

## Trauma and the Material Signifier

Linda Belau  
George Washington University  
lbelau@gwu.edu

© 2001 Linda Belau.  
All rights reserved.

---

Perhaps the most mysterious and the most devastating dimension of trauma is its apparent power to confound ordinary forms of understanding. Trauma seems to belong to another world, beyond the limits of our understanding. Indeed, this is precisely the point of interest for the deconstructive school of trauma theory, led by theorists such as Shoshana Felman and Cathy Caruth.<sup>1</sup> But if trauma's seeming incomprehensibility has been the paradoxical starting point for one of the most important avenues of its study, it has also invited a dangerous elevation of traumatic experience to the level of an ideal. That is, insofar as it remains beyond our understanding and comprehension, trauma can easily be seen as a sort of exceptional experience. And victims or survivors of trauma, consequently, may be seen as ambassadors of an exceptional realm, bearers of a higher (albeit more terrible) knowledge than is available to the rest of us.

But, as we shall see, traumatic experience is not in fact inaccessible in the way or to the degree that its major theorists have asserted. Because traumatic experience—and experience in general—is tied to a system of representation, to language, it is necessary to come to an understanding of the role that the signifier plays in trauma. And this is where psychoanalysis can make its major contribution to trauma studies. In an attempt, then, to move beyond the deconstructionist claim that trauma resides "beyond the limits of representation," this essay is specifically concerned with the significance of the signifier for an understanding of traumatic experience and the unconscious repressed. Because traumatic experience is grounded in the repetition of an impossibility, it is indelibly tied to the real beyond the signifier. In this sense, trauma opens up an ethical space beyond the symbolic which is, nevertheless, intimately tied to the materiality of the signifier and, therefore, to our social and linguistic destiny. This ethic of the impossible, however, drives the subject beyond the social to an encounter with the inadequacy of the signifier as she moves beyond the particular event of her suffering to a failed encounter with the very possibility of knowing that suffering completely. The psychoanalytic intervention assures us, then, that we are responsible in the face of something that exceeds symbolic guarantee. This is the ethical dimension of trauma that gets left behind when we attempt to place

---

<sup>1</sup> See, for example, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*, or Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Caruth's edited collection *Trauma: Explorations in Memory* is also exemplary in this regard. One might also consult Lawrence Langer's *Holocaust Memories: The Ruins of Memory* for a very engaging argument about the persistence of trauma beyond our usual social understanding.

traumatic experience beyond language and representation, beyond the traumatic materiality that is the signifier.

### ***Repetition is the Materiality of the Signifier***

The signifier is nothing if not inadequate: this is the meaning of the materiality of the signifier. This is what psychoanalysis, first and foremost, teaches us. And it is precisely around the question of this inadequacy (as materiality) that psychoanalysis seems always to be misunderstood and even criticized. Much of this misunderstanding, it seems, circles around the question of where this inadequacy finds itself. Is this inadequacy characterized by a certain content that is prohibited--beyond the scope of language and discourse as a social bond--or is this inadequacy itself nothing other than the most significant dimension of the signifier? This latter suggestion, at least, would support the notion of a correlation between the inadequacy and the materiality of the signifier. This inadequacy has everything to do with the way the signifier comes into "being" as *creatio ex nihilo* (Lacan, Book VII 115-27). Because of this "creation out of nothing," the inadequacy that marks the signifier--what, in a sense, is excluded in it or "beyond" the signifier--does not precede its loss. The signifier comes into being only insofar as it marks the subject with a certain lack; something of an originary or primal plenitude is lost. This, according to psychoanalysis, is always imagined as the symbiotic relationship between the child and the mother. The traumatic loss of this primal experience of satisfaction, this original homeostasis, is the price the subject must pay for entry into the symbolic and the differential relations of desire. The signifier is thus characterized by an inadequacy which is registered through the subject in two ways: First, the signifier cuts the subject, leaving a gap or lack. This lack splits the subject. The subject also registers the signifier's inadequacy insofar as it is the signifier that is inadequate to fill in or make a complete restitution for the traumatic loss the subject suffers as its split. The signifier, that is, cannot make good the loss the subject suffers, a loss inaugurated by the advent of the signifier and the entry into the symbolic.<sup>2</sup> This is the constitutive failure that Freud named castration. What is lost in castration is a certain guarantee that satisfaction can be attained through the signifier. One always has a failed relation to a primary experience of satisfaction. And this failure, this cut on the body, marks the birth of knowledge and its counterpart, desire. It marks the birth of the human as desiring subject.

Like Adam and Eve, exiled from the Garden of Eden as the price paid for the realization of knowledge, we must pay the price for our entry into language. Thus, we can never return to our lost "presymbolic" origin. Not because this return is prohibited, however, as it appears to be for Adam and Eve, but because it is impossible. When a certain Edenic past is prohibited, as it is for Adam and Eve, it is held up as an ideal past, as a time that might be repossessed through some ideal situation (in the Christian heaven, for example) or by some exceptional entity (God who lives in heaven). When a certain primal past is impossible, as the primal origin of the subject is for psychoanalysis, it can never be repossessed "as it was." It can only be encountered through repetition as an impossible experience in the present. There is

---

<sup>2</sup> This, it would seem, is precisely the meaning behind Lacan's notion that the subject suffers the signifier. Developing his meditation on the relationship between the Thing and the subject--what he calls the "human factor"--Lacan writes "the human factor will not be defined otherwise than in the way that I defined the Thing just now, namely, that which in the real suffers from the signifier" (Book VII 124-5).

no lost, Edenic origin we might otherwise hearken back to if it were not for the oppressive and limiting confines of our symbolic order. And there is no entity so exceptional that he can reclaim the mother and maintain his subjectivity.<sup>3</sup> This notion of a prohibited primary satisfaction beyond the limitations of the symbolic is pure fantasy, and it completely misses the point of repetition. And, as far as Adam and Eve and the prohibition of knowledge are concerned, the possibility for the satisfaction of a primal, utopian Eden is also not so imminent. One can easily maintain that the tree of knowledge is not necessarily prohibited in the case of Adam and Eve since it is only after the exile, after the advent of knowledge and understanding that Adam and Eve first come to understand the very concept of prohibition. The prohibition, that is, only makes sense from a perspective outside or beyond the garden since there would be no garden—at least no understanding of the garden--without its loss. Before one begins to imagine some presymbolic or prelinguistic origin cut off from the social discourse of man, then, it is necessary to realize that no such primal satisfaction is ever directly given.

As far as the subject is concerned, however, there is no ontological existence prior to recognition in the Other, and the existence of a "time before time" can only be understood through the logic of repetition or the "earlier state" that Freud mentions as the aim of the death drive.<sup>4</sup> This is a past that the subject necessarily loses, and it is precisely through this loss that the subject is able to constitute his "origin" *après coup* as an act of repetition. The logic of this lost origin, produced after the fact of the advent of the symbolic, is nicely illustrated by Lacan's notion of the *vel*, the forced choice the subject must submit to in order to enter the symbolic. And it is precisely this loss that opens up the space for the traumatic real since it creates something beyond symbolization.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the "origin" that the subject supposedly loses never

---

<sup>3</sup> The kind of "exceptional" subject who is able to escape the cut of castration and the subsequent loss of the maternal Thing is, of course, the psychotic. This is why we could say that he lives an ideal existence. He lives the ideal. The psychotic forecloses the Name-of-the-Father; he is stuck in an imaginary alienation, thus thwarting the law (and the protection) of the symbolic. Because the psychotic chooses the worse (*pire*) over the father (*père*), he does have access to an uncut, unlimited *jouissance* that is embodied in the figure of the primal mother. This may make him exceptional, but it doesn't necessarily give him the ability to enjoy his satisfaction.

