis has been there from the beginning, even if the unfitness of the latter to deal on its own with the political and existential dilemmas of black subjection has regularly been entered into the record.⁶ Wilderson's early and admittedly restricted critique of Lacan's ethics of full speech notwithstanding, and despite his seeming preference since for deliberating the political effects of antiblackness (i.e., how it secures the psychic coherence of human life) over its

their contrapuntal reassessments of the psychoanalytic criticism of Fanon (2008) and Hortense Spillers (2003).

⁵ "Afropessimism is not an ensemble of theoretical interventions that leads the struggle for Black liberation. One should think of it as a theory that is legitimate because it has secured a mandate from Black people at their best; which is to say, a mandate to speak the analysis and rage that most Black people are free only to whisper." Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 173.

⁶ Psychoanalysis' ambivalent status in black studies is well-documented (Tate, 1996), but it seems that it is not so much psychoanalysis as much as certain varieties of psychological reason that illegitimately go under that name that Wilderson correctly deems as inadequate, which makes afropessimism more properly a *critique of the negation of psychoanalysis*. Owing to Wilderson's iconoclastic readings of Freud and Lacan, and to the far-reaching reassessments that these readings have prompted, psychoanalysis and black studies have since enjoyed an historically unprecedented level of theoretical exchange, one whose more recent landmarks include Sheldon George's *Trauma and Race* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2016) and David Marriott's *Lacan Noir* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021).

ethical consequences on the black subject (i.e., how psychic coherence mortifies black desire and contrabands human freedom), Wilderson once forthrightly affirmed the “dream of an unfettered ethics”⁷, an ethics of a desire to destroy settler coloniality and the slave estate, as he put it in 2010. Already, a Lacanian topology—between the desire articulated in dreams and the *jouissance* expressed in suffering—is plain enough to see at this early point in his theory. What qualifies the “slave’s desire” as ethical is a purely negative criterion: it is caused by something outside-of-language and is symbolically inarticulable within all extant structures of political, aesthetic, or social scientific address. The foreclosure of the “slave’s desire” does not lead to its extinguishment but leads it to constantly break in on personal and collective consciousness “like the somatic compliance of hysterical symptoms.”⁸

In what follows, I trace afropessimism’s ethics throughout the marrow of the field’s propositions and try to measure the degree to which Wilderson betrays or maintains his fidelity to an ethics of the slave’s desire—and all within the methodological fences of an immanent critique that judges the field’s success by the standards of the author’s own critical program (as condensed in this latest memoir) and lived experience (through a close reading of the psychotic decomposition and associated hallucination that Wilderson details at the beginning of *Afropessimism*). If psychoanalysis as such is unfit to realize black desire, one whose social and political disarticulation converts it into the bodily symptoms of entire populations, it also seems that an unfettering of the ethics of afropessimism cannot take its first step without expressing itself in the language psychoanalysis formalized to address the unspeakable, as Wilderson himself never stops doing.

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This ethical question has received a sliver of attention, not only in the reception of afropessimism (whether irrationally exuberant or in pearl-clutching outrage) but within the field itself. I think it is only now, over a decade after its christening, and with the chronicling of a psychotic crisis that firmly situates the subject of unconscious desire in relation to the dispositives of antiblackness that

⁷ Frank B. Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 4.

⁸ Wilderson, 4.

overdetermine it, that we can finally supply some formal texture to the “ethical modernity” that Wilderson’s afropessimism affirms against all hope.⁹

In the Psychotic Break

On a routine morning sometime in 2000, while peering into a mirror, “a stanza of poetry” suddenly flashes into Wilderson’s thoughts.¹⁰ He is immediately plunged into a vertigo. Wilderson can mutter the stanza’s words, laugh at the inert, strangely material presence of its signifiers, but he cannot recall the whole thing or comprehend its significance. Wilderson pours himself down the stairs of his Berkeley apartment to board a city bus headed for a psychiatric clinic but finds himself increasingly trapped in the funhouse mirrors of a rapidly dissolving reality. It is then that he first experiences a disembodying vision: “I saw myself seeing myself through the eyes of the [white] passengers.”¹¹

Seeing myself seeing myself: this is both an iteration of W. E. B. Du Bois’ famous formulation of black double consciousness and a repetition one of Lacan’s equally famous formulas for consciousness, which he describes as a purely idealized self-apprehension.¹² Consciousness reduces the world, one’s self included, to its representation, in which the hallmark of representation is its “belong to me aspect, so reminiscent of property.”¹³ But this feature is also an illusion that only gives the impression of providing the power to own or behold, with consciousness marking the primary strategy through which the neurotic elides the gaze as a limit of representation and a point of impossibility in the perceptual field. Repressing the gaze disavows the structural impossibility of any self to fully possess themselves, which proceeds when the subject objectifies themselves into an ego that is positioned to be seen by (and molded in the image of)

⁹ Wilderson, 3.

¹⁰ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 3.

¹¹ Wilderson, 6.

¹² “It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness,—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.” W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2015), xxii-xxiii.

¹³ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 81.

the Other. By assuming the Other's supposedly panoptic perspective—in “seeing myself [from the position of the Other] seeing myself”—the subject achieves this imaginary transposition of places at the price of their “annihilation.”¹⁴ Forcing such an eclipse of the gaze of the Other by the “eye” of the ego leads the neurotic to appropriate the intrinsic lack in the visible as an extrinsic shortcoming of their own powers of perception. What any image cannot show is thenceforward misrecognized by the ego as something invisible or hidden. Neurosis spatializes sight, giving the visual field an alluring and constantly frustrating depth that it does not have.

This neurotic strategy does nothing for Wilderson. In his psychotic break, Wilderson experiences consciousness as a white conceit, fundamentally alien, as a perception emanating from the outside; the correspondence between his eye and the gaze of “white passengers” fails, and so does the coincidence between his consciousness and body; the position of the Other is estranging, disturbing, and his attempt to assume their position and apprehend himself in the mirror triggers the fragmentation of his body and the dissolution of meaning; his self-representation does not secure the illusion of the “belong to me aspect” of his identity but dawns instead an awareness of the “belong to them” aspect reminiscent of being a property for others. Both neurotics and psychotics hallucinate something that is not “there” to be seen—“reality, inasmuch as it is supported by desire, is initially hallucinated,” says Lacan¹⁵—but it is only in psychosis that the subject does not *coincide* with their hallucinations. That is why the French psychiatrist Paul Guiraud distinguished psychotic hallucinations as “xenopathic” (coming from the “other” instead of from the “psyche”).¹⁶

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The appearance of this disembodied gaze is quickly followed by the emergence of another object, the voice, which issues a command that repeats in Wilderson's head as he encounters white people in public: “*make them feel safe*,” an order he calls the “cardinal rule of Negro diplomacy.”¹⁷ The voice's command is neither rationalized nor warranted by any logical premise; Wilderson is barely able to move, much less hurt another; instead, this demand performatively

¹⁴ Lacan, 81.

¹⁵ Lacan, *The Psychoses*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 1997), 84.

¹⁶ Quoted in Stijn Vanheule, “A Lacanian Perspective on Psychotic Hallucinations,” *Theory and Psychology* 21, no. 1 (2011): 93, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0959354310369275>.

¹⁷ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 6.

expresses and imposes the authority of the law, repeating the impure moment of its origin.

How the neurotic “normally” treats the voice echoes their strategy with the gaze: the radically external provenance of the voice—as the object through which the signifying chain imposes itself on the subject, and through which the Other’s presence is first impressed on the body as an enigmatic *jouissance*—is pacified by the ego through its reflexive assumption of the Other’s supposedly sensible discourse as an expression of their own “true self.” By performing such an imaginary appropriation of the voice by the “inner voice” of the ego, the subject transforms the intrinsic lack of sense in the voice of the Other of language as a contingent failure of their own powers of communication. The only ever anticipated finality of sense that such a maneuver places at their disposal makes narrative, conversational, logical-rhetorical, and poetic modes of communication so seductive to neurotics.¹⁸

In psychosis, though, the voice is denuded in its xenopathy, a sound of pure and overwhelming evocation that comes to be heard as an unknowable and unsatisfiable demand from the other. “In terms of psychosis,” writes Bret Fimiani, “we can say that the voice in hallucination is an effect of the Other of pure demand. The Other of demand, represented in the psychotic’s experience of the voice, is a capricious Other that is by definition without limit.”¹⁹ Here, too, Wilderson exists in a relation of non-correspondence to the voice, an object that, instead of functioning as the sonorous support for the conveyance of sense, incarnates what is inarticulable in speech, a traumatic *jouissance* in language that is experienced as belonging to a ravenous Other. That Other issues to its victim an inscrutable demand for sacrifice—*make them feel safe*—without limit, reason, or self-regard.

Wilderson’s aphasia fades as quickly as it hit him, and when he suddenly regains the ability to respond to the psychiatric staff, the errant stanza that triggered

¹⁸ Willy Apollon, “What’s at Stake in the Freudian Clinic,” *Newsletter of the Freudian Field* 2, no. 1 (1987): 27–46.

¹⁹ Bret Fimiani, *Psychosis and Extreme States: An Ethic for Treatment* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), 23.

Wilderson's delirium returns, for the first time, as part of a completed poem. It is a construction of his own:

*For Halloween I washed my
face and wore my
school clothes went door to
door as a nightmare.²⁰*

What Wilderson credits with enabling his recovery is the same thing that triggered his psychosis: afropessimism, and in two distinct but inseparable senses. In one sense, as an experience of a profound alienation from the world that, in making the gaze and the voice tangible as objects, push the ego into a state of disembodiment. In another sense, as a theory *derived from this lived experience of psychotic crisis*, and which treats his xenopathic hallucinations as a valid (if compromised) insight into the foundation of the contemporary symbolic space. "I had suddenly realized what it meant to be an Afropessimist; that my breakdown was brought on by a breakthrough, one in which I finally understood why I was too black for care."²¹ We will come back to this formulation in much greater detail. For now, we can provisionally conclude that Wilderson is no longer able to sustain the neurotic's belief in a fictive Other who cares about his wellbeing, and that his hallucination expresses the presence of an Other of unbridled aggression who enjoys causing and witnessing his suffering. His breakdown, in other words, is triggered by a latent awareness of the otherwise disavowed *jouissance* of the Other—the self-transgression of the law, its founding and unfounded violence—whose normative misrecognition props up the neurotic's belief in an ultimately just, law-governed world.

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Wilderson's poem itself critically reflects on the dialectic of being and appearance at work here. It disillusiones the neurotic belief in the revelatory image (i.e., that there is some definite thing that images hide) as a ruse that represses the structural inconsistency or incompleteness of reality, a misrecognition against which the psychotic symptom protests. In Wilderson's stanza, blackness is *not* a Halloween costume (i.e., a mask donned by the trick-or-treater) that deceives a neighbor, lover, or police officer into mistaking its bearer for a threat to the

²⁰ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 17.

²¹ Wilderson, 17.

public welfare—as that would assume an incomplete Other whose blurred or misshapen vision could be corrected and, were they only able to see through or past the imaginary dress of racialization, would gain the ability to recognize behind blackness' appearance a true, universal being. Rather, if Wilderson terrifies in ordinary dress, if the disturbing effect he has on others (like the disturbing effect he first has on himself when looking in the mirror) is heightened by a polishing of his appearance, then blackness marks a strange type of *being-in-appearance* that plunges the reality-effect of perception into crisis (later on, Wilderson calls the conjunction of appearance and being in blackness as the “static imago of subjection”). Any attempt to decipher how blackness appears or signifies to the Other (and *ipso facto*, to find out what the Other wants from or knows about blackness) misses the more confounding manner in which the misrecognition of blackness subtends the very field of perception.

Instead of a “racialized” appearance behind which its true racial essence lies, blackness marks the disavowed point in the field of representation that spatializes perception. In appearing to be nothing but an appearance, in seeming to be full of hidden meanings that cannot be seen or are not yet revealed, blackness hides the fact that it hides nothing and creates the illusion that it is an illusion.

Wilderson diagnoses his mental breakdown as a subjective iteration of a general antagonism immanent to multiracial or post-racial societies, which gets actualized in individual and collective crises of meaning.²² Those crises of meaning, what he calls *crises in the ruse of analogy*, cause the subject anxiety—not an anxiety concerning symbolic uncertainty, but a signal anxiety that warns of the imminence of an object from the real, whose presence annihilates the ego.²³ This real object forms an impassable frontier within the symbolic space of modern democracies, and assures their structural incompleteness or failure, but it is mediated by a battery of metanarratives that block its recognition: from the metanarratives of sovereignty that repress the lack at the base of a legal order founded on racial slavery and its afterlives to the metanarratives of historical justice that dissimulate the limit of political sense (and occult the impotence of

²² Wilderson, 199.

²³ Sigmund Freud, “Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 20:75–176.

the Other of political appeal) as embodied in social death as a state of irremediable injury. Broadly understood, the anxiety that Wilderson experiences—and which his psychotic solution tries to contain—signals a structural failure in the terms of political order, social legitimacy, and cultural narrative, whose irruption compromises the rites that institute the individual in the imagined community.

In his brilliant reinterpretation of Freud's case study, Eric Santner reads Doctor Schreber's paranoid symptom as his own private response to a broader "crisis of symbolic investiture" that plagues the increasingly faulty procedures of social reproduction in modern public life. It is characterized by a general breakdown in the functioning of the rites and customs through which political authority is transferred and social and political standing is subjectively assumed.²⁴ Santner enables Schreber's hallucinatory construction to be reappraised as a testimonial to the attenuating legitimacy of institutions caused by the blooming crisis of subjectivity and power in early twentieth-century Germany (a crisis that the collective myths promulgated by totalitarian formations like the National Socialism of Schreber's day and age "manage" with equally disastrous results). As Santner and Wilderson both know, a psychotic break is not only a personal crisis but a form of relating to a historical impasse in the social and political Other. Their conspiratorial and delusional worldview, furthermore, functions as a "cure" to this breakdown in the psychosocial processes of subjectification (one that replaces a suddenly non-credible social world populated by "cursorily, improvised men" with an alternative, totalizing *Weltanschauung*).²⁵ The symptom is also a shaky "process of reconstruction" of the ego from the ruins of the imaginary reality that previous sustained it, thereby doubling as an ethical protest against the neurotic disavowal of the real lack in the metanarratives that support their imaginary identifications.²⁶

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Wilderson dismisses the "stress" of graduate school to explain his nervous illness as the bone he tosses the prying psychiatric staff to get them off his back;

²⁴ Eric L. Santner, *My Own Private Germany: Daniel Paul Schreber's Secret History of Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996).

²⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Psycho-Analytic Notes on an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," in *Standard Edition*, 12:21.

²⁶ Freud, 12:70.

he is unable to convey the *real* reason why he believes he is mad.²⁷ Nonetheless, psychoanalysis can offer an interpretation of the stress phenomenon that not only beats the apolitical explanations of psychological behaviorism but also enhances an understanding of antiblackness by bringing clarity to the psychotic deconstruction, that is, to the moment in which antiblackness' imaginary mechanisms, which otherwise successfully institute the ego of political subjectivity, fail in a spectacular fashion. Dipping once more into the insights afforded by examining the sociohistorical determinants of the Schreber case, Santner proposes a reading of "signifying stress" as a complement and ineliminable remainder of the processes that inscribe the physiological body into social exchange, and thus as an affect that "supplements every act of symbolic investiture."²⁸ When that signifying stress surpasses a certain threshold, when it exceeds and exhausts the representational resources that a given culture makes available for assigning meaning to a subject's failure to conform to its symbolic ideals and for rendering intelligible the discontent triggered by the pressures of institutional participation (from "imposter syndrome" to "antisocial behavior"), it triggers a protest of anxiety that is capable of triggering a psychotic break.

Let me offer the following interpretation: the normative stress of conforming to institutional localization and the customs of interpersonal recognition simply becomes too much for Wilderson that morning, short-circuiting his alienating self-idealization in a spectacular reversal of the mirror stage. Once the walls of political sense girding the twenty-first-century United States are breached, they no longer contain the real of antagonism within the garden of illusory meanings and, through the anxiety that signals its collapse, shatters the ego alienated within its imagined (multiracial) community. Wilderson's psychosis reveals the conceit of a politics of multiracialism that attempts to reduce blackness—as both a metonym and object of fetishistic disavowal for the untreatable wound of subjectivity—to the imaginary frustration of an abstract complaint, which reinforces a quasi-religious belief in an Other of historical judgment and redemption. Moreover, he gives lie to the authority of psychiatric medicine whose technical ideology seeks to reinstate the very conformity that Wilderson refuses to suffer and through which psychiatry disavows its own lack of any ethics.

²⁷ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 17.

²⁸ Eric L. Santner, *The Royal Remains: The People's Two Bodies and the Endgames of Sovereignty* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011), xiii.

The Ruses of the Imaginary

What insights does this psychotic episode impart, and how are those lessons incorporated into the theoretical content of afropessimism? Put another way, how does the lived experience of psychosis support Wilderson's formalization of an unfettered ethics? Let me first spell out how his symptomatic hallucination—as a “form of knowledge concerning profound malfunctions in those politicotheological procedures that otherwise sustain the very ontological consistency of what we call the ‘world’”²⁹—is extracted into a knowledge about the manner in which antiblackness secures the psychic coherence of individuals and collectives.

First, Wilderson apprehends consciousness as an imaginary strategy for avoiding, in the field of representation, any recognition of what Lacan calls the “pre-existence to the seen of a given-to-be-seen.”³⁰ In a minor twist to this psychoanalytic insight, Wilderson situates self-consciousness as the spontaneous perspectival bearing of any subject in the antiblack world. The illusion that psychosis therefore exposes or denudes as the alienating “view” of whiteness should be understood as a component-part of the *psychic coherence* that Wilderson deems to be the most consequential effect provisioned by antiblackness, provided we take “psychic” to mean, precisely, “egoic.”

The ego's coherence is itself an illusion, and the subject's projected reification as an object among others in the world rests on a suppression of the gaze—on covering up the lack in the subject's desire to see, on side-stepping the “pre-existence. . .of the seen.” But psychic coherence is *not actual*: the ruse of neurosis only allows the relative incoherence of desire to be lived as unthought; ego relations waylay the *assumption* of incoherence (i.e., desire) by interposing themselves between the subject and the unconscious. That makes the actualization of psychic coherence itself another imaginary ruse, now the ruse of psychosis, which supposes the (white) Other as a coherent identity or undivided being.

The psychotic episode simultaneously reveals the moral coherence of the world and the consistency of social and political life more broadly to be an illusion

²⁹ Santner, *My Own Private Germany*, xiii.