<sup>4</sup> Freud introduced the ego instincts and their correlate, the death drive, in order to consider the possibility of attaining primal satisfaction. Such satisfaction is the function of the drives. The organism is conservative in nature, Freud argues, and is, therefore, subject to a compulsion to repeat: we unconsciously strive, Freud maintains, to return to a primal, symbiotic state. In the fifth chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud discovers the relation between drives and repetition:

How is the predicate of being instinctual [*treibhaft*—of the drive] related to the compulsion to repeat? At this point we cannot escape a suspicion that we may have come upon the track of a universal attribute of instincts [drives] and perhaps of organic life in general which has not hitherto been clearly recognized or at least not explicitly stressed. It seems, then, that an instinct [drive] is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life. (36)

<sup>5</sup> In his reading of Lacan's example concerning the forced choice ("your money or your life") that parallels the alienation the subject undergoes upon entry into the symbolic, Mladen Dolar writes that

the forced choice entails a loss and opens a void. The advent of the symbolic presented by the forced choice brings forth something that did not 'exist' before, but which is nevertheless anterior to it, a past that has never been present. It 'creates' something that cannot be symbolized--this is what Lacan called the Real--and which at its 'first' appearance is already lost. The example is meant to illustrate the price one has to pay for the entry into the symbolic. Yet the example may be misleading insofar as it suggests that one might actually have

actually precedes his entry into the symbolic but is, instead, produced by the very symbolic it supposedly generates. Without the symbolic, that is, there would be no possibility of imagining a "prior condition." This is how the subject's "origins" are retroactively posited in repetition. Another way to articulate this point is as follows: The signifier marks the subject twice. It marks the subject as the primordial cut where the signifier carves the subject out of the body, and it also marks the subject in its failure to cover the void opened by that very cut. The paradox lies in the temporality of these marks: that is, the first mark, the primordial cutting up of the body, can only be produced by the signifier. However, this signifier doesn't actually "exist" (or function) until the symbolic space opened up by the second marking--the failure of the signifier--can produce the functioning signifier. In the logic of this chiasmic metalepsis, the signifier appears at the impossible intersection of the chiasmus; its effect stands in as its cause. Freud calls this retroaction. Lacan calls it repetition. It is in this form of repetition that the signifier finds both its materiality and the meaning of its inadequacy. And it is for precisely this reason that psychoanalysis is a praxis founded in repetition and not an idealism based on an interpretive hermeneutics. Because the subject of psychoanalysis is also subject to the movement of repetition, which is constituted in and through the inadequacy of the signifier, psychoanalysis is not an idealism. Psychoanalysis, therefore, does not work to solve the mystery of the subject by uncovering the lost truth of some ideal past since such an interpretive endeavor misses both the abyssal logic and the paradoxical temporality of traumatic experience.

### ***The Tragic Encounter, or Why Psychoanalysis is not an Idealism***

Through his analysis of the alienating veil that constitutes the subject, Lacan argues that the split in the subject keeps psychoanalysis from ever becoming a recapitulation of what he calls the conceptual flaw of philosophical idealism. Concerning Hegel's supposedly totalized notion of a successful synthesis, Lacan writes:

The essential flaw in philosophical idealism... cannot be sustained and has never been radically sustained. There is no subject without, somewhere, aphanasis of the subject, and it is in this alienation, in this fundamental division, that the dialectic of the subject is established. In order to answer the question I was asked last time concerning my adhesion to the Hegelian dialectic, is it not enough that, because of the veil, the sensitive point, point of balance, there is an emergence of the subject at the level of meaning only from its aphanasis in the Other locus, which is that of the unconscious? (Book XI 221)

Psychoanalysis, Lacan says, does not offer a closed or totalized model of the subject. Because of the rift the signifier makes in the subject, and because the signifier can never close this rift, the subject maintains an opening, a constitutive lack that is otherwise inassimilable by the subject. We may even say that this radical negativity is the subject, for any closure of this opening would also mean the disappearance of the subject.<sup>6</sup> Psychoanalysis does not attempt to turn this negativity into something

---

possessed 'life with money' before being presented with the choice, whereas entry into the symbolic demonstrates the intersection is produced by choosing--as something one never had, but lost anyway. (88-9)

See also pages 203-15 of Jacques Lacan's *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Seminar XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, for Lacan's account of the forced choice and its function in the mechanism of alienation.

<sup>6</sup> According to Slavoj Žižek,

the subject is nothing but the impossibility of its own signifying representation--the empty place opened up in the big Other by the failure of this representation. We can now see how

tenable or meaningful. Instead, it works at the level of this impossibility as an act of staging (rather than solving) the mystery of the subject's lost origin. The hermeneutic practice that characterizes psychoanalysis shows that there is more truth in the analytic scene's repetition than in any so-called original scene. Here we see how psychoanalysis is a praxis structured in repetition.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan examines the concept of repetition in order to demonstrate how, in its practical rigor, psychoanalysis can only but avoid the ideological pitfalls of idealism. He opens the famous fifth chapter of the seminar with a short preamble specifically addressing charges of psychoanalysis's supposed reductiveness.<sup>7</sup> According to his critics, Lacan tells us, it would seem that, in its supposed idealizing reductions, psychoanalysis ignores the serious and challenging causes of our troubles--conflicts, struggles and the exploitations of man by man--for an empty and self-reflective view of the subject that in no way connects to the real world. Psychoanalysis, it seems, leaves reality behind in order to dabble in a mythic world of make-believe, irrelevant nonsense. What could otherwise possibly be the significance of something as untenable and unverifiable as the Oedipus complex, for example, in our understanding of the serious and debilitating effects of trauma? The Oedipus complex, it seems, functions only as a device for psychoanalysis to maintain its impoverished and self-serving approach to the otherwise very serious problems it purports to address. Isn't this the reason that the Oedipus complex takes center stage in the discourse of psychoanalysis?

With the discovery of infantile sexuality and the Oedipus complex, Freud was able to demonstrate how an impossible encounter organizes the subject of the signifier in the movement of repetition.<sup>8</sup> Borrowing from Greek tragedy, Freud accesses the movement of this impossible encounter through the logic of withdrawal that the Oedipus complex enacts. Freud does not borrow from the Greeks in order to resuscitate some lost origin or throw credence on a long-forgotten myth. He is, rather, after a particular point of repetition. Freud, that is, embraces the Oedipus myth in order to expose the impossible and abyssal structure of identity through the Greek tragic experience of recognition. In this sense, then, the Oedipus complex, for Freud, is not so much a stage (a "time" or occurrence in the infant's life) as it is a structure.

In *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan insists that Oedipus did not suffer from the Oedipus complex. Instead, he argues, Oedipus moves beyond the sphere of the service of goods and into the zone in which he pursues his desire.<sup>9</sup> Pursuing his

---

meaningless is the usual reproach according to which Hegelian dialectics 'sublates' all the inert objective leftover, including it in the circle of the dialectical mediation: the very movement of dialectics implies, on the contrary, that there is always a certain remnant, a certain leftover escaping the circle of subjectivation, of subjective appropriation-mediation, and the subject is precisely correlative to this leftover:  $\$ \langle \rangle a$ . The leftover which resists 'subjectivation' embodies the impossibility which 'is' the subject: in other words, the subject is strictly correlative to its own impossibility; its limit is its positive condition. (Sublime Object 208-9)

<sup>7</sup> Here Lacan writes: "I wish to stress here that, at first sight, psycho-analysis seems to lead in the direction of an idealism. God knows that it has been reproached enough for this--it reduces the experience, some say, that urges us to find in the hard supports of conflict, struggle, even the exploitation of man by man, the reasons for our deficiencies—it leads to an ontology of the tendencies, which it regards as primitive, internal, already given by the condition of the subject" (Book XI 53).

<sup>8</sup> I have undertaken this analysis of the significance of infantile sexuality in both Freud's theory and in the theory of trauma and repetition in my forthcoming book *Encountering Impossibility: Trauma, Psychosis, Psychoanalysis*.

<sup>9</sup> Lacan writes: "It is important to explore what is contained in that moment when, although he has renounced the service of goods, nothing of the preeminence of his dignity in relation to these same

desire to know, Oedipus pushes to the limit of the symbolic, encountering the real as the truth of his origins.<sup>10</sup> Pushing beyond the enigmatic words of the blind Tiresias, Oedipus is driven to the traumatic truth of the Sphinx's impossible riddle. In this sense, Oedipus turns away from the symbolic mandate—the infuriating pronouncements of the father—to the impossible maternal Thing. He embraces the traumatic recognition of incestuous enjoyment. What Oedipus seeks in this recognition is a knowledge without return. Knowledge comes too late for Oedipus, however. He misses the experience, which, for him, is the constituting moment of his subjectivity, precisely because he is too present to the experience. He actually did enjoy the incestuous union with the mother. This experience, however, as chance encounter, as *tuché*, was unreadable as such.

According to Lacan, it is precisely this unreadability, as the function of the real in repetition, which forms the kernel of trauma:

What is repeated, in fact, is always something that occurs... as if by chance.... The function of the *tuché*, of the real as encounter--the encounter insofar as it may be missed, insofar as it is essentially the missed encounter--first presented itself in the history of psycho-analysis in a form that was in itself already enough to rouse our attention, that of trauma. (Book XI 55)

And it is only in the repetition of the event, after the fact and within the social realm of the Thebian context, that Oedipus is able to read his terrible deed as the event it is: that is, as the missed event. It is precisely this miss that lends the traumatic, uncommemorable dimension to the tragic event. This is precisely why Lacan will say that only repetition can commemorate the trauma, which is, otherwise, unrecognizable in itself.<sup>11</sup> Impotent in the traumatic recognition of his loss, Oedipus can only repeat an impossible commemoration of the missed encounter. Unable to posit any object in the place of the radical negativity of the traumatic experience, Oedipus's mourning is impossible.

According to Freud's "Mourning and Melancholia," melancholia is the result of an inability to cathexis a loss, an incomplete work of mourning, which leaves a kind of residue or scar, traumatically exposing what Lacan calls the subject's "extimate" structure. According to Freud, certain patients suffer an unconscious loss that defies understanding.<sup>12</sup> This notion of an unconscious loss suggests an impossible loss, or the loss of loss itself. What is lost, then, is precisely that which, in the object, is more than the object.<sup>13</sup> The "content" of this loss is correlate to the unconscious repressed.

---

goods is ever abandoned; it is the same moment when in his tragic liberty he has to deal with the consequence of that desire that led him to go beyond the limit, namely, the desire to know. He has learned and still wants to learn something more" (Book VII 305).

<sup>10</sup> As far as Freud's choice of Oedipus as the seminal myth for psychoanalysis is concerned, it is no insignificant coincidence that Oedipus's search for the truth also turns out to be a search for his origins.

<sup>11</sup> Concerning this inaccessibility of trauma, Lacan says, "only a rite, an endlessly repeated act, can commemorate this not very memorable encounter" (Book XI 59).

<sup>12</sup> According to Freud:

One feels justified in maintaining the belief that a loss of the [unconscious] kind has occurred, but one cannot see clearly what it is that has been lost, and it is all the more reasonable to suppose that the patient cannot consciously perceive what he has lost either. This, indeed, might be so even if the patient is aware of the loss which has given rise to his melancholia, but only in the sense that he knows whom he has lost but not what he has lost in him. This would suggest that melancholia is in some way related to an object-loss which is withdrawn from consciousness, in contradistinction to mourning, in which there is nothing about the loss that is unconscious. ("Mourning and Melancholia" 245)

<sup>13</sup> For an account of what, in the subject, is more than the subject, see the conclusion of Lacan's *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. What Lacan is speaking about here is the *objet a*. While this

Not knowing how to lose this "more than," the subject of psychoanalysis clings to the possibility of objectification by disavowing the structural impossibility that inheres in such a relation. One cannot make the unconscious present, for it is precisely the impossibility of such an encounter with the unconscious that marks it in the first place. The melancholic, then, much like the traumatized subject, endlessly repeats his impossible relation to the loss of loss, collapsing into the abyss of a failed symbolic.

As psychoanalysis attempts to address this collapse via the (failed) symbolic through an act of reading the fundamentally unreadable *tuché*, it pursues a traumatic knowledge—an impossible recognition—that is essentially the ruin of psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis, that is, is never able to get to the place that it holds out as the "origin" of the analysand's problems. In the practice of analysis, something is always left undiscovered. Something is always necessarily not present to the scene of analysis. This is not because that certain something is impossible to reach, but rather because reaching that certain something necessarily means missing it. As it performs its own failure in this ruinous recognition, psychoanalysis guarantees that it can never hold itself up as an idealism. And it is precisely this guarantee that ultimately gives psychoanalysis its tragic dimension. Imposing a shattering recognition onto the hero—or, in psychoanalysis, onto the subject, the analysand—the structure of tragedy enacts the ruin of the tragic character. This, of course, is the movement of what Lacan calls Oedipus's desire and it is the fundamental character of all tragic experience, including the analytic experience.

Crossing the limits of fear and pity, Oedipus's terrible deed must remain outside the action of the drama (Aristotle 28). This reminds us very much of that certain something which can never be present to the scene of analysis if analysis is to maintain its ethical adherence to the *tuché*, to the impossible encounter with the real. This is also fundamental to the experience of tragedy, for to stage everything would be to engage in spectacle, something Aristotle believes will "produce only what is monstrous" (26). Thus, it would seem, in order for tragedy—or psychoanalysis—to offer the purifying rituals of fear and pity, it must recognize the significance of certain limits, it must hold back something from the experience. That is, the spectator must be suspended in a desiring relation to the tragic effect insofar as the scene of recognition remains concealed as an other scene—eine andere Lokalität. Thus, we see the emergence in both the tragic and the analytic experience of a primal scene. That is, the impossibly present scene which functions on the level of a structure rather than as a place or time. The other scene of Oedipus's recognition, the moment of his blinding, remains concealed in order to structure the entire action of the drama as an impossible event. Of course, this parallels the scene of "recognition" for the analysand.

Oedipus's recognition of an impossible event exposes the structure of the missed encounter. It is precisely this relation to the missed encounter that both tragedy and psychoanalysis expose as the traumatic kernel of subjectivity. By performing the impossibility of a total knowledge through the concealed (off-stage) recognition, which Oedipus encounters as the truth of his being, as his "monstrous doom," tragedy does expose that monstrous element which it, at the same time, purports to conceal.<sup>14</sup>

---

special object is not exactly correlate to the content of the unconscious repressed, both concepts are characterized by something radically negative that nonetheless registers as excessive.

<sup>14</sup> See Sophocles, Oedipus, where the blind and bleeding Oedipus, after finding out the terrible truth, says to the Choragos "Death take the man who unbound my feet on that hillside and delivered me from death to life! What life? If only I had died, this weight of monstrous doom could not have dragged me and my darlings down" (70).

This, it would seem, is also the essence of analytic practice.<sup>15</sup> This is why Oedipus finds himself at the center of analytic experience, for, as Lacan tells us, "tragedy is the forefront of our experiences as analysts" (Book VII 243). Grounded in the experience of tragedy, finding the tragic hero par excellence as the touchstone of its structural theory and its impossible method, psychoanalysis finds its "truth" in its recognition of the traumatic real. Structured through a failed practice of reading the unreadable tuché, unable to step outside the repetitious structure of this impossible encounter, psychoanalysis can never elevate itself to the level of an idealism.

### ***Psychoanalysis and the Primal Experience of Trauma***

As Lacan grounds analytic practice in the experience of tragedy, he suggests that the practice of psychoanalysis has never allowed us to dodge the difficulties or realities that plague the subject. This is because psychoanalysis aims its understanding at the abyssal structure of castration and the Oedipus complex, toward the real or impossible core of the subject that, according to Freud, is at the bottom of all our discontent. In the opening of the third chapter of *Civilization and its Discontents*, as he discusses the three fundamental sources of our suffering, Freud turns to the problem that the social source of suffering presents us. As far as the social arena is concerned--the field of the subject in the symbolic--Freud wonders why we have not been able to overcome suffering. Why haven't we progressed far enough to a point where we could, as it were, successfully address the serious and challenging causes of our troubles? What, exactly, is it that keeps getting in our way? Freud quickly comes to the conclusion that it is the very structure of the subject--our own psychical constitution--that causes the suffering.<sup>16</sup> Insofar as the subject is constituted in the materiality of the signifier and is, therefore, subject to the real that is extimate to the symbolic, he will always also be subject to what Freud refers to as his "unconquerable nature." Through attention to the signifier and the structure of the subject in the Oedipus complex, psychoanalysis directs its attention toward this unruly dimension of our psychical constitution, toward this piece of the real that persists in the materiality of the signifier. "No praxis," Lacan tells us, "is more orientated towards that which, at the heart of experience, is the kernel of the real than psychoanalysis" (Book XI 53). And where does psychoanalysis meet that real? In a praxis that is organized through the possibility of an encounter with the abyssal structure of the subject; in an analytic technique that embraces the inadequacy of the signifier; in the paradoxical search for the impossible primal origin that is constituted *après coup* through the advent of the subject. In these practices, psychoanalysis arrives at what Lacan calls "an appointment to which we are always called with a real that eludes us" (53). Because of its devotion to this meeting, in its fidelity to the real, psychoanalysis emerges as an ethical praxis.