³⁰ Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts*, 74.

correlative to that of the ego's objectification and coherence. That becomes evident in how the laws of social convention, instead of fading into the background as a set of abstract rules governing relations and guaranteeing the world's moral symmetry, materializes for Wilderson as an obscene or gratuitous command by the imagined voice of a hostile white public. In another rotation of this Freudian insight, Wilderson posits the act of the law's imposition as constitutive of the world *as antiblack*.

Yet, the institution of which aspect of the law, precisely, coincides with the coherence of the antiblack world? Here we must distinguish, within the object of the voice, between the specific commands issued by the superego (i.e., the domain of morality) and the place from which those statements are enunciated (i.e., the domain of ethics).

The moral superego issues the prohibitions and duties of a particular regime of values, one that demands a renunciation of unrestricted enjoyment, and whose internalization secures the subject an imaginary place in the social order. This includes the command that Wilderson follows to "make them [whites] feel safe." The superego voices the positive content of the law. And while having the appearance of being a consistent and exhaustive set of rules, its imperatives are intrinsically self-contradictory, and thus impossible to follow to the letter. The neurotic who strives to conform to its conventions and to attain the social identity they promise can only conduct themselves *as if* this moral law is fundamentally meaningful and consistent. When they inevitably fall short of fulfilling these supposed duties, neurotics frequently punish themselves for their personal shortcomings (or critique and correct the Other to set them straight) in lieu of recognizing the structural nature of the law's incoherence. Not only does this masochism or critique secure a surplus enjoyment, but it leads to the abdication of any responsibility for an act irreducible to any prescription.

The voice of enunciation, on the other hand, summons the being to speech, and precedes the articulation of any specific moral commands. It voices the universal interpellation to subjectivity that, through the material support of the signifier, calls the human into being in relation to the Other. This is the law that imposes the domain of human ethics. As Mladen Dolar puts it, the voice of enunciation is a "pure call which commands nothing specific and offers no guarantee"

but “delivers us to the Other and to our own responsibility.”³¹ The place of enunciation calls the subject into being in its symbolic indeterminacy, which makes a free act possible.³²

By isolating the radical foreignness of the voice of enunciation, and thus the field of ethics, the psychotic reveals the neurotic’s unconscious belief in the consistency of the moral law and the order of representation as a ruse that represses a real incoherence in the symbolic universe, denuding the neurotic’s abandonment of the domain of ethics in favor of an accession to the social and moral order. Now, the psychotic too abdicates responsibility for their own desire when they pledge to carry out the commands issued by the “Other supposed to know” of their hallucination.³³ In the final instance, the ruse of psychosis, like the ruse of neurosis, disavows the irreducible freedom of the subject by foreclosing their desire in deference to a drive to satisfy a supposedly coherent moral dictum. Their minor difference is this one: instead of granting an imaginary consistency to the institutions of actually existing reality (i.e., neurosis), the ruse of psychosis institutes an imaginary consistency to their private hallucinatory worldview, which authorizes their often (self-)destructive mission (we will return to the “psychotic’s enterprise” at the end of this paper).

Desire, Cure, Care

Wilderson described the ultimate “breakthrough” he had extracted from his psychotic experience as discovering *why* he was “too black for care,” a knowledge he gleans from his encounter at the psychiatric clinic:

I was moaning. Sobbing. The crisp disposable sheet that lined the gurney rasped as I shifted. I sat up when they came into the room. No one was going to strap me down. But I didn’t climb down for fear of giving them cause. In the glare of fluorescence, they—the doctor and the nurse—were white as dust. The gurney rattled as I shook and cried. They didn’t approach. They didn’t call for help, not for themselves nor for me, a monstrous aphasic too black for care. That’s how I saw them

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³¹ Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 98.

³² See, in general, Alenka Zupančič, *Ethics of the Real: Kant, Lacan* (London: Verso, 2000).

³³ Jean Allouch, “Psychotic Transference,” in *Lacan on Madness: Madness, Yes You Can’t*, ed. by Patricia Gherovici and Manya Steinkoler (London: Routledge, 2015), 112–26.

see me. And my urge to save them from me eclipsed my desire to be cured. But I couldn't speak. Not even to tell them that I wanted to protect them from me.³⁴

Is Wilderson in fact “too black for care”? Does he believe this himself after recovering from his psychotic break, or does he glimpse something monstrous about himself, a desire he refuses to avow and that he projects onto the white avatars of psychiatry? Does his inclination to save the Berkeley clinical staff from their racial phantoms only reflect an inverted form of his desire, a longing to destroy them, a wish which he cannot bring himself to acknowledge? Wilderson parenthesizes the hall of mirrors in which he appears as “too black for care” by immediately repeating the formula for self-consciousness (“that’s how I saw them see me”). This suspends any question about this statement’s factuality while pointing to a greater truth: that Wilderson has renounced his “*desire to be cured*” in order to satisfy the supposed demands of the Other to “feel safe.”

Already here, the voice of enunciation that brings Wilderson to the threshold of a subjective act is immediately drowned out by the obscene commands of the “cardinal rule of Negro diplomacy,” an eclipsing of the ethical by the moral so complete that it closes even the narrowest of margins in which Wilderson would be able to articulate a desire beyond the demands of the Other, ultimately leading to a full foreclosure of speech (“I was moaning,” “I was sobbing,” “I couldn’t speak”). What this panicked obsequiousness disavows is the incoherence of the superego’s demand, its internal inconsistency. The more he tries to reassure his would-be persecutors of the innocence of his intentions, the louder Wilderson’s monstrous silence becomes, and the more he loses himself in the fearing eyes of imaginary others.³⁵

What does this scene indicate about the relationship between desire, cure, and care? What to make of the *desire to be cured* that Wilderson admits he has renounced, and that is preserved, in suspended animation, through its reappearance as a monster in the *camera obscura* of psychotic hallucination? Do we glimpse in it that desire whose foreclosure and inversion, as I have proposed, will be reversed and realized through afropessimism as Wilderson’s self-cure for his “breakdown”?

³⁴ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 3.

³⁵ Wilderson, 4.

A contrast between the *cure* he gives up desiring and the *care* he provisionally supposes he is ineligible to receive is clarified by Wilderson's account of the period subsequent to his admission to the psychiatric clinic, in which he seeks and finds a series of black therapists who he hopes might accomplish what all the white therapists in his experience could not: to combine *care as an ethical handling of suffering* with the *cure as a means to the end of recovery*. Yet that hope is sorely and repeatedly disappointed, for if black therapists "cared like none of the White therapists I had sampled cared," treating him with an empathy that reminded him of Wilderson's own psychologist parents, their therapeutic powers are unable to address the truth of his psychosis.³⁶ While they could "solve all the problems [Wilderson] wasn't having" and successfully kept him "from going crazy" again, they could not cure him from the state of *being crazy* that constitutes an ethical testimony to the ruses of antiblackness.³⁷

"Too black for care": where we can now understand *blackness* as indexing an ontological state of psychic incoherence that is repressed by the relations instituted through ego (i.e., the imaginary object in which the neurotic "hides the castration he [has accepted but] denies"³⁸); and where this narrow and hegemonic notion of *care* must refer to the process by which a return to a prior state of psychic equilibrium is pursued, in the name of restoring a "mental health" that can only repress ontological incoherence anew. No matter if this care's dispenser is black or white: the inarticulable pain of blackness can only be neglected through its therapeutic handling by the "psy professions"—psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists, and—why not?—parents, too. These professions designate those who all variously depoliticize the psychosocial determinants of subjective antagonism in their pursuit of a vague notion of psychic health. Further still, the critique implied by Wilderson's observation can be applied more broadly, turning what appears at first to be a complaint about an irreparable notion of care as such into a principled demand for something more than this form of treatment can provide, which only redoubles the slave's suffering by duplicating the negation of its desire.

³⁶ Wilderson, 313. For further discussion on the divergences between care and cure, see Jared Sexton, "Antidoting," *The Black Scholar* 51, no. 3 (2021): 5–24, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2021.1932383>.

³⁷ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 313.

³⁸ Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire in the Freudian Unconscious," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 699.

At this point we can arrive at a couple provisional conclusions:

- a) *Care cannot be ethical if it treats unconscious suffering as a contingency whose symptoms can be removed from an ontologically whole personality, just as*
- b) *the cure cannot be ethical if it is oriented toward a full recovery that disavows what is untreatable on the level of being.*

Thankfully, the notion of care need not remain hostage to its reduction by the moralities of health ideology.³⁹

Christian Dunker lays out the alternative link that Freudian psychoanalysis threads between desire, cure, and care: “Symptoms require treatment (*Behandlung*), while discontent requires care (*Sorge*). A symptom can be cured (*Gene-sung*) but the subject can never ‘recover’ (*Heilung*).”⁴⁰ It is impossible for the speaking-being to recover from the “pain of existence,” which is experienced in daily life through the feeling that Freud called “ordinary unhappiness.” The subject’s ontological pain is often entangled in the symptoms through which it manifests (but that also do not exhaust it). Symptoms are treated and sometimes even cleared up over the course of analysis, even if the therapeutic cure is not the aim of psychoanalysis, and even if no subject can ever be free of all symptoms. Dunker therefore proposes an alternative way of thinking *care as the process of the cure*, which offers an ethical position regarding the pain of existence. Care (*Sorge*) in this Freudian declension is the accompanying of a subject as they bring the real of the symptom to speak against the ruses of the imaginary. This form of care brings pain to speak and aims at helping the analysand move toward a new subjective position (i.e., transformation) instead of trying to remove something painful (i.e., therapy).

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On this point about its transformative potential, however, Wilderson errs, and betrays the potential for bringing his psychotic protest against antiblackness and its imaginary ruses into productive—even destructive—articulation. That error

³⁹ Jonathan M. Metzl and Anna Kirkland, ed., *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality* (New York: New York University Press, 2010).

⁴⁰ Christian Dunker, *The Constitution of the Psychoanalytic Clinic: A History of its Structure and Power* (London: Karnac, 2011), xxi.

relates to his later claim to observe no discernible distinction between the “end of analysis in psychoanalysis” and the “therapeutic cure in psychology,”⁴¹ and in which he suggests that the talking cure, as with the techniques of psychotherapy, may just be “high-grade snake oil” that cannot displace blackness “as a static imago of abjection,” and therefore cannot facilitate the black subject’s assumption of a new ethical position with regard to this strange being-in-appearance.⁴² In my view, Wilderson’s error is twofold. On the one hand, psychoanalysis does not have an end that can be verified by the objective criteria of psychical or political normality and therefore is not a therapy. On the other hand, the cure that psychoanalysis achieves as one of its possible effects is also not its aim. A clarification of this error can help demonstrate how afropessimism intervenes into an ethical discourse that it always already shared with the Freudian field.

Bringing Antagonism to its Highest Pitch

What differentiates psychoanalysis from any sort of therapeutic program is its subordination of the analyst’s desire to cure in favor of a love for a truth that a subject can never fully express in speech, whether in analysis or outside of it (an attitude that requires the psychoanalyst to “view cure as an added benefit,” and nothing more⁴³). As Freud conceded, psychoanalysis is interminable because it is incapable of guaranteeing the permanence of its cure.⁴⁴ Every analysis must eventually end, yes, but it cannot be completed, because it is both beyond psychoanalysis’ powers and contrary to its ethics to materialize all current or future conflicts in the clinical space and to exhaust their possible range of expression in symptomatic formations. As Freud saw things, every conflict that the subject experiences in psychic reality, whether latent or actively lived, was originally a conflict in external reality. “Under the influence of education, the ego grows accustomed to removing the scene of the fight from outside to within and mastering the *internal* danger before it has become an *external* one.”⁴⁵ Various defense mechanisms serve to internalize the subject’s originally external conflicts with the world (i.e., with the Other). The intent of this internalization is to avoid danger, anxiety, and unpleasure. Yet, the repression of conflicts, the expenditure of

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⁴¹ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 313.

⁴² Wilderson, 314.

⁴³ Jacques Lacan, “Variations on the Standard Treatment,” in *Écrits*, 270.

⁴⁴ Sigmund Freud, “Analysis Terminable and Interminable,” in *Standard Edition*, 23:234.

⁴⁵ Freud, 23:235; emphasis in original.

libidinal resources required to maintain those defenses, and the inefficient way that the ego discharges their functions all turn the ego into the pathogenic object *par excellence*, and create an internal suffering worse than the one excited by the original external situation. All of this brings “about an ever more extensive alienation from the external world.”⁴⁶ This alienation may “pave the way for the outbreak of neurosis” or lead to the wholesale replacement of reality in psychosis by the construction of a hallucination that, for Fanon, “coincides with an abrupt annihilation of perceived reality.”⁴⁷

Contrary to eliminating conflict, psychoanalysis aims to reverse the effects of the disciplinary apparatuses that characterize modern subjectivation by establishing a transference space in which unconscious conflicts that were once repressed from external reality—personal, social, political, economic—can be reproduced in psychical reality. “The transference thus creates an intermediate region between illness and real life through which the transition from the one to the other is made. The new condition has taken over all the features of the illness; but it represents an artificial illness which is at every point accessible to our intervention.”⁴⁸ Within the transference medium, the analyst seeks to “bring this conflict to a head, to develop it to its highest pitch, in order to increase the instinctual force available for its solution.”⁴⁹ That solution, finally, consists in “ensuring to a sufficient degree the foundations on which a control of [the drive as the motor force of conflict] is based.”⁵⁰

By establishing this minimum of control, which shifts the subject’s position toward its own conflict (in what Freud called an “alteration of the ego”), once-unconscious conflicts can be confronted at their place of origin. In a reversal of the process of the defenses, analysis accustoms the subject to putting things back in their right place by removing the scene of the fight from the internal

⁴⁶ Freud, 23:238.

⁴⁷ Freud, 23:238; Frantz Fanon and Slimane Asselah, “The Phenomenon of Agitation in the Psychiatric Milieu: General Considerations, Psychopathological Meaning,” in *Alienation and Freedom: Frantz Fanon*, ed. Jean Khalifa and Robert J. C. Young (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 442.

⁴⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through,” in *Standard Edition*, 12:154.

⁴⁹ Freud, “Terminable and Interminable,” 23:231.

⁵⁰ Freud, “Terminable and Interminable,” 23:230; emphasis added.

psychic reality where it was repressed and back into the external social reality from whence it came. What safeguards this whole procedure is the ethics of the analyst's desire. The analyst receives and supports the patient's initial desire for the cure, sustains that desire against the resistances that pop up over the course of the treatment (which are but new defenses against the manifestation and confrontation of conflict), and brings the subject to the precipice of the end of analysis, an end or termination whose decision marks the first act for which the analyst takes sole responsibility. The liquidation of the transference then creates a *reconstitutive cut* between psychic reality and sociopolitical reality, engendering a new separation and connection between the two. Consequently, the end of analysis marks a point of inflection *within* its ethics of desire and an extension, by other means, of its interminable process of antagonization and intervention. Once conflicts are sufficiently mastered within the artifice of the clinical space (through a process of first repeating their dynamic in the relation between analyst and patient), that antagonism is developed to its highest pitch in the social space (through a process of first repeating their formal structure in the relations between the subject and the world). By whipping up the libidinal forces available for its solution, the intensified antagonism becomes accessible to intervention by the political subject of desire.

Black Desire without a Subject . . . Yet

If Freud finds it impossible to exhaust all conflicts that are initially imported into the clinical space from the world outside, he also recognizes that there is one conflict *in* external reality that is not *from* external reality (and thus one conflict in psychic reality that is not repressed from its confrontation in the external milieu). While having no particular form of its own, this source simultaneously supplies the variable, quantitative intensity to all forms of conflict, and this conflict which is not-one is the death drive; this drive can never be fully "tamed," just as the energy it makes available for the intensification of conflicts can never be depleted. That is because it is the irreducible and antagonistic force that peels psychic reality away from "real life" in the mythical moment of their original division. Willy Apollon describes this structural separation between interiority and exteriority, this moment that unleashes the drive, as the result of the advent of speech that transforms the human into a "thing that speaks," and which dislocates the psyche, whose original function was to equilibrate the organism to

its physical environment.⁵¹ The conjunction and disjunction of speech and being institutes the subject of the unconscious (as separate from the psyche) and the drive emerges between the two to alienate both from the body. That subject thenceforward exists between the biological organism and the realm of pure mental representations (being neither the one nor the other), bringing the human into a relation of essential disharmony to its natural environment but also toward a relation of relative freedom from the demands of collective reality.

Perhaps Wilderson would counter that the irreducible level of antagonism lies in the human-slave distinction, one whose irreconcilability exists *in* political reality without necessarily being *from* political reality. Notwithstanding this possible counter, these seemingly irreconcilable propositions—Freud's, about the inexhaustible divisibility of the drive, and Wilderson's, about the structural antagonism of antiblackness—can be reconciled. If the drive is a purely quantitative factor, an “intensity” invested in all object relations, antiblackness would be the purely qualitative form that mediates the free drive at the hypothetical zero point at which it divides the subject and the Other. Wilderson dates the moment of its hegemonization to the start of the Arab slave trade around 1,400 years ago.⁵² This symbolic paradigm would amount to something like a highly durable and plastic global symbolic form, a territorialization machine that immediately overwrites the relation between subject and the Other on the level of desire by rendering the slave's desire irreconcilable (or incoherent) to the desire of the subject and the Other. From that historical and structural point onward, the reality “selected” by antiblackness, that reduces the irreducible conflict of the drive to an irreconcilability between neurotic desire and Black desire, begins to predominate as the medium that alienates the modern subject from themselves.

This alienation is absolute for Wilderson. “Black desire” cannot coincide with a subject in given reality, and something like the “black subject” has no conceptual coherence in afropessimism at all—just as it would also not be possible to posit this conjunction in the psychoanalytic conceptuality. Why? The subject, as summoned by the voice of enunciation—and preceding any imaginary

⁵¹ Willy Apollon, “The Subject of the Quest,” trans. Daniel Wilson, *Penumbra* 2 (2022): 1–14.

⁵² Frank B. Wilderson III, “The Black Liberation Army and the Paradox of Political Engagement,” in *Postcoloniality—Decoloniality—Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, ed. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Juncker (Frankfurt: Campus Verlag, 2014), 203.

inscription, historical articulation, or sociological insertion through symbolic forms—cannot be called “black” without positing blackness as a constitutive feature of the speaking-being, a speaking-being whose evolutionary debut Apollon’s anthropology places much earlier, approximately 300,000 years ago.⁵³ Within the strictest of Freudian-Lacanian-Apollonian terms, one cannot speak of a racialized subject at all without essentializing blackness to the signifying order. Only an ego, sculpted by the education of a particular epistemic and moral order, can be properly called “black”—but a black subject, again, does not exist in the real of speech.