As he grounds the praxis of psychoanalysis in "the real that eludes us," Lacan introduces the concept and the temporality of the tuché. Borrowing this concept from Aristotle, who uses it in connection with the question of cause, Lacan tells us that the

---

<sup>15</sup> For an insightful essay exploring the relation between monstrosity and the real, see Slavoj Žižek, "Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears."

<sup>16</sup> Freud writes: "As regards the third source, the social source of suffering... we cannot see why the regulations made by ourselves should not, on the contrary, be a protection and a benefit for every one of us. And yet, when we consider how unsuccessful we have been in precisely this field of prevention of suffering, a suspicion dawns on us that here, too, a piece of unconquerable nature may lie behind--this time a piece of our own psychical constitution" (*Civilization and its Discontents* 86).

tuché is translated as the encounter with the real.<sup>17</sup> This bears directly on the place that trauma occupies in analytic experience, especially since traumatic experience, as a missed experience, is neither chronologically linear nor diachronically constituted.<sup>18</sup> Insofar as psychoanalysis is grounded in what is not assimilable by it, it can only function as a repetition of the impossibility of assimilation, as a repetition of a trauma that is necessarily experienced as impossible. Based on a repetition of the subject's traumatic primal origin--an origin that is both constituted by and overcome through the Oedipus complex, that fundamental inauguration of the subject--psychoanalysis does not attempt to posit a linear chronology for traumatic experience. Psychoanalysis does not, in other words, limit itself to a diachronic analysis of the subject that would allow for a time or a place from which traumatic experience originates.

Owing to psychoanalytic terminology, however, there has been much confusion concerning this point. Insofar as Freud referred to the autoerotic stage, the oral stage, the anal stage, and the genital stage, for example, many later articulations of Freud's theory take the diachronic development of the individual--of the ego--as the focus of their practice. Thus the object of study takes precedence over the method of engagement. This will come to reflect the division in psychoanalysis between a sustained focus on the ego and a continued analysis of the materiality of the signifier. Ego psychology, for example, first instituted by Anna Freud, embraces the diachronic development of the individual in order to make the ego central to analysis and to an understanding of trauma. According to Lacan, however, who dedicates the whole of his first seminar to what he calls the "functional role, linked to technical necessities" of the ego in Freud's theory, this perception of the ego and the subsequent place it will come to have in psychoanalysis is quite improper, especially where the significance of the technique of repetition in the understanding of trauma is concerned (Book I 24). According to Lacan:

Technique is, and can only be, of any value to the extent that we understand wherein lies the fundamental question for the analyst who adopts it. Well then, we should note first of all that we hear the ego spoken of as the ally of the analyst, and not only the ally, but the sole source of knowledge. The only thing we know of is the ego, that's the way it is usually put. Anna Freud, Fenichel, nearly all those who have written about analysis since 1920, say it over and over again--We speak only to the ego, we are in communication with the ego alone, everything is channeled via the ego. (16)

As an adequate source of knowledge for the analyst, speaking to the ego will presumably give us all we need to know about trauma. Such knowledge, however, is precisely not the point for a meaningful understanding of trauma.<sup>19</sup> In order to "fully" understand the logic of trauma, something must be missed. And what is missed always finds itself at the center of psychoanalytic technique--technique not as sustained analysis of the ego but as repetition of the impossibility of understanding.

Such explicit attention to the ego--in which the analyst focuses on the potential of the subject to become a harmonious totality, which essentially treats the analyst and

---

<sup>17</sup> This has obvious connections to the idea of the subject's impossible origin and what Lacan calls "the structure of the unconscious causal gap" (Book XI 46).

<sup>18</sup> According to Lacan, the missed encounter that organizes the temporality of trauma is an encounter with the timeless real: "Is it not remarkable that, at the origin of the analytic experience, the real should have presented itself in the form of that which is unassimilable in it--in the form of the trauma, determining all that follows, and imposing on it an apparently accidental origin? We are now at the heart of what may enable us to understand the radical character of the conflictual notion introduced by the opposition of the pleasure principle and the reality principle" (Book XI 55).

<sup>19</sup> Such knowledge is also entirely antithetical to the kind of impossible knowledge in which Oedipus finds himself traumatically immersed.

as an object--misses the point of the function of the signifier in the subject. It also ignores the significance of repetition in the analysis of trauma as it purports to find a cure for the traumatic neuroses in its communication with the ego. This ignores the persistence of something beyond our ability to address it. "This ego, what is it?" Lacan asks. "What is the subject caught up in, which is, beyond the meaning of words, a completely different matter?" (Book I 17). As psychoanalysis turns its attention beyond the notion of a fully accessible ego, beyond the blindly ambitious assumptions of Anna Freud's ego psychology, psychoanalytic praxis--as it is re-invented in Lacan's return to Freud--will not organize itself around the diachronic development of the individual or its eventual ability to "come to terms with" the conditions of traumatic experience. It will not privilege the object of its attention over the method of its engagement with that "object." This is why psychoanalysis concerns itself with an understanding of the subject as an impossibility and not as just another object among others, or why it engages trauma as structurally impossible rather than as just another experience among others. In its technical rigor, that is, psychoanalysis endeavors to expose the fundamental impossibility that is the origin of the subject in order to provoke an encounter with the traumatic real.

Examining the connection between knowledge and man's relation to the world (a relation that can be sketched in terms of the origin of the species--phylogenesis--or on the level of the development of the individual--ontogenesis), Lacan claims that "the very originality of psychoanalysis lies in the fact that it does not center psychological ontogenesis on supposed stages" (Book XI 63). Instead, Lacan tells us, psychoanalysis considers the origin of the subject in terms of the *tuché*, the encounter with the traumatic real, which also determines that the development of the subject is entirely animated by an accident (*tuché*), by the causal gap that is the unconscious (54). Psychoanalysis, then, is based on the analysis of something inherently non-chronological insofar as it posits the real cause of the subject. It is based on an analysis of the impossible: on the metaleptic logic of the missed encounter and the return of the unconscious repressed. This, as we have seen, is why the Oedipus complex and the significance of castration take center stage in psychoanalysis. As the final "stage" of the Oedipus complex, castration irrevocably marks the subject as subject of the signifier. Through attention to the function of castration and the abyssal structure of the Oedipus complex, psychoanalysis works at the level of the materiality of the signifier. As a praxis that addresses the inassimilability of traumatic experience or the impossibility of a lost experience, psychoanalysis brings the truth of trauma to the scene of analysis the only way it is able: it repeats it as an experience in the present.

In this sense, psychoanalysis can never become a reductive idealism. In its theorization of the subject and, especially, in its understanding of trauma, psychoanalysis does not posit the lost experience as some idealized content "beyond the limits" of experience or understanding. Furthermore, psychoanalysis does not posit an "unspeakable" as a kind of prohibited, transcendental possibility beyond our discursive capabilities since it posits that only through language can there be an unspeakable.<sup>20</sup> As it performs the encounter--the *tuché* that organizes analytic practice

---

<sup>20</sup> This point is nicely illustrated by Mladen Dolar:

Only in and through language is there an unspeakable—that remainder produced as the fallout of the Symbolic and the Real.... What is beyond the signifier is not beyond reach--not something one could not influence or work upon. Psychoanalysis is precisely the process designed to touch that being, that elusive object, and since it is the product of the impact of

in relation to the accident, which is also the tuché that characterizes the development of the subject--analytic practice does not posit an ideal that it holds out as its transcendental organizing principle. Instead, it embraces the materiality of the signifier in its repetition of the impossibility that structures both the subject and traumatic experience. In this sense, psychoanalysis does not localize the impossibility of the subject or of traumatic experience in a prohibited content but, rather, constantly invokes these impossibilities as its very real praxis.

### ***Psychoanalysis is Itself the Primal Scene it Seeks***

This, it seems, is precisely the point that Jacques Derrida misses in his critique of Lacan in "La Facteur de la Vérité." Derrida's text interrogates Lacan's notion of the materiality of the signifier, taking particular issue with a supposed inherent conservatism implicit in what he calls the indivisibility of the signifier:

In its materiality: not the empirical materiality of the sensory signifier (*scripta manent*), but the materiality due, on the one hand, to a certain indivisibility... and on the other hand to a certain locality. A locality which itself is non-empirical and non-real since it gives rise to that which is not where it is, that which is "missing from its place," is not found where it is found or (but is this the same thing?) is found [se trouve] where it is not found. (424)<sup>21</sup>

It is the notion of that which is "missing in its place," the phallus as signifier, that seems to offer Derrida the most egregious example of the idealizing practice of psychoanalysis. Derrida, in fact, claims that the phallus, as the "transcendental signifier," is not an absence but, rather, is the very concrete device that psychoanalysis uses to circumvent its supposed lack. Here Derrida performs a little sleight of hand or, perhaps we should say, a sleight of the letter, in order to make his claim:

Question of the letter, question of the materiality of the signifier: perhaps it will suffice to change a letter, perhaps even less than a letter, in the expression *manque à sa place* [lack in its place, missing from its place], perhaps it will suffice to introduce in to this expression a written a, that is, an a without an accent mark, in order to make apparent that if the lack has its place [*manque a sa place*] in this atomistic topology of the signifier, if it occupies a determined place with defined contours, then the existing order will not have been upset: the letter will always re-find its proper place, a circumvented lack (certainly not an empirical, but a transcendental one, which is better yet, and more certain), the letter will be where it always will have been, always should have been, intangible and indestructible via the detour of a proper, and a properly circular, itinerary.... Lacan, then, is attentive to the letter, that is, to the materiality of the signifier. (425)

According to Derrida, this transcendental quality of the signifier, the indivisible singularity of the letter, posits a closed system that circles around the ideality of the signifier.

Derrida needs the fantasy of his grammatical sleight of hand, however, in order to maintain a critique of Lacan that posits meaning at the level of the signified rather than at the level of the materiality of the signifier. His reading, thus, is entirely imaginary and this is precisely why he turns to the a (the *matheme* for the *objet a*) to prop his fantastical reading. With the a--the fundamental object of fantasy in psychoanalysis (\$<a)--Derrida is attempting to localize the radical impossibility--what we might, here, call the materiality of the signifier--that Lacan's reading of the letter both invokes and addresses. In the passage above, of course, Derrida is also

---

language, it can only be tackled through words (psychoanalysis being a "talking cure" from its very first occurrence on), and not by any other, supposedly more direct means. (95n21)

<sup>21</sup> In this passage, Derrida is responding to Lacan's claim that this "materiality is odd [*singuliere*] in many ways, the first of which is not to admit partition" ("Seminar on the Purloined Letter" 53).

referring to another letter. This would be the love letter that Poe's hero, Dupin, is supposed to recover in the short story "The Purloined Letter." According to Lacan's famous reading of the two scenes of discovery in this story, "a letter always reaches its destination" (Book II 205).<sup>22</sup> Through an analysis of the relation of two scenes, Lacan shows that what counts for the story--just as it counts in analysis--is how the one (earlier) scene plays itself out in the other (later) scene.

In analysis, this is precisely how the unconscious repressed--the traumatic primal scene that is lost in the subject--is accessed. It returns in the present in the scene of analysis. Psychoanalysis does not need to regress to a time before time, before the time of the subject, in order to access the correct "content" of the unconscious repressed because there is no positive content to the unconscious repressed other than the form of its return. Repression, Freud tells us, never precedes its return (Beyond the Pleasure Principle 19-20). Since the primal scene can only be constituted through the symbolic order, whatever comes to the fore in the scene of analysis as the lost origin of the subject is precisely what the analysis was supposedly "searching" for.<sup>23</sup> Through its interpretive infelicity, its excessive act of repetition, psychoanalysis is able to commemorate the radical dis-content that trauma both inaugurates and exposes. Whether one considers the movement of trauma from the perspective of the splitting of the subject in the signifier or from the Freudian notion of repetition of the unconscious repressed, trauma itself, as the kernel of our being, as that which constitutes what we, as human beings, experience as the unbearable condition of our finitude, can only be "fully" understood through a recognition of the logic of the missed encounter. Because psychoanalysis itself has no identity outside the structure it seeks to analyze, it can only commemorate the traumatic missed encounter--the primal scene--as the forgotten event. As a repetition of this structure, psychoanalysis is always more (or other) than itself in the working through of trauma, which is itself a provocation of the traumatic scene, that other scene, which Freud called *die andere Lokalität* of the unconscious repressed. This is precisely why psychoanalysis is a reading practice rather than a reductive idealism. According to Barbara Johnson,

Psychoanalysis is, in fact, itself the primal scene it seeks: it is the first occurrence of what has been repeating itself in the patient without ever having occurred. Psychoanalysis is not the interpretation of repetition; it is the repetition of a trauma of interpretation... the traumatic deferred interpretation not of an event, but as an event that never took place as such. (142)

Thus, psychoanalysis is necessary to trauma, just as trauma is necessary to psychoanalysis. And any attempt to engage with trauma--the analysis of the movement of trauma as witnessing, for example--must necessarily think the repetitious structure of psychoanalysis as a failed act of reading.

Inscribed in this repetitious structure, of course, is the traumatic primal scene, an impossible scene that, forever missed, propels the metaleptic structure of the trauma. It is primarily the impossibility of trauma that is traumatic, then, not an external event that resists interpretation. And it is only psychoanalysis that can

---

<sup>22</sup> Derrida's thorough indictment of the practice of psychoanalysis (thinly veiled as a reading of Lacan's reading of Poe's story) essentially endeavors to show that some letters do not arrive at their destinations.

<sup>23</sup> In her very insightful reading of this particular debate between Derrida and Lacan, Barbara Johnson remarks that "the 'primal scene' is not a scene but an interpretive infelicity whose result was to situate the interpreter in an intolerable position. And psychoanalysis is the reconstruction of that interpretive infelicity not as its interpretation, but as its first and last act. Psychoanalysis has content only insofar as it repeats the dis-content of what never took place" (142).

address the form of this repetition, since psychoanalysis itself is nothing other than the repetition of its failed performance. Thus, according to Johnson, psychoanalysis "is not an interpretation or an insight, but an act--an act of untying the knot in the structure by the repetition of the act of tying it" (142). Every attempt to interpret, to represent, or to understand the trauma repeats traumatically the withdrawal which trauma fundamentally is. In this sense, trauma is engaged only in and as an impossible encounter. And psychoanalysis is witness to this encounter as it embraces the metaleptic temporality of repetition. Through its failed reading of the unreadable tuché, then, through its traumatic understanding grounded in fidelity to the real, psychoanalysis is grounded in the very impossibility of witnessing.