This raises the bigger question of whether something like a *black (or slave’s) desire without a subject* is even theoretically comprehensible. Can a non-subjective desire have any ethics to speak of, “unfettered” or otherwise? We can offer the following propositions as a pivot toward some final conclusions:

- I) that a *desire without a subject cannot be ethical* because desire, as materialized in speech, must be consecrated in an act that always “presupposes a subject,”⁵⁴ a subject who then has the ethical imperative to take responsibility for that act in relation to the Other;
- II) that an *ethics without a subject precludes desire* because the subject of the unconscious is the effect and guarantee of the lack in the Other that makes an incompletely determined (i.e., free) act possible; and that, if both of these propositions are true,
- III) black desire remains unethical without a subject, or more precisely, *the ethics of black desire remains virtual until it is assumed by a subject in an act.*

Two Ethical Imperatives

For Apollon, the treatment of psychosis aims to wrest the ethics of the psychotic from its occultation in the symptom. That aim is pursued by opening the self-references of the delusion through a radical questioning of its truth. In this way, the aim is to sustain and transform, rather than eliminate, what is called the *psychotic enterprise*, as driven by a singular desire to do something for the whole

⁵³ Apollon, “Subject of the Quest,” 2.

⁵⁴ Lacan, “Variations on the Standard Treatment,” 291.

of humanity.⁵⁵ At the structural origin of psychosis is, for Apollon, an initial experience of the “collapse of the world,” one triggered by an encounter with a gnawing absence in the symbolic that was insufficiently mediated by the disavowing mechanisms of the imaginary, and which exposed the subject to something unspeakable and irrepressible in their own body. As an attempt at assigning this thing in the body a meaning, the paranoid symptom elaborates a grand conspiracy that structures a subjective quest (often assigned by a xenopathic voice) to expose a defect in reality and thereby mend a real hole that appears, in the delusion, as a fundamental and portentous “evil.” That this horror demonstrates a tacit knowledge about an excess of sense in the world is clear enough, and the psychotic rightly finds fault with the inconsistency of common reality. But instead of affirming this symbolic indeterminacy as the locus of the possibility of human freedom, the psychotic strives to plug the hole in the Other through a destructive or self-sacrificial act, giving way on their desire in conformity to a will to satisfy the demands of an imagined other. With the zeal of a messiah and the narcissism of a martyr, the psychotic thus “digs its way out to a solution [to the ‘collapse of the world’] by exposing his being and dedicating his body to mending the default in the symbolic order.”⁵⁶

Wilderson, too, experiences the world come to an end during his psychotic crisis, which he is the first to admit “is no picnic.”⁵⁷ Yet, which world has ended exactly, if not the antiblack world whose non-existence was only denied by a combination of the “ruses of power” (and its narratives of seduction)⁵⁸ and the ruses of analogy (and its narratives of repair)? Does his psychosis not document the end of the *semblance* of the world, one whose social and psychic coherence, as illusory as it is, hinges on the maintenance of a constant state of disavowal about its own substantial inexistence?

⁵⁵ Willy Apollon, Danielle Bergeron, and Lucie Cantin, “The Treatment of Psychosis,” trans. Tracy McNulty, in *The Subject of Lacan: A Lacanian Reader for Psychologists*, ed. Kareen Ror Malone and Stephen R. Friedlander (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 209–28.

⁵⁶ Willy Apollon, “Theory and Practice in the Psychoanalytic Treatment of Psychosis,” in *Lacan and the Subject of Language*, ed. Ellie Ragland-Sullivan and Mark Bracher (New York: Routledge, 1991), 121.

⁵⁷ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 3.

⁵⁸ Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 79–112.

If Santner is right to speculate that a crisis in the meaningfulness of symbolic titles and the legitimacy of power prepared the way for Schreber's break with the sociopolitical reality of early-twentieth-century Germany, it seems that the radical annulling of the credibility of the antiblack world to which Wilderson once unconsciously consented coincides with a suddenly uncontained crisis in the ruse of analogy. That ruse is the metaphorical operation that otherwise mystifies black suffering by assigning it—alongside all other positions of moral standing in the modern demos—the discrete meaning of an abstract and generalizable injury. On the psychic level, that state of injury is equivalent to the frustration through which the neurotic ego responds to its alienation. Wilderson's psychosis momentarily renders him incapable of unconsciously visualizing a claim to injury and the associated ability to seek recourse to the state or other authorities for redress. This should not be controversial, since Wilderson is describing, on the level of unconscious reality, what Wendy Brown already systematically describes as a phenomenon of political reality. Both analyses describe how the incitement to and assumption of a state of injury becomes a general condition for political legibility that disciplines the desires of identitarian subjectivities in late modern democracies like the United States.⁵⁹

If its political effect is to institute the imaginary world of neurosis and guarantee the semblance of its affiliations, the ruse of analogy is also the primary instrument for securing the “*the death of Black desire*.”⁶⁰ This renders the ruse of analogy as a mechanism for foreclosing an insatiable desire irreducible to any concrete object, and that, in exceeding the coherence of any demand for redress, finally escapes the moral-affective mobius that loops left-liberal politics and neurosis together in a double noose, with its infinite braid trisected into the phases of frustration, aggression, and cathartic compensation. Here at last we can introduce the first ethical imperative of afropessimism: *to end the world*. While appearing as a political call to action, it is only the experience of the psychotic position that can illuminate its ethical dimension, provided we remain wary of the shortcomings of the psychotic “solution” to their own experience and ethical insights.

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⁵⁹ Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modernity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

⁶⁰ Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 220–21; emphasis in original.

For, unlike the psychotic—who projects a world on the verge of ending *and* seeks to repair it in a self-sacrificial act before it is too late—Wilderson calls for recognizing that the world of neurotic liberalism has already ended, even though it is still unconsciously lived *as if* it existed. This imperative stops short of the psychotic dereliction of the ethical, which consists in the hallucinatory praxis that believes the world can be made whole again, and which just rests on another ruse of analogy. That ruse which equates the real object—an impassable stumbling block intrinsic to reality—to some contingent and fixable historical evil (e.g., whether a grand plot to destroy humanity or a grand plot to destroy black people). Instead of attributing a paralyzingly certain knowledge about the world to an actualized Other and throwing up his hands in a dereliction of any ethical relations, Wilderson's afropessimism calls for a generalized recognition of the lack in the neurotic's virtualized Other. He interpellates the subject to a place between absolute freedom and absolute determination: the scene of enunciation in which one must act in accordance with a desire that can neither be prescribed nor guaranteed in advance. This will have been an act that puts psychic coherence at risk.

Now, in the throes of the wholesale failure of the ruse of analogy in front of that Berkeley apartment's mirror something irrepressible and unspeakable emerges in Wilderson's body, and which can no longer "remain hidden under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography."⁶¹ That is, beyond the range of relations to imaginary others and demands that constitute the expressive content of his symptom, Wilderson describes the suffering at its core as a tearing apart of the body by a "beast with insane rage [that] struggled to burst through my skin in a shower of blood and bile."⁶² This bestial force, which seems to shuttle between the virtual and the actual in an interminable labor of conception and abortion, triggers the vertiginous anxiety in himself and others whose signal warns of ego death and psychic dissolution. Yet, this image also literalizes the violence through which the ruse of analogy—whose metaphoric operation "normally" brings this visceral substance of the real into symbolic circulation and political subjectivation—is not without an a-signifying remainder, a leftover

⁶¹ Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 206.

⁶² Wilderson, *Afropessimism*, 6.

that is condemned to the flesh of blackness as “slaveness,” but whose mechanisms the psychotic breakdown brings to a momentary standstill. To put it another way, *Wilderson lives in his fragmented body the structural failure of analogization*, which otherwise rests on unconsciously recognizing in blackness an irrecoverable state of social death (only to negate it by way of juxtaposition to any political subject of standing whose legibility rests on a contrastive claim to a redressable injury). In the same movement, recognition blocks the black subject from claiming the very quality of “slaveness” that is extracted from the position of social death to constitute all non-black subjects in their representation of themselves to themselves and to the Other (from the scale of multiracial democracy down to that of coalitional politics and interracial relations). That is why blackness cannot even represent itself to itself as a political subject.⁶³ “Blackness and Slaveness are inextricably bound in such a way that whereas Slaveness can be separated from blackness,”—and *must* be extracted as an analogue for representing all other places of political subjectivity—“Blackness cannot exist as other than Slaveness.”⁶⁴

Here, finally, we can introduce afropessimism’s second ethical imperative: to *assume the position of social death*, a position whose assumption is both politically impossible and exclusively ethical. Assuming social death consists of neither celebrating the contraction between blackness and slaveness nor disavowing the necessity of the latter, but in recognizing slaveness as *both* inevitable—in the sense of long preceding the subject as their cause in the Other—and inextricably bound to blackness as the historical product of the imposition of an imaginary that disavows all others’ relationship to slaveness. “Black people,” Wilderson immediately continues, “are often psychically unable and unwilling to assume this position [of social death]. This is as understandable as it is impossible.”⁶⁵ Understandable: to assume social death is, by definition, in no one’s interest, and since the neurotic has already unconsciously decided against its assumption in assuming an ego. Even and especially in the case of black neurotics, since “bonding with White and non-Blacks over phobic reactions to the Black imago provides the Black psyche with the only *semblance of psychic integration*

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⁶³ Wilderson, 247.

⁶⁴ Wilderson, 42.

⁶⁵ Wilderson, 103.

it is likely to have.”⁶⁶ Yet, impossible: the ego cannot avow social death without recognizing the castration that they themselves have disavowed and without risking the semblance of being that this disavowal buys them. To assume the position of social death is thus to reverse what Wilderson calls the *cynical divorce of black rage from black desire* by bringing the subject to assume this desire in the radical undecidability of its psychic and social implications.⁶⁷ This clears the way for taking responsibility for an act that introduces something new and irreducible to the world.

An act, for instance, like the invention of afropessimism, whose ethics are sustained by the psychotic's radical care for the suffering of the speaking-being. One possible mode of this human would be a blackness that, instead of coinciding with slaveness, exists in a relation of poetic otherness to it. *Wo Es war, soll Ich werden.*⁶⁸

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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⁶⁶ Wilderson, 252; emphasis added.

⁶⁷ Wilderson, 204.

⁶⁸ Sigmund Freud, “Neue Folge der Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse,” in *Studienausgabe*, ed. Alexander Mitscherlich, Angela Richards and James Strachey (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1969–75), 1:516.

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Why the Group Is Mad: Introjection and Psychosis in Freud's "Group Psychology"

Keywords

introjection, group psychology, psychosis, melancholia, mania, Sigmund Freud, Sándor Ferenczi, psychoanalysis

Abstract

I examine introjection as it is elaborated by Freud in "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego." Against Ferenczi, who invented the term to name a neurotic process, Freud theorizes introjection as a psychotic process. Through Freud's reinterpretation of introjection, I argue that the group, in Freud, is a psychotic formation, which has the structure of melancholia. I conclude by using introjection to shed light on how melancholia turns into mania, a question that Freud left unanswered in his first theorization of melancholia, the paper "Mourning and Melancholia."

Zakaj je množica nora? Introjekcija in psihoza v Freudovi *Množični psihologiji*

Ključne besede

introjekcija, množična psihologija, psihoza, melanholija, manija, Sigmund Freud, Sándor Ferenczi, psihoanaliza

Povzetek

Avtor raziskuje introjekcijo, kot jo razvije Sigmund Freud v *Množični psihologiji in analizi jaza*. V nasprotju s Ferenczijem, ki je ta termin iznašel, da bi z njim poimenoval nevrotični proces, Freud teoretizira introjekcijo kot psihotičen proces. Avtor skozi Freudovo reinterpretacijo introjekcije trdi, da je množica pri Freudu psihotična formacija, ki ima strukturo melanholije. Avtor v sklepu s pomočjo introjekcije osvetli način, kako se

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melanholija sprevrne v manijo, vprašanje, ki ga je Freud pustil neodgovorjenega v svoji prvi teoretizaciji melanholije v spisu »Žalovanje in melanholija«.



As it is well known, Sigmund Freud presents *Massenpsychologie*—or, group psychology, as it is translated in the *Standard Edition*—as an unfinished project. There are a number of “problems and lines of work,” such as, the difference between the group and “a mere collection of people,” the tendency of people to form groups, the question of groups without a leader, groups that unite through an idea, tendency or wish, and groups that form over “hatred against a particular person or institution,” all of which must be solved—and none of which Freud takes up in “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego”—before the theory of groups can even begin to be considered complete.¹ In this essay, I will push the Freudian project of group psychology one step further by taking up one of its myriad unresolved “problems”—in this case, the problem of *introjection*—for it is by grasping introjection, and the place it has in Freud’s account, that we will grasp something important about group psychology itself: namely, that the group is a *psychotic* formation.

I

Freud evokes introjection at a crucial moment in “Group Psychology.” He has reviewed Gustave Le Bon’s *Psychologie des foules* and William McDougall’s *The Group Mind*—the times’ two most significant works on group psychology—he has considered, and rejected, *suggestion* as a possible explanation for the phenomenon; and he has just defined, as well as exemplified, the particular kind of group he will be considering in his book.² He is now ready to bring psychoanalysis to bear on the question of group psychology, and the psychoanalytic concept he has chosen for the job is *identification*. “Identification,” he writes, “is known to psycho-analysis as the earliest expression of an emotional tie with another

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¹ Sigmund Freud, “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego,” in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 18:100.

² Freud focuses on organized and enduring groups with leaders or, as he calls it, the artificial group. It follows, then, that my comments in this paper apply only to the artificial group.

person.”³ It is a relation of likeness or emulation—a “would like to *be*”—as opposed to a relation of possession or a “like to *have*.” Ultimately, “identification endeavours to mould a person’s own ego after the fashion of the one that has been taken as a model.”⁴ With this description of identification, Freud is covering what would have been well-known territory, if not for the nascent field of group psychology itself, then at least for his followers. But then Freud does something unexpected, indeed surreptitious: he smuggles into his description of identification an additional concept, one that would have been familiar only to a select few, and, even then, he handles it in a manner that would have been unfamiliar to them. That term is *introjection*. Having traced the three sources of identification, he writes the following summary statement: “First, identification is the original form of emotional tie with an object; secondly, in a regressive way it becomes a substitute for a libidinal object-tie,” and this is the important part, “as it were by means of *introjection of the object into the ego*; and thirdly, it may arise with any new perception of a common quality shared with some other person who is not an object of the sexual instinct.”⁵ What does Freud mean by “introjection of the object into the ego”? Or, more broadly cast, what is introjection? And how does it differ from identification that the two should appear side by side in the same passage? In other words, what does introjection contribute to group psychology that identification alone cannot?

At this point, we would expect Freud to provide answers to these questions, and yet, he does nothing of the sort. Indeed, he does not even offer a proper definition of introjection. What he does, instead, is deploy the term in various ways, leaving it up to the reader to surmise its meaning. Let us enumerate all the ways Freud deploys the term. We already saw the first way that Freud deploys it: identification involves “introjection of the object into the ego.” The next three ways are simple repetitions of the signifying construction *introjection of the object*, making that particular construction a total of four of the five occurrences of the term in the chapter. A sentence about the alteration of the ego composes the fifth and final way Freud deploys the term in the chapter: “This second piece is the one which has been *altered by introjection* and which contains the lost object.”⁶

³ Freud, 18:105.

⁴ Freud, 18:106.

⁵ Freud, 18:107–8; emphasis added.

⁶ Freud, 18:109; emphasis added.

The last two ways Freud deploys introjection in “Group Psychology” (for a grand total of seven deployments) occur in the following chapter, “Being in Love and Hypnosis,” where it is used, this time in verb form, to indicate the object’s alteration of the ego: “In the former case the ego has enriched itself with the properties of the object, it has ‘introjected’ the object into itself,” and “it is even possible to describe an extreme case of being in love as a state in which the ego has introjected the object into itself.”⁷ Based on these deployments, one surmises that introjection has something to do with identification (insofar as it occurs in a chapter on that topic), involves the object somehow—perhaps the absorption of the object by the ego (“the introjection of the object into the ego”)—and results in some sort of alteration of the ego (“altered by introjection” and “the ego has enriched itself with the properties of the object”). Yet, while these surmises may give us some indication of what introjection is, it would be a mistake to treat them as the substitute for a proper definition, as they are far from it.⁸

Why does Freud write so ambiguously—if not ambivalently—about introjection? As tempting as it might be, we must resist construing Freud’s reluctance—or, perhaps, refusal—to properly define introjection as having to do with a penchant for obscurity, for it is actually quite out of character for him to speak so ambiguously about a concept, especially in this text. For example, compare how he handles introjection with how he handles identification. Identification, as we saw above, is a relation of likeness, a “moulding” of the ego after a model. A definition that is clear and to the point. Or consider how he handles the artificial group. Artificial groups, he defines, are groups “requiring an external force to keep them together.”⁹ Again, clear and to the point. Moreover, not only does Freud handle technical terms like *identification* and *artificial group* with exactness and precision, he also handles common terms like *the Church* in the exact same manner. Churches, he explains, are “communities of believers,” but *the Church* as he uses the term is specifically “the Catholic Church.”¹⁰ Indeed, “Group Psychology” is chock full of terms and concepts that receive precise and exact definitions, including even “Group Psychology” itself: “Group psychology

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⁷ Freud, 18:113, 114.

⁸ It would appear that the editor of the *Standard Edition* treated these associations as a definition, as Strachey puts more entries of *introjection* in the index than actual appearances, thereby giving the impression that Freud uses the term much more than he actually does.

⁹ Freud, 18:93.