### ***Witnessing: The Obscenity of Understanding***

In Seminar XX, Lacan tells us that "reading in no way obliges us to understand" (65). Given the structure of trauma, we should not expect a simple straightforward understanding of it. In addition, Lacan tells us, analytic interpretation is based more on a refusal of understanding than a premise of comprehension.<sup>24</sup> This is exactly the point Claude Lanzmann makes in his famous Shoah, an eight-hour documentary film comprised mostly of interviews with Holocaust survivors. This important film has also come to occupy the center of the deconstructive school of trauma theory, especially as both Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman have turned their attention toward the film (Caruth, *Trauma and Memory*; Felman, "The Return of the Voice"). Insofar as he ventures to undertake a radical refusal of understanding, however, Lanzmann seems rather indebted to a psychoanalytic sensibility, especially as he speaks of his directorial endeavor to transmit an impossibility, to represent something that is unspeakable and, in doing so, to expose what he calls the obscenity of understanding.<sup>25</sup> Not to understand, Lanzmann maintains, not to understand "why," was the only ethical way to approach a representation of the Shoah. Thus, we can assume, whatever his film intends to undertake as its function or purpose, the obscene meaning of Auschwitz, in its radical absurdity, is perhaps the only stable law: "Hier ist kein Warum."<sup>26</sup> The absurdity of this law defies and destabilizes understanding, for

---

<sup>24</sup> Lacan established his fundamental method around this very point as he discusses the strategies for analysis with his class:

What matters, when one tries to elaborate upon some experience, isn't so much what one understands, as what one doesn't understand.... How many times have I said to those under my supervision, when they say to me--I had the impression he meant this or that--that one of the things we must guard most against is to understand too much, to understand more than what is in the discourse of the subject. To interpret and to imagine one understands are not at all the same things. It is precisely the opposite. I would go as far as to say that it is on the basis of a kind of refusal of understanding that we push open the door to analytic understanding. (Book I 73)

<sup>25</sup> According to Lanzmann:

There is an absolute obscenity in the very project of understanding. Not to understand was my iron law during all the eleven years of the production of Shoah. I clung to this refusal of understanding as the only possible ethical and at the same time the only possible operative attitude. This blindness was for me the vital condition of creation. Blindness has to be understood here as the purest mode of looking, of the gaze, the only way not to turn away from a reality which is literally blinding. ("Obscenity of Understanding" 204)

<sup>26</sup> Literally, this means, "here is no why." The Nazi's eradication of this principle, of the warum (why), is, according to Primo Levi, how the Jews were abjected in camps. It is the law of Auschwitz. The denial of the warum becomes, for Levi, the sight for utter anguish; it marks the annihilation of the person. See Claude Lanzmann's "Hier ist kein Warum" (279).

the question one would presumably ask in the face of utter annihilation is, precisely, warum?

It is this annihilation of meaning--here, the impossibility of witnessing--that imposes the gap in understanding that Lanzmann is concerned with. In the same way that Freud's theory works to transmit the unconscious repressed in the structure of repetition, Lanzmann hopes to bring out the truth of witnessing through an impossible transmission of the incomprehensibility of the Shoah. Thus, for Lanzmann, the act of bearing witness does not necessarily lend itself to the production of meaning. For Lanzmann, it seems, bearing witness takes place only in and as this form of transmission.<sup>27</sup> It is only in and through the act of an impossible transmission that the obscenity of understanding becomes the scandalous possibility that Lanzmann's film repeats. And, according to Shoshana Felman, it is precisely this approach to representation and the event that Lanzmann's film transmits.<sup>28</sup> What the film is about, then, Felman maintains, is the performance of a certain impossibility. In this sense, Lanzmann's film does not turn the trauma of the Shoah into an object for our voyeurism; instead, it offers the best representation it can through a refusal of understanding and through the repetition that such a refusal will generate.

Despite her seeming sensitivity to the pitfalls of understanding, Felman appears, in the end, to miss her own point. In a published interview with Lanzmann, Felman cannot seem to keep herself from inserting her own clarifying remarks into Lanzmann's otherwise open-ended text. Here, for example, is a passage interrupted by Felman's bracketed interpellation:

'Hier is kein Warum': Primo Levi narrates how the word 'Auschwitz' was taught to him by an SS guard: 'Here there is no why,' Primo Levi was abruptly told upon his arrival at the camp. The law is equally valid for whoever undertakes the responsibility of such a transmission [a transmission like that which is undertaken by Shoah]. Because the act of transmitting is the only thing that matters, and no intelligibility, that is to say no true knowledge, preexists the process of transmission. ("Obscenity of Understanding" 204)

What Lanzmann essentially manages to accomplish here with the vague prose that Felman felt compelled to clean up is the repetition of an impossibility. In this text--before Felman's intervention--Lanzmann maintains a fundamental confusion: whose transmission is he referring to, his or Levi's? What this vague passage performs is the impossibility of ever making a clear distinction between the two. That is, the impossibility of ever distinguishing the first scene of the trauma--Levi's past experience of the camps--from its repetition in a second scene in the present--the context of its return as the failure of its symbolic (or filmic) inscription.

Given Lanzmann's position, such a move toward clarity, toward understanding, is egregiously inappropriate. This is not to say, however, that Felman's infidelity somehow undermines Lanzmann's text, for it is precisely in such a betrayal that the force of Lanzmann's impossible position is enacted. That is, in refusing the indeterminacy of Lanzmann's position, by attempting to impose a kind of identity (no matter how split) onto Shoah (as that which undertakes such and such a transmission,

---

<sup>27</sup> According to Lanzmann, "the act of transmitting is the only thing that matters, and no intelligibility, that is to say no true knowledge, preexists the process of transmission" ("Obscenity of Understanding" 204).

<sup>28</sup> According to Felman, "Shoah bears witness to the fragmentation of the testimonies as the radical invalidation of all definitions, of all parameters of reference, of all known answers.... The film puts in motion its surprising testimony by performing the historical and contradictory double task of the breaking of the silence and the simultaneous shattering of any given discourse, of the breaking--or the bursting open--of all frames" ("Return of the Voice" 224).

as a transmitted), Felman makes the most loyal of gestures in her refusal of Lanzmann's impossible transmission. Failing to understand the impossible encounter that Lanzmann's film attempts to enact, Felman's betrayal of the witness itself performs a kind of obscene understanding, marking the primal scene, the missed encounter, which Lanzmann's impossible transmission therefore enacts.

Since Lanzmann is, indeed, illustrating the movement of understanding rather than speaking about the understood—which is always only an objective external product of the movement of understanding itself—we can begin to see why the film is, as Lanzmann tells us, a philosophical rather than a historical document. Insofar as Lanzmann's text seems to want to function on the level of transmission without falling into a transmitted, it, in a sense, harkens back to that primordial obscenity which understanding is as a limit, suspending the reader, traumatically, without a transmitted that can be dealt with by any identity, no matter how shattered. As he refuses the moralizing gesture that embraces the radical negativity of the trauma as something we must understand, Lanzmann remains faithful to the exigencies of the materiality of the signifier to which he is blindly subject in his impossible transmission of the obscenity of understanding.

In this sense, one might ask of Lanzmann how the impossibility of understanding is approached; how is it itself understood? According to Felman, Lanzmann's film offers us the possibility to expand our horizons:

To understand Shoah is not to know the Holocaust, but to gain new insights into what not knowing means, to grasp the ways in which erasure is itself part of the functioning of our history. The journey of Shoah thus paves the way toward new possibilities of understanding history, and toward new pragmatic acts of historicizing history's erasures. ("Return of the Voice" 253)

This is truly an enigmatic passage, for it is difficult to read exactly where Felman situates herself. On the one hand, Felman recognizes the dimension of trauma that Lanzmann's film evokes as it endlessly repeats the impossibility of transmission. Despite this insight, however, Felman maintains, on the other hand, that "Shoah is a film about the relation between art and witnessing, about film as medium which expands the capacity for witnessing... Shoah gives us to witness a historical crisis of witnessing, and shows us how, out of this crisis, witnessing becomes, in all senses of the word, a critical activity" (205-6). Here she seems to miss the very point she embraces above, since she essentially sees witnessing as productive of knowledge. If nothing else, the crisis of witnessing will make witnessing itself more effective, more useful. It will make the real of the trauma accessible to the symbolic, available for symbolic exchange.

This is precisely not the point that Lanzmann is trying to make, however, as his notion of an impossible transmission essentially demands that the activity of witnessing collapses in its own intentions. This, as far as trauma is concerned, is where and how the real appears in the symbolic. And it is this insight that puts Lanzmann on the side of psychoanalysis.