¹⁰ Freud, 18:93.

is therefore concerned with the individual man as a member of a race, of a nation, of a caste, of a profession, of an institution, or as a component part of a crowd of people who have been organized into a group at some particular time for some definite purpose."¹¹

We must also resist the temptation to defend Freud's inexactitude by claiming that he is relying on the reader's prior knowledge, for when introjection appears in "Group Psychology," it is virtually brand new. Prior to "Group Psychology," Freud uses the term only once—and, as we shall soon see, it is not even in the place that one would expect to find it—and even there, it is left undefined. In his seminal paper of 1915, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," Freud deploys the term during a discussion of the development of the ego. As the ego develops, Freud claims, it absorbs objects of pleasure. "In so far as the objects which are presented to [the ego] are sources of pleasure," he writes, "it takes them into itself, 'introjects' them."¹² Again, there is the suggestion that introjection involves the taking in or the absorbing of the object, but importantly, no definition is given. This is not to suggest that Freud never relies on the reader's prior knowledge because sometimes he does. But when he does, it is always for a concept that has been clearly defined. For example, Freud never defines *idealization* in "Group Psychology," despite its importance to the proceedings, but when we turn to his discussion of it in "Narcissism," we find this: "Idealization is a process that concerns the *object*; by it that object, without any alteration in its nature, is aggrandized and exalted in the subject's mind"—another clear and concise definition.¹³

Moreover, we get no closer to a definition by looking at instances of introjection which occur in Freud's writings after "Group Psychology," as the term virtually drops out of his vocabulary. So, while one would expect to find the term in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, when Freud rehearses the account of the ego that he had developed in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," it is nowhere to be found, as he writes, simply: "Some of the things that one is unwilling to give up, because they give pleasure, are nevertheless not ego but object."¹⁴ Where Freud

¹¹ Freud, 18:70.

¹² Sigmund Freud, "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," in *Standard Edition*, 14:136.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, "On Narcissism: An Introduction," in *Standard Edition*, 14:94; emphasis in original.

¹⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Civilization and Its Discontents," in *Standard Edition*, 21:67.

does actually use the term, it is, again, in the context of internationalization or absorption; once again, from *Civilization*: “His aggressiveness is introjected, internalized.”¹⁵ And yet, even here, questions arise, as one may legitimately ask: what is gained from the term *introjection* that is not gotten from *internalization* alone? What difference is there, if any, between introjection and internalization that they may appear next to one another? If the answer is none—if introjection is merely internalization—then why use *introjection* at all? Perhaps, something approaching an answer appears in *The Ego and the Id*, when Freud specifies that introjection involves “a kind of regression to the mechanism of the oral phrase,” but even this is insufficient and, in any case, too late for the historical reader of “Group Psychology.”¹⁶

Thus, the mysterious appearance of introjection in Freud’s text makes it one of the many unresolved “problems” of group psychology. So, what exactly is introjection, and what does it have to do with group psychology? Far from tangential, these questions are essential for grasping what is particular about the group and, therefore, questions that take us to the very heart of group psychology itself. In what follows, I will answer these questions by closely examining this ambiguous concept in Freud’s text, hopefully defining it once and for all; and in so doing, I hope to shed important new light on group psychology itself and, in particular, its relationship with melancholia and mania, which Freud discusses near the end of his text. Indeed, that Freud dedicates the last substantive chapter of “Group Psychology” to a discussion of melancholia and mania—two *psychotic* formations—is a fact that has received little, if any, attention but which is crucial for grasping what is at stake in Freud’s thinking on group psychology as such: namely, that the group, as far as Freud understands it here in “Group Psychology,” is a *psychotic formation*.

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II

Introjection is not originally Freud’s invention; it is Sándor Ferenczi’s. Ferenczi develops the concept in his paper “Introjection and Transference,” written in 1909—that is, six years prior to its first appearance in Freud, and twelve years prior to “Group Psychology.” There, Ferenczi presents introjection as the

¹⁵ Freud, 21:123.

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in *Standard Edition*, 19:29.

neurotic counterpart to the *psychotic* mechanism of projection. *Projection*, as it is well known, receives its most thorough elaboration in Freud in the Schreber case of 1911, where it is presented as the mechanism by which the psychotic mounts a defense against the inner calamities that plague them: "An internal perception is suppressed, and, instead, its content, after undergoing a certain kind of distortion, enters consciousness in the form of an external perception."¹⁷ However, projection had already appeared in Freud's thought as early as 1895, in his "Draft H" to Wilhelm Fliess, and in print for the first time only a year later, in 1896, in section three of "Further Remarks on the Neuro-Psychoses of Defence"—texts that both focus on paranoia.¹⁸ Moreover, Freud had been corresponding with Ferenczi over the theory of paranoia in the year prior to the publication of "Introjection and Transference," and so, while Ferenczi's paper appears two years prior to the Schreber case, there is no question that he had this definition of projection in mind while elaborating his theory of introjection.¹⁹

Unlike the psychotic who makes "an attempt at recovery," as Freud puts it, by projecting libido back onto the people and things from which it was initially withdrawn in the form of delusions, the neurotic, Ferenczi claims, deals with sexual excitations that have become unpleasurable (or, more accurately, *too* pleasurable) by incorporating objects from the outside world into their psychic reality or their "circle of interest," as Ferenczi calls it.²⁰ The neurotic incorporates these external objects with an eye toward attaching "free-floating and complex-escaping" excitations to them.²¹ In this regard, the psychotic and the neurotic are opposites of one another: "Whereas the paranoiac expels from his ego the impulses that have become unpleasant, the neurotic helps himself by taking into the ego as large as possible a part of the outer world, making it the object of unconscious phantasies."²² This "diluting process," as Ferenczi describes it, through which the neurotic internalizes external objects so as to mitigate

¹⁷ Sigmund Freud, "Psycho-Analytic Notes upon an Autobiographical Account of a Case of Paranoia (Dementia Paranoides)," in *Standard Edition*, 12:66.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Extracts from the Fliess Papers," in *Standard Edition*, 1:206–12, "Draft H"; Sigmund Freud, "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence," in *Standard Edition*, 3:184.

¹⁹ See Strachey's introduction to "Case of Paranoia," 12:4.

²⁰ Freud, "Case of Paranoia," 12:71; Sándor Ferenczi, "Introjection and Transference," in *First Contributions to Psycho-Analysis*, trans. Ernest Jones (London: Karnac, 2002), 48.

²¹ Ferenczi, 46.

²² Ferenczi, 47.

problematic excitations, is what Ferenczi calls *introjection*.²³ Through introjection, the neurotic widens the network of objects—or “circle of interest”—within the psyche, thereby allowing them to avoid these troublesome excitations, for example, by displacing them onto someone (say, the analyst) with whom they have formed a transference or by identifying with these excitations’ antitheses. Thus, Ferenczi assesses, “[t]he neurotic is constantly seeking for objects with whom he can identify himself, to whom he can transfer feelings, whom he can thus draw into his circle of interest, i.e. introject.”²⁴

For those who are suspicious of Freud, it may seem too convenient that he writes ambiguously about a concept that Ferenczi invents, as if the master was caught up in an unconscious—or, even, conscious—rivalry with the protégé, but this suspicion doesn’t fit Freud’s *modus operandi*. Freud regularly engages with the concepts and ideas of other theorists, and whenever he does, he never fails to define their terms or credit their authors. Just a few examples should demonstrate the point. In a footnote to the Schreber case, Freud writes this of Karl Abraham’s essay “The Psychosexual Differences Between Hysteria and Dementia Praecox”: “Abraham’s short paper contains almost all the essential views put forward in the present study of the case of Schreber.”²⁵ Here, not only does Freud cite Abraham but he—overgenerously, to my mind—characterizes his own work on psychosis as derivative of Abraham’s.²⁶ Elsewhere, Freud credits Paul Näcke with the development of the clinical picture of narcissism, describing the phenomenon, clearly and succinctly, as “the attitude of a person who treats his own body in the same way in which the body of a sexual object is ordinarily treated.”²⁷ Indeed, so concerned is Freud with properly crediting the discoverer of narcissism that in a footnote to *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, added in 1920, he corrects himself, writing that narcissism was discovered by Havelock

²³ Ferenczi, 47.

²⁴ Ferenczi, 47–48.

²⁵ Freud, “Case of Paranoia,” 12:70n; Karl Abraham, “The Psycho-Sexual Difference Between Hysteria and Dementia Praecox,” in *Selected Papers on Psychoanalysis*, trans. Douglas Bryan and Alix Strachey (London: Karnac, 1988).

²⁶ Abraham’s paper offers not so much a theoretical account of psychosis as a clinical picture of its symptomology. What theoretical material does appear in the paper owes itself to Freud. As Abraham himself put it, his account of psychosis will “stand and fall by Freud’s sexual theories.” Abraham, 65.

²⁷ Freud, “On Narcissism,” 14:73.

Ellis, and not Näcke.²⁸ From Eugen Bleuler, Freud engages, not one but two concepts—*ambivalence* and *schizophrenia*—taking up the one and critiquing the other.²⁹ This collection represents only a few examples. Throughout Freud's vast body of work, we find him referencing and discussing the concepts and theories of other researchers and schools of thought, always with terms clearly defined and properly cited. So, while it is true that Freud does not cite Ferenczi in the chapter "Identification" of "Group Psychology," it is dubious, at best, to conjecture that he was motivated by an unconscious jealousy or even envy of Ferenczi. In any case, while Freud does not cite Ferenczi in the chapter, he does so in both the chapter entitled "Being in Love and Hypnosis" as well as the paper "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes."

Without the low-hanging fruit of professional envy, we will have to search for an explanation for Freud's vague handling of introjection in the substance of his ideas. To do this, we should first look at the theoretical context in which Freud deploys Ferenczi's concept, for if we look at this context, we will find a crucial difference in the way Freud and Ferenczi understand the term, a difference that makes Freud's use of introjection decidedly un-Ferenczian.

III

Importantly, Freud evokes introjection at the precise moment that he brings *psychosis* into "Group Psychology." After providing an overview of the concept of identification, Freud writes the following: "Psycho-analytic research, which has already occasionally attacked the more difficult problems of the psychoses, has also been able to exhibit identification to us in some other cases which are not immediately comprehensible."³⁰ The mere mention here of the psychoses is already telling, but, then, Freud goes on to expound on introjection through a discussion of a specific form of psychosis, namely melancholia: "Another such instance of introjection of the object has been provided by the analysis of melancholia."³¹

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²⁸ Sigmund Freud, "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality," in *Standard Edition*, 7:218n3.

²⁹ See, for example, Freud, "Three Essays," 7:199; and Freud, "Case of Paranoia," 12:62.

³⁰ Freud, "Group Psychology," 18:108.

³¹ Freud, 18:109.

We may pause here for a moment, and without going into the actual discussion of melancholia, we may discern, from this context alone, something crucial about Freud's understanding of introjection. For Freud, introjection is associated with *psychosis*—melancholia, in particular—and not *neurosis*. We can appreciate just how far away we are from Ferenczi's original theorization of the concept. Ferenczi, as we already saw above, understood introjection to be a mechanism of *neurosis*, not *psychosis*. In fact, introjection and *neurosis* are so intimately linked in Ferenczi's mind that he describes introjection as the "diametrical contrast" of psychotic projection.³² With Freud, however, it is the exact opposite. Introjection is a mechanism that sheds important light on the inner workings of melancholia, and in this way, he understands it to be a mechanism of *psychosis*, not *neurosis*.

Even at this preliminary stage, we can already appreciate why Freud may have wanted to avoid defining introjection in any precise way: he was actively altering its meaning and, crucially, altering it in manner distinct from Ferenczi's original theorization of the concept. More pointedly, Freud was engaging in a kind of silent critique of Ferenczi's original theorization, pushing introjection toward *psychosis* and away from *neurosis*. No wonder, then, that Freud does not name introjection—instead, naming "the theory of hypnosis" in relation to "Introjection and Transference"—among the list of Ferenczi's theoretical accomplishments, in his *festschrift* for his friend and colleague's 50th birthday.³³ Freud believed that Ferenczi had gotten something crucially wrong about the mechanism, and instead of engaging in a direct criticism of his friend and colleague, he simply used the term in a redirecting manner. The difference between Freud and Ferenczi's respective understandings of the term, then, only becomes more apparent and pronounced when we move from the context of Freud's discussion of melancholia to the discussion itself.

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Freud evokes introjection in order to provide a theoretical missing link in his account of melancholia. Melancholia, as he reminds us, is a phenomenon that is characterized by a single distinct symptom: the tendency toward severe self-criticism or, what Freud calls, "a cruel self-depreciation of the ego."³⁴ In his

³² Ferenczi, "Introjection and Transference," 47.

³³ Freud, "Dr. Sándor Ferenczi (on his 50th Birthday)," in *Standard Edition*, 19:269.

³⁴ Freud, "Group Psychology," 18:109.

first theorization of melancholia, the 1917 paper "Mourning and Melancholia," Freud describes this characteristic symptom:

The patient represents his ego to us as worthless, incapable of any achievement and morally despicable; he reproaches himself, vilifies himself and expects to be cast out and punished. He abases himself before everyone and commiserates with his own relatives for being connected with anyone so unworthy. He is not of the opinion that a change has taken place in him, but extends his self-criticism back over the past; he declares that he was never any better. This picture of a delusion of (mainly moral) inferiority is completed by sleeplessness and refusal to take nourishment, and—what is psychologically very remarkable—by an overcoming of the instinct which compels every living thing to cling to life.³⁵

Freud's remarkable insight into this singular symptom—an insight that serves as the basis for his theory of melancholia as such—is that the melancholiac's "relentless self-criticism and bitter self-reproaches" are aimed, not at the melancholiac themselves (that is, not at their ego) but, rather, at the other: "Analyses have shown that this disparagement and these reproaches apply at bottom to the object and represent the ego's revenge upon it."³⁶ Freud's hypothesis is that the melancholiac once possessed a precious object, some singular other like a parent or lover, which for some reason (e.g., death, divorce, mere slight, etc.) becomes lost. Rather than brushing it off, the melancholiac regards the loss as an affront, an act of betrayal on the other's part, worthy of punishment. Importantly, whereas the neurotic, given the exact same set of circumstances, voices their complaints to some big Other, like God, or even directly to the lost other themselves, the melancholiac—and this is what distinguishes melancholia from every other psychic formation—twists these complaints back onto their own ego. That is, the melancholiac takes "revenge" upon the other for their infidelity by punishing their own ego.

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Yet, to make this hypothesis work, Freud must explain how it is that the melancholiac's ego is able to stand for the other. That is, how is it that an *internal* psychic entity, like the ego, can come to stand for an *external* object, like the other? It is at this exact moment, to provide this missing piece of the clinical puzzle,

³⁵ Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," in *Standard Edition*, 14:246.

³⁶ Freud, "Group Psychology," 18:109.

that Freud turns to introjection. “The introjection of the object is here unmistakably clear,” he writes.³⁷ Drawing upon Ferenczi’s notion that the neurotic widens the psyche’s “circle of interest” by forming identifications and transferences with external objects, Freud posits that the melancholiac absorbs the other into the ego, such that the ego is transformed into the other. Here, Freud likens the melancholiac to a young man who is unable to abandon his mother and, therefore, replaces his own ego with her imago: “he transforms into her,” he writes.³⁸ Likewise, the melancholiac is someone who is constitutionally—or, structurally, if you like—unable to mourn the loss of the other and, therefore, preserves the other by introjecting them into the ego. In this way, a portion of the melancholic ego is “altered by introjection” and “contains the lost object.”³⁹ What is crucial here is the absence of any sense of gap or space between the ego and the other. Freud’s point is not that the melancholiac adopts sundry features and aspects of the other, like donning on a mask or disguise, but, crucially, that the melancholiac “contains” the other within themselves, such that the ego is “altered” by it. That is, if the young man is transformed into the mother, the melancholiac is transformed into the lost other. To put it yet another way, the melancholic ego is not *like* the other; rather, it *is* the other. This is the meaning of Freud’s famous line from “Mourning and Melancholia,” “[t]hus the shadow of the object fell upon the ego,” a line that he repeats here in “Group Psychology.”⁴⁰ The point is not that the object simply outsizes the ego in significance or individuality but, rather, that the object overtakes or replaces the ego within the melancholic psyche itself. Only in this way—that is, only by integrating the other into the ego—is the melancholiac able to attack the other by attacking themselves.

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What should strike us in this account of introjection and melancholia is the complete lack of any sense of defense or mitigation. Introjection, as far as Freud theorizes it, is not a mechanism by which the ego evades or mitigates the unpleasurable presence of the other; rather, it is the exact opposite: introjection is the mechanism by which the overproximate other invades or inhabits the melancholic ego. Contrast this with Ferenczi’s account; recall that, for Ferenczi, introjection is a defense mechanism. The neurotic, troubled by some unpleasurable

³⁷ Freud, 18:109.

³⁸ Freud, 18:108.

³⁹ Freud, 18:109.

⁴⁰ The version from “Group Psychology” reads as follows: “The shadow of the object has fallen upon the ego.” Freud, 18:109.

(or too pleasurable) excitation, widens their "circle of interest" by introjecting various objects that can then be attached to the troublesome excitation, thereby diluting it. Ferenczi puts it this way: "[Introjection] is a kind of diluting process, by means of which [the neurotic] tries to mitigate the poignancy of free-floating, unsatisfied, and unsatisfiable, unconscious wish-impulses."⁴¹ It is from this so-called widening of the "circle of interest" that Ferenczi finds the source of the neurotic's "large-hearted, impressionable" character.⁴² All of the neurotic's various attachments to surrounding objects, from significant others, through popular figures, to the analyst themselves—these, what Ferenczi calls "'manias' of the neurotic"—are an attempt to mitigate or dilute the "poignancy" of this problematic excitation.⁴³ "The psychoneurotic," Ferenczi thus concludes, "suffers from a widening, the paranoid from a shrinking of his ego."⁴⁴

Note how introjection functions in Ferenczi's evocative descriptions of the neurotic. Introjection enlarges the neurotic's ego in order to place objects, like so many barriers, between the neurotic themselves and this troublesome "free-floating" excitation. It is this sense of a barrier that is completely missing in Freud's account. By contrast, in Freud, introjection brings the melancholiac up close to the other. Indeed, it eliminates any sense of gap or distance between the two (recall that the melancholic ego "*contains* the lost object"). There is not one hint here of mitigation or dilution. Freud does not claim that introjection attenuates the "poignancy" of the lost other. Rather, he speaks of alteration, transformation, and self-division. Whereas Ferenczi speaks of a widening or enlarging of the ego, Freud speaks of an overshadowing of the ego. For Ferenczi, introjection is the mechanism by which the neurotic is able to avoid or otherwise mitigate (dilute, in his locution) the troublesome presence of sexual excitation while, for Freud, introjection is the mechanism—exhibited, most acutely, in melancholia—by which the other overtakes or, as he puts it, overshadows the ego, thereby making them indistinguishable from one another. Thus, if Freud no longer cites Ferenczi when referring to introjection after "Group Psychology," it is not because he is

⁴¹ Ferenczi, "Introjection and Transference," 47.

⁴² Ferenczi, 48.

⁴³ Ferenczi, 46. Ferenczi's use of "mania" here is purely descriptive. Mania, as a *psychic formation*, is, as Ferenczi is well aware, a form of psychosis, and thus, incompatible with neurosis.

⁴⁴ Ferenczi, 48.

caught up in some sort of imaginary rivalry with his pupil but, rather, because he is no longer referring to Ferenczi's neurotic notion of the term.

IV

"Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego," then, is, among other things, a reconsideration and a revision of the theory of melancholia that Freud developed in "Mourning and Melancholia." When Freud was thinking and writing about melancholia between 1914-15, he already had an inkling that the mechanisms behind the phenomenon, though reminiscent of those responsible for neurosis (understood here in terms of mourning), are ultimately unique and different. The only question was how to capture that difference. Curiously, at that time, Freud did not utilize introjection for this purpose, as one might expect, although he could have, since Ferenczi had already introduced the term and he himself had already used it, strangely enough, in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," also written in 1915. Rather, Freud tries to conceptualize the difference through the concept of identification.

"An attachment of the libido to a particular person, had at one time existed," writes Freud in "Mourning and Melancholia;" "then, owing to a real slight or disappointment coming from this loved person, the object-relationship was shattered."⁴⁵ Yet, instead of reinvesting the freshly loosened libido in a new object, a new "loved person," after a period of mourning, as a neurotic would, the melancholiac withdraws the freed libido back into the ego. "There, however," Freud continues, "it was not employed in any unspecified way, but served to establish an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object."⁴⁶ Through this identification with the other, the melancholic ego becomes the object of the melancholiac's ruthless self-criticism, thereby evincing a split between "the critical activity of the ego," on one side, and "the ego as altered by identification," on the other.⁴⁷

If there is something familiar in this phrase *the ego as altered by identification*, it is because there is one just like it in "Group Psychology": "This second piece

⁴⁵ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 14:249.

⁴⁶ Freud, 14:249; emphasis in original.

⁴⁷ Freud, 14:249.

is the one which has been *altered by introjection* and which contains the lost object."⁴⁸ When put side-by-side, these phrases—the ego as *altered by identification* and *altered by introjection*—give the impression that identification and introjection are interchangeable, that they are simply synonyms of one another. Indeed, it is very tempting to believe that Freud himself understood the two terms this way—as mere synonyms—except we remember that Freud was well aware of introjection, and thus, had he wanted to use the term, he would have (and indeed already did in “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes”). Therefore, we must understand his use of identification here as an explicit choice. That is to say, we must understand Freud’s use of identification as an intentional expansion of the notion of identification to encompass both neurosis and psychosis, or, to put it oppositely, we must understand Freud’s use of identification in “Mourning and Melancholia” as a conscious attempt to avoid using introjection.

The identification—or, the “moulding” of the ego after a model—which occurs in melancholia differs from that which occurs in neurosis, Freud wants to argue, because the former is grounded in narcissism, “so that the object-cathexis, when obstacles come in its way, can regress to narcissism.”⁴⁹ In other words, the melancholiac never moves beyond narcissism; they remain trapped within its confines, even as they exhibit object-love. For the melancholiac, narcissism is not a temporary phase but, rather, a permanent or structural feature of the psyche. As such, even when the melancholiac exhibits object-love, they are still experiencing self-love. As Freud puts it, “identification with the object then becomes a substitute for the erotic cathexis.”⁵⁰ Viewed this way, the self-loathing that so characterizes melancholia is not a new symptom, which emerges when the other is lost, but, rather, *the other side* of this narcissistic self-relation. That is, if, when triggered, the melancholiac reproaches the unfaithful other by eviscerating their own ego, then, when untriggered, they love their own ego by loving the other.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Freud, “Group Psychology,” 18:109; emphasis added.

⁴⁹ Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 14:249.

⁵⁰ Freud, 14:249.

⁵¹ This language of “triggering” trades on Jacques-Alain Miller’s notion of *ordinary psychosis*, that is, nonpresenting psychosis. See, Jacques-Alain Miller, “Ordinary Psychosis Revisited,” trans. Adrian Price, *Lacanian Ink* 46 (Fall 2015): 90–115. For an excellent account of untriggered and triggered—that is, ordinary and extraordinary, or quiet and loud—psychosis, see Darian Leader, *What Is Madness?* (New York: Penguin, 2012).

Freud calls this—what we might otherwise describe as—homogenization of the ego and the other, which is responsible for melancholia, *narcissistic* identification, as opposed to the *hysterical* identification of neurosis. The difference between the two, he explains, is that in narcissistic identification, “the object-cathexis is abandoned” while in hysterical identification, “it persists and manifests its influence,” particularly in the phenomenon of mourning.⁵² When Freud writes “Group Psychology,” however, this notion of narcissistic identification completely disappears—and, with it, the distinction with hysterical identification—and in its place, appears introjection. We may pause here a moment to speculate as to why Freud may have wanted to replace narcissistic identification—and identification broadly speaking—with introjection as the conceptual frame through which to grasp melancholia.

The great advantage of identification is, of course, that it is a relation of likeness, a relation of being like the other, as we have said. As such, it offers an explanation for how it is that the melancholiac’s ego can stand for the lost other. The idea runs as follows: the melancholiac forms an identification with the other, and as such, they model their ego after the other. However, whereas an external element—i.e., object-cathexis—introduces a minimal gap between the neurotic ego and the model other, no such element exists within the melancholiac’s narcissistic identification with the other (“identification with the object then becomes a *substitute* for the erotic cathexis”) and, therefore, no such gap exists between the melancholic ego and the model other. The melancholiac’s likeness with the other, in other words, is so complete, so hermetic that the two become indistinguishable from one another.

While identification offers Freud an explanation for how the melancholiac’s ego comes to stand for the lost other—just as introjection would later do—there is a significant problem with it: identification is strongly associated with neurosis. “Identifications with the object are by no means rare in the transference neuroses either,” writes Freud; “indeed, they are a well-known mechanism of symptom-formation, especially in hysteria.”⁵³ Thus, by extending identification to melancholia, Freud is essentially using a neurotic mechanism to explain a psychotic phenomenon. The upshot of this usage is the impression that melancholia

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⁵² Freud, “Mourning and Melancholia,” 14:250.

⁵³ Freud, 14:250.

is structurally related to neurosis, that melancholia is a species of neurosis, like hysteria, we might say. Indeed, it is common for people today to believe that ordinary neurotics can suffer from acute bouts of melancholia, that *melancholia* is simply a synonym for *depression* or *sadness*, and there are even some today who have used melancholia as the basis for a theory of gender, thereby inadvertently likening queerness with psychosis.⁵⁴ But this is not, in fact, how Freud understands melancholia. For Freud, melancholia is definitively not a species of neurosis but, rather, a form of psychosis (or *narcissistic neurosis* as he sometimes calls psychosis).⁵⁵ This is why Freud introduces the distinction between *narcissistic* and *hysterical* identification: he wants to preserve the specificity of the psychoses by introducing a specifically psychotic form of identification. Could it be, then, that, in the time between "Mourning and Melancholia" and "Group Psychology," Freud grew dissatisfied with his distinction of narcissistic and hysterical identification? Could it be that he felt the distinction was not strong enough? That the mere association with identification—the qualifier "narcissistic" notwithstanding—was enough to turn melancholia into a neurosis in the minds of many? If this were indeed the case, it makes sense that he would want

⁵⁴ See, for example, Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997).

⁵⁵ Freud writes: "The ego itself came to be regarded as a reservoir of what was described as narcissistic libido, from which the libidinal cathexis of objects flowed out and into which they could be once more withdrawn. By the help of this conception it became possible to embark upon the analysis of the ego and to make a clinical distinction of the psychoneuroses into *transference neuroses* and *narcissistic disorders*. In the former (hysteria and obsessional neurosis) the subject has at his disposal a quantity of libido striving to be transferred on to extraneous objects, and use is made of this in carrying out analytic treatment; on the other hand, the narcissistic disorders (dementia praecox, paranoia, melancholia) are characterized by a withdrawal of the libido from objects and they are therefore scarcely accessible to analytic therapy." Sigmund Freud, "Two Encyclopedia Articles," in *Standard Edition*, 18:249; emphasis in original. Note Freud enumerates melancholia among the "narcissistic disorders." We find similar discussions of melancholia and the so-called narcissistic disorders in lecture 26 and 27 of the "Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis (Part III)," in *Standard Edition*, 16:412–47. In "Group Psychology" itself, Freud makes occasional references to psychosis, which may appear esoteric at first but, then, make sense once placed in relation to melancholia; for example, in the lead up to his discussion of melancholia and mania; he writes: "But it may be expected that when we penetrate deeper into the psychology of the psychoses its significance," that is, the significance of the differentiation between the ego and the ego ideal, "will be discovered to be far greater." Freud, "Group Psychology," 18:130.

a different term, a new term, to capture the specificity of the melancholiac's relation with the other.

If Freud was indeed afraid of creating too much proximity between melancholia and neurosis, this would explain why he did not use introjection from the start. At the time, introjection, as we discussed above, was considered a neurotic category, the opposite of psychotic projection. As such, it could not supply the kind of structural distinction that Freud needed to keep melancholia and neurosis separate. Otherwise put, if Freud had indeed used introjection, he still would have needed to distinguish a specifically narcissistic or psychotic form of introjection from a neurotic form, the same as he did with identification. This also means that when Freud used introjection in "Instincts and Their Vicissitudes," he was still using it in its Ferenczian sense, that is, as a neurotic category. Yet, there was still something extremely evocative in Ferenczi's original theorization of the term, something that, ironically, seemed to shed more light on melancholia than on neurosis: namely, the idea that objects can be drawn into the ego, thereby widening its "circle of interest." What if Ferenczi had gotten it right that introjection widens the ego by introducing objects into it but erred when he attributed this function to neurosis, and not psychosis? Then, it would be possible to preserve Ferenczi's core insight by recontextualizing its relevance: what Ferenczi had discovered was not the neurotic counterpart to psychotic projection but, rather, the psychotic counterpart to neurotic identification. It is precisely this recontextualization of Ferenczi's insight that Freud accomplishes in "Group Psychology." By associating introjection with melancholia, Freud shifts Ferenczi's notion away from the neuroses and toward the psychoses while, at the same time, preserving the structural distinction between melancholia and neurosis, all in one fell swoop.

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However, it would be wrong to gainsay Freud's account of narcissistic identification from "Mourning and Melancholia," for it still teaches us something important about his conception of introjection. While introjection is the psychotic counterpart to neurotic identification, we cannot say that introjection is identification's exact opposite—that is, the two are not mutually exclusive. We cannot insist upon their exclusivity because we know that where introjection now stands, narcissistic identification once was. So, while introjection is, to be sure, not identification itself, neither is it even a form of identification. At the same time, it is also not entirely correct to say that it has nothing to do with

identification; both are relations of internalization, for example. Indeed, there is something in the concept of introjection that is reminiscent of identification, something that it metonymically carries over from identification. That is why Freud was able to use narcissistic identification to signify its relation in the first place. Thus, neither identification itself nor its strict opposite, introjection is something in between. We might put their nonrelation this way: if identification insists upon the gap between the ego and the other, even as it models one after the likeness of the other, then introjection eliminates that gap, obliterates it altogether. Introjection, we may then say, is *a relation of internalization with the gap between the ego and the other removed*.

V

Thus, when Freud evokes introjection in "Group Psychology" he is equating the group's structure to melancholia. We might formulate his thinking this way: *the group is structured like a melancholia*. What exactly does this formulation mean? First of all, what it does *not* mean is that the individuals who make up the group are melancholiacs nor that the group somehow appeals to or speaks to melancholiacs or psychotics, more generally. Rather, it means only that the group *form* itself is melancholic in nature, that the group itself has the *structure* of a melancholia. To put it another way, it means that the group, like the melancholic psyche itself, is structured by introjection. So, it does not matter what the individual psychic states of the members within the group exactly are. Whether the group is comprised of individual neurotics or psychotics is irrelevant; what matters is only the group's structure itself, and that structure, I claim, is melancholic. This, then, is one of the ways we may understand the irreducibility of group psychology to individual psychology. Group psychology is not an analogy or an extrapolation of individual psychology; group psychology is not the aggregation of individual psychology because there is always a disjunction or gap between the two, a disjunction that gives the group its own psychic reality, independent of the individual psychic realities of its members.

Still, while it is clear that the group is structured like a melancholia, Freud has some difficulty pinpointing precisely where introjection functions within its form. At first, Freud attempts to grasp introjection in terms of contrast. That is, he construes it as the opposite number of the process known as *idealization*. Commenting on the melancholic psyche, Freud writes this, in the chapter

“Identification”: “[Melancholias] show us the ego divided, fallen apart into two pieces, one of which rages against the second.”⁵⁶ The first piece is the piece that has been transformed by the introjection of the lost other while the second piece is a piece that “comprises the conscience, a critical agency within the ego,” that is, the piece of the ego that has become idealized or, as Freud dubs it, *the ego ideal*.⁵⁷ This “critical agency” or ego ideal embodies the standard—that is, “the demands which [the] environment makes upon the ego and which the ego cannot always rise to”—against which everything, including even the ego itself, is compared, measured, and judged.⁵⁸

Thus, as far as Freud understands it in “Identification,” introjection represents the opposite of idealization. Part of the ego has become introjected with the lost object while another part has become idealized, and it is the conflict between these two parts that is responsible for the melancholiac’s signature self-criticism. However, in the following chapter, “Being in Love and Hypnosis,” Freud criticizes this very account, writing of the contrast that it erects: “Closer consideration soon makes it plain, however, that this kind of account creates an illusion of contradistinctions that have no real existence.”⁵⁹ *An illusion of contradistinctions*. So, the distinction between introjection and idealization is, in the end, false, “an illusion.” To get at how so, Freud uses the analogy of being in love. Idealization, he claims, is not unlike this phenomenon. Like idealization itself, being in love comes with a tendency to overvalue the other—*sexual overvaluation*, he calls it—thus, the lover will frequently overlook the flaws and shortcomings of the beloved while, at the same time, overestimating their virtues, such that the beloved “enjoys a certain amount of freedom from criticism.”⁶⁰ In the extreme case, the beloved will even be exempt from scrutiny by the ego ideal altogether, becoming themselves the very standard of right and wrong, good and bad, etc. “The criticism exercised by that agency is silent,” writes Freud of this extreme scenario; moreover, “everything that the object does and asks for is right and blameless,” and “in the blindness of love remorselessness is carried to the pitch of crime.”⁶¹ What has happened here? Why has the beloved escaped

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⁵⁶ Freud, “Group Psychology,” 109.

⁵⁷ Freud, 18:109.

⁵⁸ Freud, 18:110.

⁵⁹ Freud, 18:113.

⁶⁰ Freud, 18:112.

⁶¹ Freud, 18:113.

scrutiny by the ego's critical functions? Why has the ego ideal shut its mouth, as it were? Freud's answer here is remarkable: it is because the beloved has themselves become the ego ideal. As he puts it, "the object has been put in the place of the ego ideal."⁶² That is to say, when we fall in love or when we idealize the other, we do not simply exempt them from criticism, as if we were making a conscious choice; rather, they become integrated into the ego ideal—or, to put it another way, they become the very voice of conscience itself—and it is this merger with the ego ideal that exempts them from criticism.

It is tempting to think of this idealization of the beloved—this occupation of the "the place of the ego ideal" by the beloved—as something qualitatively different from the ego's introjection of the lost other, an internalization of a different color; and, indeed, this is precisely how Freud understands it in "Identification." However, here, in "Being in Love and Hypnosis," Freud corrects this view, claiming that their distinction is "an illusion." Going a step further, he writes: "it is even possible to describe an extreme case of being in love as a state in which the ego has introjected the object into itself."⁶³ While only in the preceding chapter, Freud understood idealization to be the opposite of introjection, he now grasps it in this chapter as itself a version of introjection. What distinguishes idealization from introjection proper, then, is not the relation itself, as both are kinds of internalization; what distinguishes them, rather, is their destination, that is, "whether the object is put in the place of the ego or of the ego ideal."⁶⁴ Introjection proper puts the other in the place of the ego while idealization puts—that is, introjects—the other in the place of the ego ideal.

If, as I claim, the group is structured like a melancholia, then it is because of the ego ideal. Put differently, the ego ideal is the melancholic element within the group structure, for it is through the ego ideal that the leader becomes introjected into the individual egos of the members of the group. Through the ego ideal, the shadow of the leader falls upon the egos of the members, as it were, overtaking and overwhelming them with an oppressive overproximity. To put it in a completely different way, when the individual members form a group around the figure of the leader, no matter what their respective psychic structures are,

⁶² Freud, 18:113.

⁶³ Freud, 18:114.

⁶⁴ Freud, 18:114.

whether neurotic, psychotic, or perverted, they experience melancholia. The group, then, in this precise sense, is a collection of individuals who are all experiencing a melancholia together. This is why the group is mad. Not because the individual members are mad but, rather, because the group structure itself is mad: melancholic, to be precise. To paraphrase Freud's own definition of the group: *a primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have introjected one and the same object in the place of their ego ideal and have consequently experienced a melancholia together.*

VI

Toward the end of "Group Psychology"—indeed, it is the very last substantive chapter of the book, the very last theoretical discussion—Freud takes up the question of melancholia's tendency to turn into *mania*. This discussion, like "Group Psychology" itself, is a recommencement of an investigation that started, but was never finished, in "Mourning and Melancholia." Freud's hypothesis at that time was that "a large expenditure of psychological energy," which had become loose, "so that it is available for numerous applications and possibilities of discharge," is responsible for mania.⁶⁵ Yet, exactly how this "large expenditure of psychological energy" becomes available in the first place is something of a mystery to him, and the further he investigates into the matter, the more questions he encounters. To begin, the work of mourning also releases psychological energy that was bound up in the lost object, and yet, mourning does not give way to mania, like melancholia tends to do. Furthermore, the very notion of withdrawing psychological energy from the lost object is antithetical to everything Freud says about melancholia; that is, melancholia, for Freud, is precisely the inability of the ego to overcome the loss of the object. Melancholia, as he explains, "consists in the threatened libidinal cathexis at length abandoning the object, only, however, to draw back to the place in the ego from which it had proceeded," so that "by taking flight into the ego love escapes extinction."⁶⁶ So, how does melancholia make "a large expenditure of psychological energy" available for mania? Freud cannot say, and he ends the essay with these words: "As we already know, the interdependence of the complicated problems of the mind forces us to break

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⁶⁵ Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia," 14:254.