### ***Beyond the Symbolic: Putting Trauma to Work***

Witnessing does not bring about the success of recollection or guarantee the success of the testimonial account; rather, Lanzmann tells us, witnessing enacts its own impossibility; it is its own demise. This paradoxical movement, not some horrible external event, is precisely what emerges as traumatic for the witness. This is why trauma can never be put to use, and this, in turn, is why it exceeds the symbolic

economy. The fact that trauma exceeds symbolic exchange does not, however, mean that it exists outside or "beyond" the symbolic since the very possibility of excess is part of the symbolic economy. To posit trauma as outside the symbolic, as inaccessible, would simply be to elevate trauma to the level of a transcendental ideal. If trauma were such an ideal, the fact that it exceeds symbolic exchange would hardly be of concern. It is only because the symbolic cannot address the logic of trauma adequately that trauma is registered at all. While trauma itself may be proper to the real, the failure of its inscription is registered in the symbolic. Because of this, the real of trauma can be said to be inherently symbolic. This parallels a common misunderstanding concerning the real in its relation to the symbolic. The real--correlate to the "beyond the signified" of the trauma—is not "beyond" the symbolic. It is rather the very limit of the symbolic, the impossible kernel of the symbolic around which it circles, what the symbolic attempts to cover over as its very industry.<sup>29</sup> To posit the real as somehow separate from the symbolic entirely misses the point of its significance. The real is nothing other than the point at which the symbolic fails; it is not some idealized content beyond the symbolic. Its very structure precludes that possibility.

Felman attempts to see this relation through in her pedagogic practice as she accidentally incorporates a critical crisis into the material of her class.<sup>30</sup> Rather than positing the failure of the symbolic class space as a marking of the real of the course material, however, Felman wants to expand the symbolic space in order to reach a kind of prohibited or inaccessible real. In her class, Felman seems bent on identifying herself as a kind of trauma counselor for her existentially bereft students, offering them, in this exchange, the possibility for an expanded frame of reference--a broadening of their understanding--through the splitting, loss, and repossession of identity. This identification demonstrates a strong desire for the possibility of a pathetic intervention into the process of witnessing, an intervention which (much like her intervention into Lanzmann's text) allows for a certain understanding of things, an understanding that maintains the security of an emotional engagement. And such engagement will, ultimately, teach us something about understanding and trauma, if not for the betterment of mankind, then, perhaps, for the betterment of pedagogy.

Felman engages the context of witnessing in a very thoughtful way, insisting, for example, that testimony must be considered in terms of a practice rather than a theory. Focusing on the significance of the speech act, Felman tells the story of her class, performing, in the process, her own evocation of the impossibility of witnessing. Claiming the unpredictability of testimony as her muse, Felman recounts the story of a class in crisis. It is surely an interesting story, but it takes a curious turn as Felman inserts herself into the position of the analyst, her class seemingly playing the role of the traumatized analysand:

Looking back at the experience of that class, I therefore think that my job as teacher, paradoxical as it may sound, was that of creating in the class the highest state of crisis that it

---

<sup>29</sup> This is also what provokes repetition. For a very clear explication of this point, see Joan Copjec, *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists* (120-21).

<sup>30</sup> The focus of the class, a graduate seminar entitled "Literature and Testimony," was, according to Felman, the analysis of various accounts of crisis. The class crisis, which became the focus of her essay, developed around the screening of two video testimonies by survivors of Auschwitz. These videos were part of the Video Archive for Holocaust Testimonies at Yale University. For a detailed account of the content of the class and the different sorts of crises Felman addressed, see Felman's "Education, Crisis and the Vicissitudes of Teaching."

could withstand, without "driving the students crazy"--without compromising the students' bounds.

The question for the teacher is, then, on the one hand, how to access, how not to foreclose the crisis, and, on the other hand, how to contain it, how much crisis can the class sustain. ("Education, Crisis" 53-4)

While she is clearly playing the part of analyst here, Felman's intention to contain, control, and define the crisis betrays a naive understanding of crisis as productive.<sup>31</sup> That is, Felman wants to believe that her class learned something from the "witnessing" they enacted.

Thus, it would seem that in Felman's classroom, at least, trauma is not an experience without return. By undergoing the crisis of silence, of the impossibility of representation, her students emerged from their crisis experience shaken but better for the experience--becoming nicer people or wiser scholars, perhaps. In a paper she delivered to the class in response to the crisis, Felman claims that her students "can now, perhaps, relate to this loss more immediately, more viscerally" (50). Here she suggests that her students have experienced loss, that something (rather than nothing) is lost. What is lost, of course, is a certain prohibition. But overcoming the presumed prohibition in such a way only reinforces the belief that traumatic experience is a kind of prohibited--and therefore ideal--experience. These exceptional students, that is, have attained the ideal; they have an immediate relation to the traumatic beyond representation. What is prohibited for the rest of us is available to them. Having experienced this overcoming of the prohibition, having attained the ideal, Felman's students may now move on with their lives all the more capable of understanding their presumed loss of identity, all the more secure in their newly expanded horizons.

"I am inviting you now to testify to that experience," Felman tells her class, "to repossess yourselves" (51). Here Felman plays the guru who is able to return to the class something essential, some prohibited content that representation cannot seem to muster. In this sense, she offers them access to an idealized notion of trauma, to an experience of trauma as beyond the limits of understanding. Thanks to her, those limits have just been expanded, and the newly expanded insight allows for a broader perception of experience. Although Felman makes many claims about her pedagogy paralleling the analytic scene, her essentially deconstructionist theoretical position compels her to completely ignore the significance of the signifier in traumatic experience and to focus on the signified, on the value inherent in the linguistic sign, instead. Thus, it would appear that she is more interested in trauma as a meaning, albeit prohibited, rather than as a structure or as a relation. This difference is precisely the crux of the dissimilarity between psychoanalysis and deconstruction.<sup>32</sup> Insofar as

---

<sup>31</sup> Not to mention the touchy-feely sentiment about not "compromising her students' bounds." Private property has never been a cornerstone of analytic experience, and disrupting the analyst's "bounds" is precisely what the entire undertaking is all about. So, on one hand, Felman seems to want to open her students' horizons, to make a certain prohibited experience available to them while, on the other hand, she does not want to offend or disrupt her students' bounds (horizons) too much. She will kindly spare their feelings and their established sense of identity. One usually forfeits the possibility for an ethical act as soon as he takes on the pathological "nice guy" persona, however. Ethical acts are not necessarily moral acts, Lacan reminds us in his seventh seminar. Only the moral actor can guard against hurt feelings.

<sup>32</sup> Another way to characterize this difference is to say that, for deconstruction, the subject is impossible while, for psychoanalysis, the subject is that very impossibility. And this makes the subject of psychoanalysis tenable in a very unique way. This is also why psychoanalysis is able to treat the subject as something other than just another object among others. And this is also why and how psychoanalysis avoids the pitfalls of idealizing its subject.

her teaching provokes her students to recognize something that they could "truly learn, read, or put to use," Felman's pedagogy posits trauma as a signified (53). Trauma, she demonstrates, is "out there" beyond our usual capacity for understanding. As such, it has the miraculous potential to broaden our horizons. Insofar as trauma, as an attainable ideal experience, can teach us new things about ourselves, it can work for us. It can make us better.

### ***Recollection and the Ideal Form of Memory***

With her latent desire to put trauma to work, Felman expresses the same kind of approach to the impossibility of representation that Lawrence Langer pursues in his work on trauma and memory. Unlike Felman, however, Langer does not incorporate any kind of classical psychoanalytic approach in his theory. Instead, Langer relies on a strange sort of psychologizing of the survivor of traumatic experience, focusing on the disruptions of memory and the plurality of selves that traumatic experience engenders. Thus, Langer embraces the concept of simultaneity, which becomes the guiding principle for his descriptions of Holocaust survivor witness testimonies, characterized by what he calls disruptive memories.<sup>33</sup>

Here lies the essence of remembrance for Langer: mnemonic continuity and discontinuity existing side-by-side, never canceling each other out but never exactly living in harmony, either. Langer speaks of the "twin currents of remembered experience." These are, he says, akin to a "time clock" that flows uninterrupted from past to present, and a "space clock" that "meanders, coils back on itself... impedes the mind's instinctive tropism toward tranquility" (174). That these two clocks exist at the same time allows for a much more radical displacement of the logic of linearity and rationality than would the simple usurpation of this logic by discontinuity. Langer's work is full of these images, of mutually exclusive categories that both collide and enter each other's space, disallowing any perception of them as separate or distinct, contaminating the purity of any division and forcing the reader out of the shelter of traditional sequential distinctions. Memory is thus never redemptive, insofar as it forces the survivor into that space of continuity/discontinuity, never allowing for issues to be called up, worked through, and filed safely away.