⁶⁶ Freud, 14:257.

off every enquiry before it is completed—till the outcome of some other enquiry can come to its assistance.”⁶⁷

Fortunately, half a decade later, “some other enquiry,” in the shape of “Group Psychology,” did come along to assist, but in this enquiry, there is no mention of large quantities of reserve energies. Instead, Freud relies on the concept of the ego ideal. “There is always a feeling of triumph,” he claims, “when something in the ego coincides with the ego ideal.”⁶⁸ It is a feeling that comes from the ego ideal’s acceptance or approval—or, indeed, recognition—of the ego. Mania, then, is nothing more than the exponential enlargement of the feeling of triumph that accompanies the multiplication of these coincidences. In mania, Freud argues, “the ego and the ego ideal have fused together, so that the person, in a mood of triumph and self-satisfaction, disturbed by no self-criticism, can enjoy the abolition of his inhibitions, his feelings of consideration for others, and his self-reproaches.”⁶⁹ Yet, while there is no mention of the economic model of the psyche here, we can appreciate how this account from “Group Psychology” supplements the account from “Mourning and Melancholia”: The complete fusion or coincidence of the ego and the ego ideal—the dissolving of the one into the other, to paraphrase Freud—results in the release of that “large expenditure of psychical energy,” which characterizes mania and which the ego ideal had kept locked up within itself.⁷⁰ That is to say, if “[t]here is always a feeling of triumph when something in the ego coincides with the ego ideal,” then there is a feeling of absolute ecstasy of triumph when the ego completely overlaps with the ego ideal. That feeling of absolute ecstasy is mania.

It is no coincidence that Freud is finally able to find the source of that “large expenditure of psychic energy,” which he had identified in “Mourning and Melancholia” as responsible for mania, only when he writes “Group Psychology,” for it is here in “Group Psychology” that he transforms introjection into the primary mechanism of melancholia. Introjection, we will recall, is the mechanism by which the other—whether the lost other or the idealized other (the leader, in the group)—invades the space of the ego, occupying it with an oppressive

⁶⁷ Freud, 14:258.

⁶⁸ Freud, “Group Psychology,” 18:131.

⁶⁹ Freud, 18:132.

⁷⁰ Freud writes: “their ego ideal might be temporarily resolved [*aufgelöst*] into their ego after having previously ruled it with especial strictness.” Freud, 18:132.

overproximity, that is, the mechanism by which the ego ideal coincides or fuses with the ego, the confluence of the ego and the ego ideal. It is, therefore, no wonder that melancholia has the propensity to turn into mania, for introjection—its primary mechanism—dissolves any sense of barrier or distance that keeps the two apart. Thus, at any time, the introjected other can overtake and overshadow the melancholic ego, thereby releasing that “large quantity of psychological energy” which it had kept pent up within itself.

Freud’s revision to his theory of mania—that is, the introduction of introjection into its structure—has the following implication for the group: the group, insofar as it is structured like a melancholia, has the tendency to turn into a *collective mania*. It is not only that the group engages in introspection and self-loathing, as the members seek to deny the loss of some lost object, for example, a lost “abstraction,” like the nation.⁷¹ It is also that the group produces manic outbursts of frenetic energy and activity whenever the members feel a special propinquity with the leader, for example, when they have the acute sense that their leader’s wishes perfectly align with their own. What must it feel like to be in the group during one of these manic episodes, when the object of the leader completely melts into the egos of the individual members, when the members, buoyed by the perfect overlapping of their egos with the ego ideal, become completely uninhibited? It must be some combination of exhilaration and terror; “remorselessness. . .carried to the pitch of crime,” as Freud puts it. The feeling that one is invincible, invulnerable, that anything is possible, including even the overthrow of democracy itself. Such is the fate of any group formation that has introjection as its organizing principle.

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Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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⁷¹ Freud, 18:100.

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On the Collective Subject: Lacan *avec* Badiou

Keywords

collective subject, One-Multiple, mathematics, politics, Jacques Lacan, Alain Badiou

Abstract

The article aims to theoretically construct the collective subject from Lacan's Borromean turn which contains a reflection on knotting, mathematical groups and the Freudian "single trait" translated as "unary trait." Through his teaching of the One and its relation with the "unary trait," not to mention the Borromean clinic, I will develop a Lacanian collective subject. From triadic knotting to generalized Borromean, we will see how the One turns to the multiple as more than one cuts become necessary to dissolve the Borromean chain. This shift has implications for the Lacanian collective subject. This subject is non-totalizable and radically democratic with a series of One-multiples, forming the collective. The article then goes on to connect this collective subject with Alain Badiou's insistence on the inherent collectivity of the political subject and dwells on the resistant and "evental" possibilities of this collectivity. In Badiou's thought, radical politics is an evental creation of "collective" or "generic humanity." The collective subject of fidelity in Badiou is theorized at a distance from parliamentary democracy and its delegation-based representational politics. In both Lacan and Badiou, topology plays a key role in collectivizing the logic of the subject. Foregrounding this debt to mathematics, this article thinks through the ways in which the collective subject topologically reconfigures the relationship between the individual and the community by "voiding" the one of the individual with the one-multiple of the commune. The purpose of the article is to show how mathematical thinking supports the psychoanalytic and philosophical thinking of the collective subject as a political concept.

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O kolektivnem subjektu: Lacan z Badioujem

Ključne besede

kolektivni subjekt, Eno-Mnoštvo, matematika, politika, Lacan, Badiou

Povzetek

Članek si zastavi cilj teoretske konstrukcije kolektivnega subjekta iz Lacanovega boromejskega obrata, ki vključuje premislek vozlanja, matematičnih grup in freudovske »ene same poteze«, ki jo Lacan prevaja kot »unarno potezo«. Na podlagi njegovega poučevanja o Enem in njegovem razmerju do »unarne poteze«, če sploh ne omenjam boromejske klinike, bom razvil lacanovski kolektivni subjekt. Od triadnega vozlanja do posplošenega boromejskega vozla bomo pokazali, kako se Eno, ko je za razpust boromejske verige potreben več kot en rez, preobrne v mnoštvo. Ta premik prinaša posledice za lacanovski kolektivni subjekt. Ta subjekt je netotalizabilen in radikalno demokratičen, sestavljen iz niza Enih-mnoštev, ki tvorijo kolektiv. V nadaljevanju članek ta kolektivni subjekt poveže z vztrajanjem Alaina Badiouja pri inherentni kolektivnosti političnega subjekta ter se zadrži pri uporniških in dogodkovnih potencialih te kolektivnosti. V Badioujevi misli je radikalna politika dogodkovna kreacija »kolektivne« oziroma »generične človeškosti«. Kolektivnega subjekta zvestobe Badiou teoretizira v odmiku od parlamentarne demokracije in zastopniške politike. Tako pri Lacanu in Badiouju topologija igra ključno vlogo pri kolektivizaciji logike subjekta. Z izpostavitvijo zadolženosti matematiki članek premisli načine, na katere kolektivni subjekt topološko rekonfigurira razmerje med individualnim in skupnostjo z »izpraznjenjem« Enega individualnosti z enim-mnoštvom skupnostnega. Namen članka je pokazati, kako matematično mišljenje podpira psihoanalitično in filozofsko mišljenje kolektivnega subjekta kot političnega koncepta.



Lacanian Groups: Borromean One-Multiples and Collectivity

Is there a “group psychology” in Jacques Lacan? Derek Hook in “Towards a Lacanian Group Psychology” answers this question via “trans-subjectivity” (what you think the Other thinks about you) by building on Lacan’s idea of “logical time.”¹ He mobilizes the object and offers a theorization of the signifier,

¹ Derek Hook, “Towards a Lacanian Group Psychology: The Prisoner’s Dilemma and the Trans-subjective,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 43, no. 2 (2013): 115–32. Other writers hinting at the idea of group in Lacan are, for example, Scott Conkright who explores

but the argument is limited to the early Lacan. Hook does not deal with the Borromean logic in Lacan's later teachings (books 20 to 25 of *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan*). In what follows, I will use Lacan's work on Borromean knots, number theory, mathematical sets and groups to establish a Lacanian collective subjectivity that moves from the One to the One-multiple. We will then forge a dialogue between Lacan's mathematically oriented subjectivity and the Lacanian philosopher Alain Badiou's idea of the collective subject. The purpose of this dialogue is to show how the subject in psychoanalysis and philosophy is not to be reduced to the individual of liberal individualism. The subject could have a group or collective status. Lacan and Badiou's mathematical maneuvers ensure that the collective is not an oppressive totality. For Lacan, there is no collective unconscious but the singularity of one unconscious as a speaking-body speaks to another in a Borromean way. For Badiou, the collective subject is not totalized or unified. The only One it retains is the mathematical function of "count-as-one." Lorenzo Chiesa has drawn attention to the continuity between Lacan's "unary trait" and S^1 on the one hand and Badiou's "count-as-one" on the other.² I want to extend the political implication of this continuity under the banner of the collective subject. The function of mathematics in generating this collective is our key question for both Lacan and Badiou.

Before delving into Lacan's extraction of the phrase "unary trait" from Sigmund Freud's "Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego," let me make a comment on Freud's text. Freud sees the group-mind through identification in which the individual may give up on their ego-ideal and substitute it for a group ideal, incarnated by the leader. How the individual mind changes in the group remains Freud's abiding question as he explores the complex identification that happens between one group member and another, leading up to the leader. Groups have a multi-layered identification: "*A primary group of this kind is a number of individuals who have substituted one and the same object for their ego*

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jouissance and group therapy but without any intent on developing a collective subject and Macario Giraldo whose *The Dialogues in and of the Group: Lacanian Perspectives on the Psychoanalytic Group* (London: Routledge, 2012) develops a clinic of group therapy but the orientation is more clinical than political.

² Lorenzo Chiesa, "Count-as-one, Forming-into-one, Unary Trait, S^1 ," *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy* 2, no. 1-2 (2006): 68-93.

*ideal and have consequently identified themselves with one another in their ego.*³ If members identify with the leader in a mediated sense via the object, they also identify with other members of the group in a more immediate way. When Freud modifies Wilfred Trotter's appellation of the human as "herd animal" to "horde animal," he suggests that the group is not completely equal. Equality applies to the members but not to the leader.⁴

Identification is a key concept in "Group Psychology." What Freud calls "a single trait" is the second of the three types of symptomatic identification in which the subject "borrows a single trait from the person who is its object."⁵ His example is Dora imitating her father's cough. Freud calls this a "partial" and "extremely limited" form of identification.⁶ For him, this identification is regressive and does not make a libidinal object-choice.⁷ In the first type of identification, there is "the original form of emotional tie with an object," in the second identification (via a single trait), there is an "introjection of the object into the ego" and in the third, identification emerges with a person "who is not an object of the sexual instinct."⁸ In *Seminar V*, Lacan calls Freud's "single trait," an "insignia." For him, this insignia means that "for the hysteric her impasse opens wide the doors to the other— at least, the doors to all the others, that is, to all possible hysterics, even to all hysterical moments of all others."⁹ Lacan's gloss stipulates that hysterical identification through a single trait takes a collective form of subjectivity: the hysteric can identify with not only "all" other hysterics but also with the hysterical moments of non-hysterical subjects. The single trait is a portal that unlocks a collective subject, but does the "all" signal totalization? I would say no. It is not for nothing that Lacan spends so much time on the feminine logic of "not-all" in *Seminar XIX*, dedicated to his teaching on the One! The One is "not-all." It is not total.

³ Sigmund Freud, "Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1953–74), 18:80; emphasis in original.

⁴ Freud, 18:89.

⁵ Freud, 18:64.

⁶ Freud, 18:64.

⁷ Freud, 18:64.

⁸ Freud, 18:65.

⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Formations of the Unconscious*, trans. Russell Grigg (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 411.

To continue with Lacan's reading of Freud's "single trait," he offers a mathematical translation of "single trait" as "unary trait": a written mark that the subject receives from One signifier. This first identification forms the ego-ideal.¹⁰ One signifier is sufficient to produce this initial identification. This first signifier, a "unary signifier," emerges in the Other's field and represents the subject for another signifier.¹¹ As Lacan clarifies in *Seminar XVII*, the unary trait is "Being, marked *one*."¹² He positions the unary One in the Cartesian "I think therefore I am" turning it into "I am thinking, 'Therefore I am.'"¹³ The "therefore I am" is the thought of the first I who thinks. The psychoanalytic contention is that there are two "I"s in the Cartesian axiom and not one. This subjective division is the effect of the "unary trait" because the One is always already a one-multiple: "the unary trait is never alone. Therefore, the fact that it repeats itself—that it repeats itself in never being the same."¹⁴ Unary trait is the mark of the One that differentially repeats itself and produces a subject that is never quite alone. I would call this a collective subject.

This group-subject is installed *qua* 1 that repeats as the mark of pure difference in a series of Ones. There is something of the One: the One all alone. The catch is that it is not one One but many Ones all alone and yet together in a Borromean chain. The S¹ is thus punned with the multiplicity of "swarm" (*essaim*) in *Seminar XX*.¹⁵ Justin Clemens reads this "swarm" as a Lacanian group without a master or a group in which the master has become a swarm. For Clemens, these '+1' bodies are grouped together with a unary trait and not with a phallus. He calls these swarms "both pre- and trans-individual."¹⁶ While his reading of the swarm (as the technologically redefined human) is sinister in evoking destructiveness, the communitarian subjectivity I am developing here is affirmative. In *Seminar*

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, "The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire," in *Écrits*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: W. W. Norton, 2006), 684.

¹¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: W. W. Norton, 1998), 218.

¹² Jacques Lacan, *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis*, trans. Russell Grigg (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 154.

¹³ Lacan, 155

¹⁴ Lacan, 155.

¹⁵ Jacques Lacan, *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality, the Limits of Love and Knowledge*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York, W. W. Norton, 1999), 143.

¹⁶ Justin Clemens, *Psychoanalysis is an Anti-Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 165.

VIII, Lacan emphasizes the collectivizing nature of Freud's "single trait" by designating it as "a common trait":

In order for all those subjects to collectively have, at least for a moment, the same ideal, which allows virtually anything to happen for a rather short period of time, all external objects must, he explains, be taken to have a common trait, an *einzigiger Zug* [a single trait].¹⁷

The unary trait can create a commons: a collective form of subjectivity by linking multiple subject-bodies into a chain where the "+1" is the link. In the above passage, time is of essence, as it is when Lacan uses the expression "collective logic" in a sub-section title of his essay on logical time.¹⁸ He indicates that such a "collective logic" may "complete classical logic"¹⁹ but never spells out this logic of collective subjectivity.

There is an enigmatic footnote in Lacan's essay on logical time. Therein, from Freud's conceptualization of group psychology he deduces the formula that "the collective is nothing but the subject of the individual."²⁰ Does this mean Lacan is cancelling the distinction between the individual and the group? Is he crossing out the possibility of the collective subject and returning us to the individual? My answer is in the negative. The word "individual" in the formulation above is the One of the unary trait and not the individual in the liberal individualism of self-love. The leader of a group is not always one person but a shifting function in (or even out of) the group. As we witness often with political organisations or parties, the leader-function shifts from one individual to another. What they carry is a common trait: a shared object of ideology. This individual trait links more than one subject-body and produces a collective. In *Écrits*, we read:

Contrary to what people imagine, in collective identification it is by an individual thread that subjects are informed; this information is shared only because it comes from the same source. Freud emphasized that what is at stake is the

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¹⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Transference*, trans. Bruce Fink (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), 395; the phrase *einzigiger Zug* in German in original.

¹⁸ Jacques Lacan, "Logical Time and the Assertion of Anticipated Certainty," in *Écrits*, 173.

¹⁹ Lacan, 174.

²⁰ Lacan, 175.

identity that narcissistic idealization carries in itself, and allows us thus to complete the image that serves the function of the object there with a schematic trait.²¹

The passage above offers an explanation for Lacan's aforementioned footnote. It is not that the collective subject does not exist, but it becomes collective when stitched by the One or what Badiou calls the "count-as-one." We will return to Badiou's point but to continue glossing Lacan's passage, the collective subjective identification happens through a schematic unary trait. The individuality of the unary trait creates a homology between the collective and the individual. In *Seminar VIII*, Lacan spells out this homology in relation to Freud's "single trait," which he calls "common trait": "It [common trait] interests us because what is true at the collective level is also true at the individual level."²² Lacan's formula confirms that the subject is both collective and individual. It is the same subject that assumes both positions. We will go on to read Lacan's foray into set-theory, number theory and Borromean logic as an attempt to solidify this collective subject.

Lacan designates the "single trait" as a sign but not as a signifier.²³ It is a sign of the signifying chain but not a signifier. It is a mark of the One that can conjure the entire signifying battery of language. In *Seminar IX*, devoted to the topic of identification, Lacan calls his translation of "single" into "unary" "set-theoretical."²⁴ The strokes of the unary trait are associated with written letters in this seminar. Through the mathematical function of writing the subject negotiates with number, whether or not they are able to count at this *ur*-stage. We may remember Lacan's reflection on what he saw in the museum saint-Germain: the primitive hunter's marks on the Magdalenian rib bone. These unary marks form the one-multiple: "the one manifestly designates multiplicity as such."²⁵ The difference of these unary traits is not qualitative: "each one of these traits is not at all identical to its neighbour, but it is not because they are different that they function as different, but because the signifying difference is distinct from anything that

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²¹ Jacques Lacan, "The Situation of Psychoanalysis and the Training of Psychoanalysts in 1956," in *Écrits*, 400.

²² Lacan, *Transference*, 395.

²³ Lacan, 355.

²⁴ Jacques Lacan, "Identification," trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of December 6, 1961), PDF document.

²⁵ Lacan, December 6, 1961.

refers to qualitative difference.”²⁶ The difference introduced by the letter of unary trait is the quantitative difference of the one-multiple. When Lacan connects the unary trait with the unit (*monas*) in Euclid’s *Elements*, he underlines the mathematical character of the unary One.²⁷ Unary trait is a support for numerical difference. This 1 of difference serially builds a collective subject. The collective subject may look like an “all” but the “not-all” as a de-totalizing function punctuates it. The strokes are not superimposed. There are gaps between them. If they were superimposed, it would be a unified totality. The differential distance from one notch to another on the rib-bone is countable, irrespective of whether the hunter knows counting. Unary trait initiates the idea of number independent of counting. These numbers that generate a unary series on the infinite line embody a subject that is collective but not unified or totalized.

There are allusions to Gottlob Frege’s *The Foundations of Arithmetic* (1884) throughout *Seminar IX*. In *Seminar XII*, though Lacan himself says little on the relation between the One of unary trait and Frege, Yves Duroux and Jacques-Alain Miller make presentations on Frege’s number theory. They discuss how Frege’s series of natural whole numbers is haunted by the mark of lack in the 1 that repeats itself at each interval in the passage from one number to another. Duroux highlights how the number series begins from the contradiction that “the concept equal to zero and not equal to zero is the number zero. [. . .] Because zero is the object which falls under the concept zero and which at the same time is not equal to zero.”²⁸ The object zero is both equal and not equal to the concept zero. This contradiction is a crack in the passage from zero to one. It is this zero as one that repeats itself in the succession of numbers. As Miller elaborates, zero is not self-identical and this is the lack that generates the number series. Its psychoanalytic insight is structural. The contradiction in the passage from zero to one is homologous to the contradiction between the subject and the Other. According to Miller, “the representation of the subject in the Other, in the form of the one of the unary trait, is correlative to its exclusion outside of this field.”²⁹ Unary trait produces the first identification with the Other. The subject is represented in the Other as One but it is also excluded from this field

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²⁶ Lacan, December 6, 1961.

²⁷ Lacan, December 13, 1961.

²⁸ Jacques Lacan, “Crucial Problems of Psychoanalysis,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of January 27, 1965), PDF document.

²⁹ Lacan, February 24, 1965.

because the One is the mark of lack: zero. Miller rounds off: “the relationship of exteriority of the subject to the Other [. . .] constitutes this Other as unconscious in so far as the subject does not reach the Other.”³⁰ The intersubjectivity of the unconscious is riven by the cut between the subject and the Other. Frege’s number theory is a mathematical support for this topological cut. A Lacanian collective subject must make a link not by negating the contradiction but by accommodating it. The zero as One that repeats itself as the mark of pure difference is a mathematical trait that facilitates the construction of the collective subject.

In *Seminar XIX*, Lacan returns to Frege while talking about the One and designates number 1 as the “signifier of inexistence.”³¹ One is founded on the concept of inexistence because it is founded on zero. For Lacan, the One emerges from where the One is missing.³² It stems from its lack in zero. Zero’s predecessor can only be zero. This is why zero is equal to zero (equal to itself) and at the same time, it is not equal to zero (zero as its own predecessor). In Frege, there is no difference between these two zeroes and he forms the One on the basis of this identity.³³ For Lacan, zero as predecessor and successor are different and one of these two zeroes—the successor, spectrally repeats itself throughout the number series as the “+1” or the one-multiple:

In Frege’s logic, the logic that is laid out in the *Grundlagen der Arithmetik*, you will see at once the insufficiency of any logical deduction of 1, because it has to pass via 0, which cannot be said to be 1, and yet everything unfolds in such a way that the entire arithmetic sequence proceeds from the fact that 1 is missing at the level of 0. Because already, from 0 to 1, that makes two. From this point forth, it will make three, because there will be 0, 1 and 2.³⁴

Zero and one do not add up and make two but they are two countable numbers. If we count the zero, 1 becomes 2 (0, 1), 2 becomes 3 (0, 1, 2) and so on. This is the function of the “+1” that does not add up but repeats in the passage from one number to another. Lacan differentiates between unary trait and *Yad’lun* or

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³⁰ Lacan, February 24, 1965.

³¹ Jacques Lacan, . . . *or Worse*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2018), 46.

³² Lacan, 126.

³³ Lacan, 46.

³⁴ Lacan, 114–15.

there is something of the One.³⁵ But, unary trait as number reiterates his point: “*there is no other existence of the One but mathematical existence.*”³⁶ To translate this formula into Badiou’s language, the One is only a mathematical count and in a Fregeian way, there is a miscount in it. The One fails to count itself. The count is not counted as 1. We will return to this thesis in the section on Badiou. For now, let me agree with Lacan that the One has nothing to do with the individual.³⁷ The One is a “+1” of repetition in the numerical order. It marks the subject’s relationship with lack (zero). Lack as the starting point of desire binds the subject with the Other. The subject’s lack appeals to the lack in the Other. This is the opening toward a collective subjectivity in Lacanian psychoanalysis.

Lacan’s thesis on the One in *Seminar XIX* not only has implications for arithmetic but also for set theory. He argues that set theory complicates the gap between “o” and “1” by making a distinction between the “1” of set and the “1” of element.³⁸ Each set has the empty set as its element or subset. The empty set (\emptyset) is thus counted as One. It follows that “o” is counted as “1.”³⁹ Set theory at this fundamental level supports the bifidity of the divided One; one element in the set [o, (\emptyset)] already gives us two subsets. We are back to Frege’s “+1.” Set theory helps Lacan advance a mathematical idea of infinity. He holds that it performs a “*Cantorization*” of the status of number by including the transfinite number.⁴⁰ Lacan approaches the problem of the infinite set – “a set that is equivalent to *any one* of its subsets”⁴¹ – to arrive at the figure of the One as an egalitarian *any-one*. He raises questions about the use of induction in demonstrating the denumerability of the parts (subsets) of infinite sets.⁴² I cannot go into these intricacies. They are not relevant to collective subjectivity but let me mention that this problematization comes back to the bifidity of zero and one. “o” in exponential power produces “1”: “a number to the power of o is always 1.”⁴³ The ambiguous passage from “o” to “1” that underwrites the number series is the generative

³⁵ Lacan, 146.

³⁶ Lacan, 165; emphasis in original.

³⁷ Lacan, 165.

³⁸ Lacan, 124.

³⁹ Lacan, 142.

⁴⁰ Lacan, 125; emphasis in original.

⁴¹ Lacan, 138; my emphasis.

⁴² Lacan, 138–41.

⁴³ Lacan, 141.

point of inexistence (not nothingness, as Lacan reminds us throughout *Seminar XIX*) for existence. It is the starting point for the collective subject that does not stop at “1” but at “o” as “1.” Zero as stopping point for the collective subject prevents it from becoming a unified totality.

The collective subject supported by the one-multiple of the unary trait is a serial mathematical subject. Number (with or without counting) is introduced into the subject by the written letters of the unary trait: “the entry into the real as inscribed signifier – and this is what the term of primacy means – of writing. The entry into the real, is the form of this trait repeated by the primitive hunter of absolute difference in so far as it is there.”⁴⁴ The unary trait is “what precedes all counting and includes it and supports it, namely bi-univocal correspondence, the trait for trait.”⁴⁵ Lacan’s comment clarifies the unary trait’s set-theoretical status as bi-univocal correspondence or bijection: a mapping between two sets in which each element of the first set is paired with a unique element of the other set; put simply, no two elements in set A are mapped to the same element in set B. This one-to-one correspondence in set theory is a consequence of Lacan’s unary oneness. It creates a unary relation between multiple elements across sets nevertheless. This multiplicity in the One supports the collective subject. The set-theoretical bijection bridges the unary One with the Borromean logic.

In *Seminar XXIII*, Lacan links Freud’s “single trait” and his Borromean principle of knotting as a form of mathematical (geometric) inscription:

I’ve been taking an interest in this business of writing, which I promoted the first time I spoke of the unary trait, Freud’s *einzigster Zug*. By virtue of the Borromean knot, I have given this unary trait another support. [. . .] This is not the first time you’ve heard me speak about the infinite straight line, which I characterize through its equivalence to the circle.⁴⁶

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The Borromean knot is a support for the unary trait. The knot originates from the principle that the infinite line is equivalent to the circle. Therefore, it has

⁴⁴ Lacan, “Identification,” February 28, 1962.

⁴⁵ Lacan, May 30, 1962.

⁴⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Sinthome*, trans. A. R. Price (Cambridge: Polity, 2016), 125.

an intrinsic link to infinity. Three parallel lines get knotted at the point of infinity.⁴⁷ It is a minimally triadic knot (one cannot make this knot with two rings) founded on topological warping. It inscribes the relation between the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary for later-Lacan. For him, the knot is a subjective support. I would argue that it supports a collective form of subjectivity. This geometric inscription refers to a non-trivial Brunnian link in which there is no one-to-one relation among the three rings and the structure is equivalent. One could potentially plait rings three by three and produce a Borromean infinity: “You can plait for as long as you like, provided you stick to a multiple of six, as long as you like, the plait in question will always be a Borromean knot. Already just by itself this seems to open the door to an infinity of Borromean knots.”⁴⁸ Or again: “It is this +1 which ensures that, eliminate that one for example, there is no longer a chain here, there is no longer a series since from the simple fact of cutting out this one-among-others, all the others, let us say, are freed as ones.”⁴⁹

In this Borromean infinity of multiple subjective braids, we are talking about identifications by which one R-S-I knot plaits with another R-S-I knot. This is how subjects get collectivised. Jean-Michel Vappereau has shown that if we go beyond a certain number of rings, the Borromean property – cutting any one of the rings releases the entire chain/knot – changes. After a certain threshold, instead of any one ring releasing the chain, we must consider the minimal number of cuts required to release the chain. If m is the number of cuts to release, the generalization of Borromean link consists of going from $m = 1$ to the numbers, any m about a chain of n circles where $n > m$.⁵⁰ If the number of rings is fifteen, as long as the minimal number of cuts is less than fifteen, it will be called a Borromean chain. What changes in this “generalized Borromean knot” is the status of “1.” It is not that any “1” can collapse the collective anymore but the number of cuts must be minimal and less than the Ones that constitute the chain. Lacan only glimpses the generalized Borromean knot in *Seminar XVI* but never fully deploys it. Lacan’s bent toward it nevertheless indicates how

⁴⁷ Jacques Lacan, “R. S. I.,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of May 13, 1975), PDF document.

⁴⁸ Jacques Lacan, “Les non-dupes errent,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of March 12, 1974), PDF document.

⁴⁹ Lacan, “R. S. I.,” January 14, 1975.

⁵⁰ Jean-Michel Vappereau, “Sa claqué: Du nœud borroméen fort généralisé. Définition, fonction et champ de la généralisation,” *Essaim* 21, no. 2 (2008): 47.

Borromean logic, once expanded, can contain infinitesimal collectivity. Perhaps Lacan stops at “4” (fourfold Borromean knot, *sinthome* being the fourth order of a binding symptom for R-S-I) as he does not want to give up on the egalitarian Borromean property where releasing *any one* ring collapses the entire chain. Be it the pluralised names-of-the-father or *sinthome* as the fourth order constructed on top of the R-S-I knot, the binding entities in Lacan’s Borromean clinic suggest a group subject.

Borromean link connects with number and we will see how it becomes a way for Lacan to support the “+1” function discussed above. In *Seminar XXII*, he mentions the concept of the “fundamental group” for a knot. It consists in the number of journeys (of the infinite line) and crossovers for that particular knot. The fundamental group is a number that varies from one knot to another.⁵¹ The mathematical idea of the group clarifies the link between knot theory and number theory. In *Seminar XXIV*, Lacan returns to the fundamental group to state that one must count the holes in a knot to get the number of trajectories it has been constituted with.⁵² There are multiple holes in the three and fourfold knots. One must consider not only the central hole of each torus but the hole inside the torii as well. The external holes are intercut when the link is made. Internal holes remain as they are, but they house the possibility of another knot insofar as each torus of the Borromean link can have another Borromean link inside it. This group-hole in the Real constructs the collective knot-subject.

If I claim that the Borromean knot is a mode of thinking the collective subject, it has multiple implications: first, it is an equivalent or egalitarian structure where each One has the same importance. Each one is indispensable. It is not like the Olympic knot where only cutting the median ring will unknot the structure. If *any one* Borromean ring is cut, the entire structure collapses. Each ring imitates the other in this equivalent structure and one cannot distinguish the rings without coloring them. This collective braid problematizes the individual. Every one is the same and it is from this structural equivalence (read equality) that a particular attribute like colour can mark differentiation.⁵³ The second implication

⁵¹ Lacan, “R. S. I.,” May 13, 1975.

⁵² Jacques Lacan, “L’insu que sait de l’une-bévue s’aile à mourre,” trans. Cormac Gallagher (unpublished typescript, session of January 18, 1977), PDF document.

⁵³ Lacan, *Sinthome*, 40.

is that Borromean logic is triadic and not dyadic; it avoids the isolationist, fusionist and narcissistic possibilities of a coupledom that does not see beyond itself. The two is constructed by the three as a “+1” in this knot. In the quadruple chain, “3” and “4” as a double-buckle produce the “2.” The third aspect to this collective is that it is possible to collapse the chain minimally. It is a collapsible community and not a dogmatic, unbreakable party-subject. Each ring (a torus) of the knot can also have a Borromean knot inside it. This way the link is both inside and outside. The fourth point to derive from this mathematical structure as a support for the collective subject is that it combines the one and the many. Each ring is alone by itself but together in a triadic logic. This collective combines the individual and the community in a way we witnessed with Freud’s group psychology and Lacan’s reading of it, especially via the unary trait. The fifth point that makes Borromean logic immune to totalization is the impasse of the Real. The knotting happens at the level of the third, i.e., the Real. Lacan insists that Real is not only one of the rings of the link, but the knotting itself is Real.⁵⁴ When a group is not connected by language (symbolic) or ego (imaginary) but by the impossible (real), its collectivity is non-unitary, contingent and collapsible. It is the third ring’s (as the line circles up by splicing its two ends) twist around the hole shared by the two other rings that produces the Borromean triad. What binds this collective is the true hole of the Real, ratified by the infinite line that bends and warps around it. A knot-subject collectivized by the Real resists totalization since the Real can never be fully formalized. Borromean generalization reaches impasses wherein the “any one” function fails and one must think about more than one cuts to collapse the chain.

There is no dyadic relation in the Lacanian collective. The Ones in the knot have no direct link. In *Seminar XXII*, discussing the Freudian group that all subjects are part of, Lacan expands on the social group as a Borromean knot:

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The start of any social knot is constituted [. . .] by the sexual non-relationship as a hole, not of two, at least three, and [. . .] even if you are only three, that will give four. The plus-one person will be there, even if you are only three, [. . .] this will make a Borromean knot if one started from the idea of the cycle, as it is made from two knotted even if you were only three, that will make four, hence my expression plus-one. And it is by withdrawing a real one that the group will be unknotted. For

⁵⁴ Lacan, “R. S. I.,” December 17, 1974.

this you must be able to withdraw a real one to give the proof that the knot is Borromean and that it is indeed the three minimal consistencies that constitute it.⁵⁵

We do not have the scope to address sexual non-relation here, but the above passage indicates that the Lacanian social knot of a collective subject is founded on the non-relation of the Real or the “not-all” that gets added to the “+1.” This is the mathematical formula of Lacanian collective subject: “+1” punctuated by “not-all.” With this combination of “+1” and “not-all” in mind, let me now turn to Badiou’s conceptualization of the collective subject.

Badiou’s Collective Subject: Evental Politics and Mathematics

Having established a collective subject through mathematical thinking in Lacan, in this section I will connect it with Alain Badiou’s political subject as an inherent collectivity and analyze the role of mathematics in its construction. The term “collective subject” has not received much critical attention in Badiou studies. Though Badiou gets a mention in the introduction to issue 4 of the journal *Subjectivity* on “collective subjects, emancipatory cultures and political transformation,” the collective nature of the Badiouean subject is hardly discussed there.⁵⁶ For Badiou, the subject comes in the wake of an interruptive event. The subject is not the individual. The event as a contingent supplement to a situation changes the given situation and vanishes as soon as it appears. Subjectivity is constructed as a post-evental process of truth. An individual may exist before the event but provided there is fidelity to the event, we have a subject after it. In Badiou’s mathematical ontology theorized in *Being and Event*, being is a pure multiple, i.e., the multiple of a multiple. Its stopping point is not the one but the void. He uses the term “collective subject” for the political truth procedure.⁵⁷ Badiou calls such a subject “the truth of the collective’s being.”⁵⁸

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In *Being and Event* while discussing how the state does not recognize individuals but only a class of individuals, Badiou encounters the coercive statist collective. This is not the collective subject. The collective subject works against this

⁵⁵ Lacan, April 15, 1975.

⁵⁶ Alexander Dunst and Caroline Edwards, “Collective Subjects, Emancipatory Cultures and Political Transformation,” *Subjectivity 4* (2011): 1–8.

⁵⁷ Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005), 392.

⁵⁸ Badiou, 17.

pseudo-collectivity. There can be no true collectivity without attending to its members (not as individuals but members). Since the logic of the group and that of the member are similar, a group must recognize its members. The state does not recognize subjective singularity. It takes an evental politics to recognize the member as constitutive of the collective in their very being. Badiou reads Jean-Jacques Rousseau's "general will" as one such "collective operator" that "splits particular wills"⁵⁹ and leads to the creation of a "collective humanity."⁶⁰ He calls Rousseau's contract a "collective event."⁶¹

Badiou's One, like Lacan's, is only a count. It does not have any ontological grounding. The individual is not absent in Badiou but they are seen as elements of a collective principle of subjectivity:

One sees how topology is disidentifying in nature. That which in topology applies to a term, a point, an individual, by way of the determination of its site, its local adherence, must also always hold true for others, for a collective, to which this individual belongs.⁶²

Badiou agrees with Lacan's thesis that what applies for the members individually holds true for the collective.

In *Logics of Worlds* (2006, 2009), Badiou relegates the individual to a "democratic materialism" that believes in bodies and languages alone but cannot posit any truth: "The individual as fashioned by the contemporary world recognizes the objective existence of bodies alone."⁶³ He axiomatizes democratic materialism: "*There are only individuals and communities.*"⁶⁴ Let us note that democratic materialism does not cancel community but unlike evental politics, for this statist political framework, individuals and communities are static, separable entities. Community in democratic materialism is understood as an ethno-nationalist

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⁵⁹ Badiou, 346.

⁶⁰ Badiou, 345.

⁶¹ Badiou, 352.

⁶² Alain Badiou, *Theory of the Subject*, trans. Bruno Bosteels (New York: Continuum, 2009), 223.

⁶³ Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (New York: Continuum, 2009), 1.

⁶⁴ Badiou, 8; emphasis in original.

idea of one community or another. These individuals and communities cannot be transformed by the evental process of truth. In opposition to democratic materialism, Badiou axiomatizes ‘materialist dialectic’ as follows:

*The universality of truths rests on subjective forms that cannot be either individual or communitarian.*⁶⁵

Or:

*To the extent that it is the subject of a truth, a subject subtracts itself from every community and destroys every individuation.*⁶⁶

As these two axioms suggest, Badiou’s collective subject is neither individual nor communitarian. It merges the two by negating their mutual exclusivity. The collective subject as “one-multiple” is both individual and communitarian. It is neither one nor the other but both. The evental politics of truth produces a subtractive site where subjects are made at a distance from every particular community and by destroying all kinds of individuation.

In *Metapolitics*, Badiou’s proposal seems to contradict collectivity as a mathematical idea:

An event is political if its material is collective, or if the event can only be attributed to a collective multiplicity. “Collective” is not a numerical concept here. We say that the event is ontologically collective to the extent that it provides the vehicle for a virtual summoning of all. “Collective” means immediately universalising.⁶⁷

The collective is universal but not numerical. Instead of reading Badiou *contra* Lacan on this point, let me return to the numericality of the collective political subject. Unlike Badiou’s other three evental truth procedures that he calls “aristocratic,” the political truth procedure is not only collective or universal in the function of address (all truths are addressed to all) but also locally collective at every point of its composition:

⁶⁵ Badiou, 8; emphasis in original.

⁶⁶ Badiou, 8–9; emphasis in original.

⁶⁷ Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (New York: Verso, 2005), 141.

Science, art and love are aristocratic truth procedures. Of course, they are addressed to all and universalise their own singularity. But their regime is not that of the collective. Politics is impossible without the statement that people, taken indistinctly, are capable of the thought that constitutes the post-evental political subject. This statement claims that a political thought is topologically collective, meaning that it cannot exist otherwise than as the thought of all.⁶⁸

In the political truth process, an “immanent subjective infinity” is the first term, unlike in others where the infinite comes into play but not at the starting point.⁶⁹ This inaugural infinity of the political subject makes it collective. Infinity is a mathematical concept in Badiou. The collective subject shows its mathematical character here. What makes the political truth process mathematical is the relation between the state and the event. Badiou defines the state as a “meta-structure that exercises the power of counting over all the subsets of the situation.”⁷⁰ Every situation has a state but the state of the situation exceeds the situation and this excess is mathematically established as immeasurable.⁷¹ When evental politics happens, this immeasurable excess obtains a measure: “the political event interrupts the subjective errancy of the power of the State. It configures the state of the situation. It gives it a figure; it configures its power; it measures it.”⁷² From this measure Badiou arrives at the “numericality” of the political truth process. The truth process that produces the political subject is deemed as numerical. In this mathematics, we travel from one infinity to another through yet another infinity in the middle: “In the case of politics, we said that its first term, which is linked to the collective character of the political event, is the infinite of the situation. It is the simple infinite, the infinite of presentation. This infinite is determined; the value of its power is fixed.”⁷³ Political truth process begins from the infinity of the collective event and via the infinity of the state of the situation, it ends with a fixing of infinity. Badiou mathematically inscribes these three as follows:

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⁶⁸ Badiou, 142.

⁶⁹ Badiou, 143.

⁷⁰ Badiou, 143.

⁷¹ Badiou, 144.

⁷² Badiou, 145.

⁷³ Badiou, 146.

1. σ
2. $\varepsilon > \sigma$
3. $\pi(\varepsilon)$ ⁷⁴

The mathematical movement proceeds from an indeterminate to a determinate infinity. Badiou places the “1” as the climax of this political numericality:

Finally to count as one that which is not even counted is what is at stake in every genuinely political thought, every prescription that summons the collective as such. The 1 is the numericality of the same, and to produce the same is what an emancipatory political procedure is capable of. The 1 disfigures every non-egalitarian claim.⁷⁵

The Lacanian “one-multiple” of group subject returns at this juncture. Badiou writes political numericality as: $\sigma, \varepsilon, \pi(\varepsilon), \pi(\pi(\varepsilon)) \Rightarrow 1$.⁷⁶ This “1” of equality is a counting of the uncounted via the event. He calls it “the universal truth of the collective.”⁷⁷ This is where Badiou contradicts himself: the collective subject is not just universal but numerical as well. The collective’s universality lies in traversing the numericality of multiple infinities (three, to be precise) to construct the egalitarian 1. In *The Immanence of Truths* (2018, 2022) Badiou juxtaposes the apparent collectivity of parliamentary democracy with the true collectivity of insurrectionist subjectivity. In the numerical festival of elections, he locates “individuals,” as “separated” from each other in the voting booth.⁷⁸ There is no true collective in it despite the democratic semblance of collectivity. On the other hand, from political movements, mass strikes etc., a true collective emerges. He calls the democratic semblance of collectivity “individuals and their majority count.”⁷⁹ It stands in contrast to the possibilities of “collective groupings.”⁸⁰ This collective subject is a matter of construction. It must be “created” from common resources and unlike individuals who are aligned with the finite, Badiou

⁷⁴ Badiou, 147–48.

⁷⁵ Badiou, 150.

⁷⁶ Badiou, 151.

⁷⁷ Badiou, 151.

⁷⁸ Alain Badiou, *The Immanence of Truths*, trans. Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (London: Bloomsbury, 2022), 29.

⁷⁹ Badiou, 30.

⁸⁰ Badiou, 30.

organises the collective subject “on the scale of infinity itself.”⁸¹ He reminds us that collective resources are far greater than that of the individuals and they create more possibilities than the individual resource of a situation.⁸² Badiou argues that the individual approached by the state is not a subject but a singleton set. The mathematical reference to set theory is notable:

It is not the individual as a potentially infinite multiplicity, capable of truth, taking part in an event, indomitable and creative, that the State takes into account, but the singleton of that individual. It is not the real individual Ahmed who is constituted by the state as a “citizen” but rather {Ahmed}. This explains the general equivalence of all individuals in the eyes of the state, their essential anonymity. They are all singletons, hence units regarded not as what they are but as minimal subsets of the state.⁸³

The point I want to highlight (since Badiou remains silent here) is that the singleton set is *not One*: it contains the empty set as its subset— $\{\emptyset\}$. The singleton set and the empty set are its two subsets. When the state approaches the individual as a singleton, it fails to consider that the singleton is not one but two: {Ahmed, \emptyset }. This is where the Lacanian “+1” haunts the individual. It breaks the unitary Oneness of the citizen and opens the possibility of an eventual subject to emerge from the individual.

For Badiou, the political subject is collective in a mathematical way that involves numericality, set theory and infinity. This subject is internationalist in a Marxist sense. In *A New Dawn for Politics* (2021, 2022), he writes: “It is possible to organise collective life without reference to identitarian closed sets such as nations, languages, religions, and customs. All of these differences can and must coexist in a fruitful way, but on the political scale of humanity as a whole. The future lies in a complete internationalism.”⁸⁴ The collective subject does not cross out the difference of identities but allows them to co-exist in it. The identitarian differences must not be treated as “closed sets.” They must function as “open sets”

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⁸¹ Badiou, 32.

⁸² Badiou, 34, 36.

⁸³ Badiou, 297. For an earlier purchase on this idea, see *Being and Event*, 107, where he associates the individual approached by the state as a singleton, a subset and not as the name of an infinite multiple.

⁸⁴ Alain Badiou, *A New Dawn for Politics*, trans. Robin Mackay (Cambridge: Polity, 2022), 67.

that intersect and find a transcendental in the human scale. This is the “generic” subject, Badiou rebuilds from Marx but not without reference to Paul Cohen’s mathematical discovery of generic sets from the 1960s. The generic set corresponds with “generic humanity” extracted from Marx’s *1844 Manuscripts*.⁸⁵ It remains “indiscernible” within the situation as the ontological schema of truth. Generic subsets of a set cannot be easily distinguished from one another which gives them an egalitarian and equivalent status. The event activates this generic schema of truth in a subjective way.⁸⁶

Generic humanity is a collective subject: a set that needs to be constructed via the event. Badiou defines it following Marx: “to go beyond the individual, not in the direction of enjoying a withdrawal but in that of constructing a generic humanity.”⁸⁷ Evoking Bertolt Brecht’s poem, he calls generic collectivity an “unknown man.”⁸⁸ This generic subject could be anyone, much like the Borromean *any One* with the capacity to unmake the collective. Generic humanity becomes universal by stepping away from any one particular identitarian category like nationality, ethnicity, religion, class, caste and so on. It uncouples itself from these categories, but this does not mean that the categories cease to exist for the collective subject. They co-exist in the subject without the subject being reduced (“sutured” in Badiou’s language) to any one of them. They exist in the subject as serial “+1” identities but the subject is not an aggregate of these Ones. The collective generic subject is not a sum of its parts but a non-totalizable entity that makes these ones co-exist on an infinite number line. There is something more (0 as 1 in between the numbers) in the subject than these constituents. This makes the collective subject into a generic set: “a set that is as indeterminate as possible, as indistinguishable as possible from another generic set, as lacking as possible in any distinctive property.”⁸⁹

In line with Cohen, Badiou situates the generic set as the “nondescript subset of a given infinite set.”⁹⁰ Its connection with infinity is instructive. It gives the collective subject an infinite dimension. In *The Immanence of Truths*, one of the

⁸⁵ Badiou, *Immanence of Truths*, 230.

⁸⁶ Badiou, *Being and Event*, 371.

⁸⁷ Badiou, *Immanence of Truths*, 121.

⁸⁸ Badiou, 189.

⁸⁹ Badiou, 231.

⁹⁰ Badiou, 240.

four infinities (the other three being the infinity of the world, the infinity of the static work and the dynamic, constructible infinity covering the work's static infinity) involved in the work of truth is the infinity of the generic set.⁹¹ This is how Badiou describes the process:

The truth procedure, which, starting from the trace (or “name”) of the event, “works” infinitely toward its result in the world, which is the generic subset. It is in this sense that the procedure can be called a generic procedure [. . .]. This should be understood in the dynamic sense: investigation after investigation, as it moves through the world impacted by the event, the procedure creates the form and content of the generic set. Now, the work is defined as a fragment of this process, of this becoming. It is only retroactively that ontology will consider it as a subset of the result “to come” of the procedure, that is, the *generic set*.⁹²

The evental trace works in an infinite way to create the form and content of the generic subset in future anterior. The generic set is “non-constructible” and therefore it must be created. I would argue, this is the axiomatic task of collectivity as a subjective principle. Badiou finds continuity between Cohen's non-constructible generic sets and Marx's proletariat as generic humanity:

Paul Cohen [. . .] proved that we can admit, without introducing any systemic contradiction and without using any new axioms, hence from within the classical ontology of the multiple, that there exist intrinsically non-constructible sets, sets that will not be reached by the constructible hierarchy. [. . .] he called these sets *generic sets*.

The word “generic” has a long history. It is the word by which Marx referred to the proletariat in the *1844 Manuscripts*. He said that the proletariat was the representation of generic humanity [. . .] of humanity as such, not assignable to this or that identity, whether hereditary or constructible. What Marx meant by “proletariat” was in fact the non-constructible real core of bourgeois society: the workers, naturally, existed; they were there, but not only could the established order not construct them as a consistent set *as a subjective capacity*, as the creating of

⁹¹ Badiou, 453.

⁹² Badiou, 456.

a communist politics, but it couldn't even imagine, let alone admit, that such a construction was possible.⁹³

The passage above indicates that the collective subject is a generic set, non-constructible within a given situation until the event encounters and changes the situation by supplementing it infinitely to construct the non-constructible set. Within capitalism, the proletariat remains non-constructible. It takes the event that changes capitalism to create the proletariat as its generic result.

The collective subjects constitute generic infinity but as Badiou warns us, they cannot be taken as “pre-defined totalities.”⁹⁴ They are “*immanent exceptions*.”⁹⁵ Truth itself has the status of exception in Badiou. The collective subject too is exceptional: an evental product that treats a situation from its point of exception. This exceptionality saves the collective from turning into a totality. The non-totalizability of the collective subject is shared between Badiou and Lacan. The collective subject is not one or the other community (e.g., Christian or Arab). Badiou holds that “community,” caught up in identitarian discourse,⁹⁶ becomes a reactionary term. The collective subject of truth is the real or impossible of these particular communities.⁹⁷ Community in the particularist sense is a marker of finitude but the collective subject is universal, infinite and generic.⁹⁸ Its generic universality protects it from being totalized as one ethno-nationalist community or another. Though his analysis has a different goal to the present one, let me cite Chiesa to agree with him:

Unity and totality [. . .] can only be conceived of if one begins from the multiple, which initially un-presents itself in the void-set as being without-one. The fact that both elements and sets are multiples-of-multiples and thus become indistinguishable collapses the traditional distinction between unity as an element of a totality and totality as a set of unities.⁹⁹

⁹³ Badiou, 230–31; emphasis in original.

⁹⁴ Badiou, 231.

⁹⁵ Badiou, 231; emphasis in original.

⁹⁶ Alain Badiou, *Conditions*, trans. Steven Corcoran (New York: Continuum, 2008), 172.

⁹⁷ Badiou, 148–49.

⁹⁸ Badiou, 172.

⁹⁹ Chiesa, “Count-as-one,” 83–84.

In the passage above Chiesa argues that Badiou's ontology where a multiple is a multiple of another multiple *ad infinitum* collapses the difference between unity and totality as it nullifies both. The collective subject is neither unitary nor totalizable.

Collectivity in Lacan and Badiou: Politics of Mathematical Thinking

As we have seen, the mathematically constructed collectivity as a subjective principle is political in its implication for Lacan and an explicitly political subject for Badiou. Mathematical thinking serves a political purpose in both their projects across psychoanalysis and philosophy. The collective subject is mathematically political and not political despite being mathematical. Our construction of collective subjectivity opens up the political in mathematical thinking. The collective involves a political dialectic of the one and the many but it must tackle the lack or the void as the problem of the emergence of 1 from "o." The process does not privilege unity, as it does not privilege totality and individualism. This collective subject is not unitary but collapsible by the agency of *anyone*. This is what makes the collective egalitarian. Collective subjectivity does not forward individualism as the stopping point is not 1 but o. The mathematical mark of lack divides the *in-dividual*. The collective subject resists totalization in Lacan by the Real logic of impossibility and incompleteness as it does in Badiou by resisting the ethno-nationalist nomination of one particular community or another. Mathematical thinking allows us to conceptualize a structure that is collective without being totalizable or summative. Individuals do not pre-exist this collective. The collective subject in turn gives birth to members who are not the same individuals that made the collective. In *The Immanence of Truths*, Badiou calls this pre-evental individual by the name of "human animal"¹⁰⁰ but this entity only becomes a subject when the event collectivizes it and forms a subjective principle. Mathematical thinking becomes political by furnishing a structure of infinity for this collective subject. The "human animal" is finite, but the collective subject is mathematically and politically infinite.

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Before concluding, let me complete the "Lacan *avec* Badiou" circle by mentioning Badiou's own comment on Lacan's idea of collectivity. It is somewhat opposed to what I have argued here. In his 1994–95 seminar, *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy*

¹⁰⁰ Badiou, *Immanence of Truths*, 247.

3, Badiou maintains that Lacan has a timebound and finite idea of collectivity: a group that can only go on for a short while, as long as it is working together on something. When the work ends, it should disband and make another group for another work.¹⁰¹ Let me note that Badiou is talking about psychoanalytic groups, organisations, schools, institutions and not about collective subjectivity as a Lacanian concept. He points out that psychoanalytic institutions are “philosophical” and not “political” because they cannot make a group work beyond a particular act.¹⁰² For Badiou, the Lacanian group is at best a movement but not a political organization:

“Politics” cannot simply mean that people stick together for as long as it takes to do something. *That* might be a movement, or whatever you want to call it: a group, or a grouping, or an assembly, or a gathering. But it can’t be an organization in the political sense of the term because a political organization is in fact only required insofar as there’s a need to switch from one thing to another.¹⁰³

Without going deeper into the consequences of this reading, let me observe that Badiou’s position on the psychoanalytic institution may be accurate (Lacan dissolved his own psychoanalytic school in 1980) but Lacan’s thought does have a notion of collective subjectivity, irreducible to institutionalism. The collective subject is anti-institutional. Institution is a pseudo-collectivity, invested in dominant ideology. The collective subject must be formed at distance if not at loggerheads with the institutional group. Be it Lacan’s set-theoretical Borromean

¹⁰¹ Alain Badiou, *Lacan: Anti-Philosophy 3*, trans. Kenneth Reinhard and Susan Spitzer (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 183. In his 1980 “Letter of Dissolution,” Lacan critiques the idea of the “psychoanalytic group” that becomes a religious “Church.” What loses focus in the process is the very discourse of psychoanalysis. For more on this, see Jacques Lacan, *Television: A Challenge to Psychoanalytic Establishment*, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman et al., ed. Joan Copjec (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 130. To clarify, in this article, I am not talking about group as psychoanalytic organisation or institution but group-subject as the possibility of a collective principle of subjectivity coming out of psychoanalytic theory and practice. In *Briefings on Existence*, Badiou makes a more positive remark on the relation between mathematical group theory and Lacanian psychoanalysis in the piece “Group, Category, Subject” by arguing that the subject-group is infinite which makes psychoanalysis “incompletable.” The group, as Badiou formulates on page 150, “works as a matheme for a thought on the subject.” This formulation aligns well with the argument of the present paper.

¹⁰² Badiou, *Lacan*, 184.

¹⁰³ Badiou, *Lacan*, 183–84; emphasis in original.

subject or Badiou's evental subject, their politics lies in the way they encounter the Real and counter the institutionalism (the Big Other in Lacan and the state in Badiou) of the Symbolic and the Imaginary.

To conclude, in this article I read Lacan *avec* Badiou to construct a category of the collective subject from their works. This subjectivity as a principle is collectivised via mathematical thinking. Its political underpinnings in Lacan become programmatic sites for political action in favour of change in Badiou. The purpose of reading Lacan with Badiou is to show how the latter makes patent what remains latent in the former i.e., the political repercussions of mathematical thinking. Mathematical thinking in its immanent materiality supports the political subject of change. As I demonstrated, in both Lacan and Badiou, the collective subject is non-summative, egalitarian, non-identitarian, anti-individualist and non-totalizable. Its collectivity is mathematical but not instrumentalist in a numerical determinist sense. If anything, the collective subject is evental and non-deterministic in its accent on the Real of collapsibility. The collective subject frees psychoanalysis (Lacan) once more from its age-old critique as an individualist clinic and makes room for evental politics in philosophy (Badiou).

Data availability statement

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analysed during the current study.

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Navajanje literature na koncu prispevkov

Na koncu prispevka je navedena celotna literatura, urejena po abecednem redu. Seznam lahko vključuje le literaturo, ki je navedena v sprotni opombi.

Slike

Slike se ne vstavljajo v prispevek, označi se samo približna mesta, kjer bodo objavljene. Slike se pošilja v jpg formatu, ločljivost najmanj 300 dpi.

Ostale informacije avtorjem

Prispevki bodo poslani v recenzijo. Avtorji se strinjajo s pogoji objave, navedenimi v *Obvestilu o avtorskih pravicah*, ki je objavljeno na spletni strani revije. Avtorjem bodo poslane korekture. Pregledane korekture je treba vrniti v uredništvo v najkrajšem možnem času. Upoštevanji bodo samo popravki tipografskih napak.