According to Langer, witnesses are more likely to claim that they are possessed by traumatic events--moments that have never left them--rather than suggesting that they, as remembering subjects, have control over their memories.

---

<sup>33</sup> As far as testimony as a form of remembering is concerned, Langer insists that trauma disrupts the very process of memory:

The faculty of memory functions in the present to recall a personal history vexed by traumas that thwart smooth-flowing chronicles. Simultaneously, however, straining against what we might call disruptive memory is an effort to reconstruct a semblance of continuity in a life that began as, and now resumes what we would consider, a normal existence. "Cotemporality" becomes the controlling principle of these testimonies, as witnesses struggle with the impossible task of making their recollections of the camp experience coalesce with the rest of their lives.

This is not the only manner in which he presents his project, however, for the very next line following the above quotation reads: "If one theme links their narratives more than any other, it is the unintended, unexpected, but invariably unavoidable failure of such efforts." Thus, there is another mode, or remove, of what occurs simultaneously happening here for Langer: he is interested in the survivor's effort to impose some kind of continuity onto the various conflicting positions that exist at the same time that he insists that the failure of this continuity is the only sure thing the survivor can expect (Holocaust Testimonies 2-3).

Thus, the sense of a sovereign self that dictates the actions of one's life gives way to an unstable multitude of selves. It is important to realize that this relation of memory to self is neither linear nor circular--there is no one preceding the other, nor is there one that evokes the other which, in turn, evokes the other. Rather, this relation is reciprocal, both the self and the memory exist at the same time, both complementing and annihilating each other. Turning his attention toward the different identities that emerge with each disruptive memory, Langer indicates that it is the incommensurability of what he calls "the buried self" with the "normal" self that causes survivors an anguished relation to memory. Thus, the impossibility for the normal self to assert its primacy and either completely dismiss or completely acknowledge the buried self becomes grievously problematic for the survivor. Discovering that these two identities, which exist simultaneously (though not harmoniously), are not reconcilable leaves the survivor facing an absence of identity that the self cannot fill.

Insofar as these selves and memories comprise an absolutely abject entity, Langer maintains that memory can never be heroic or consoling. Attempting to represent concentration camp experiences as bold adventures that test the human will domesticates our notions of the Holocaust and blocks any possibility for understanding the power and significance of disruptive memories.<sup>34</sup> In this sense, Langer seems to be suggesting that no true and, perhaps, useful value or meaning can be recouped from these experiences, for unheroic memory "will not placate but can only disturb" (175). From this impossible position, Langer offers us the challenge to discard the base necessities of a heroic understanding and embrace a more productive outlook: once we realize that the diminished self of unheroic memory obscures traditional categories, it summons us to "invent a still more complex version of memory and self" (172). Thus, Langer does not want us to attempt to make these realities palatable. Instead, he wants us to radically reconstruct the boundaries of traditional categories of thought and understanding.

Langer is especially interested in overhauling traditional conceptions of history and historical inquiry. He takes this concern beyond the usual queries that historians ultimately come to ask about the veracity and accuracy of survivor accounts. Langer passes over that quickly, though not dismissively, reminding us that there are always many versions of the truth. Consequently, these accounts challenge our ability to hear and evaluate the truth of testimonies, to "enter their world to reverse the process of defamiliarization that overwhelmed the victims and to find an orientation that will do justice to their recaptured experience without summoning it or them to judgment and evaluation" (183). Faced with the impossibilities that characterize the survivor account, Langer tells us, we can no longer experience history as something definite, linear, or chronological. Instead, we must assume a different orientation that allows for, and perhaps even uses, the disruptions of ruined memory and traumatic experience.

In order to appreciate what Langer calls "the integrity of testimonies," we must be willing to accept the "harsh principle" of impossibility. "Such an acceptance," Langer maintains, "depends in turn on the idea that an unreconciled understanding has a meaning and value of its own" (168). This acceptance is no passive matter, for it forces us to enlarge our notion of what history might be. Further, Langer says, an expansion of our current understanding of the historical is both necessary and

---

<sup>34</sup> According to Langer, "the pretense that from the wreckage of mass murder we can salvage a tribute to the victory of the human spirit is a version of Holocaust reality more necessary than true" (165).

sacrificial if we ever hope to include survivor accounts into the discourse of history.<sup>35</sup> If we allow this enlarged notion of history its influences, Langer maintains, we can have a valuable understanding of the Holocaust, especially insofar as it "urges us to reconsider the relation of past to present (in a less hopeful way, to be sure), and of both to the tentative future" (109). Thus, Langer suggests, the Holocaust encompasses a historical value that affirms the radical incomprehensibility of the event without dismissing it as inaccessible or meaningless.

Langer asks us to be careful when determining the inaccessible, however, since characterizing events as outside the possibility of representation may be nothing more than an easy avoidance. He claims that what we call inaccessible is simply not open for discussion.<sup>36</sup> Rather than transporting us beyond the limits of understanding, then, Langer suggests that survivor testimonies drive us to the periphery of comprehension. Thus, Langer insists, "we need to search for the inner principles of incoherence that make these testimonies accessible to us" (16-17). According to Langer, incoherence does not mean inaccessibility; in fact, it is the very thing that yields accessibility. If we have trouble following this logic, Langer charges, it is because of our confining definitions of impossibility. According to Langer, our ability to understand what impossibility means and how it relates to reality and, more specifically, our ability to perceive it as reality, is sadly limited by the confines of traditional understanding. And these limitations should directly concern us, the audience, who, because of our facile and comfortable understanding of reality, refuse to listen to the force of these survivor accounts.<sup>37</sup>

Perhaps we should be suspicious that Langer's notions of clarity and accessibility seem to collapse into another kind of too easy avoidance at this point, especially as he begins to articulate his call for an active audience, participating in the process of making meaning. Langer complains that "outsiders" (this would be the audience, including Langer) are not given any place or, perhaps, significance, in the context of impossibility. Langer seems to be attempting to bridge that abyss of understanding via his presence as audience. According to Langer, witnesses who "remain dubious that those who cling to outmoded opinions of culture will understand their words" generate a "myth" that "the essential severity of such testimony is inaccessible to outsiders" (81). We can be sympathetic to such a position, Langer allows, but we must not actually embrace it if we hope to dodge this "convenient excuse for avoiding the subject entirely" (81). The important question here, it seems, is whether understanding is available at all to the audience, let alone the survivors themselves. Unlike Lanzmann, then, who sees understanding as fundamentally obscene, Langer is trying to save understanding.

While Langer seems to be asking us to embrace impossibility, he is actually only simply calling for a disruption of categories that will lead to an expansion of

---

<sup>35</sup> Langer writes:

Unless we revise the language of history (and moral philosophy) to include the "fate" that besieged Moses S. and his fellow victims, they remain exiled from concepts like human destiny, clinging to the stories that constitute their Holocaust reality until some way is found to regard such stories as an expression rather than a violation of contemporary history. This is a difficult task and may be an impossible one, because the price we would have to pay in forgoing present value systems might be too high. (120)

<sup>36</sup> According to Langer, "we lack the terms of discourse for such human situations, preferring to call them inhuman and thus banish them from civilized consciousness" (118).

<sup>37</sup> In this sense, Langer suggests that "the question of inaccessibility may be our own invented defense against the invitation to imagine what is perfectly explicit in the remembered experience" (82).

understanding rather than a recognition of its fundamental obscenity. Thus, his discourse offers no serious alternative to a recuperative liberalism. Insofar as Langer limits himself to a call for an extended understanding of things rather than an analysis of trauma from the perspective of the inadequacy of the signifier, he misses the point of impossibility and falls instead into the trap of idealism. That is, he takes the "unspeakable" as an actual content that is beyond our understanding and holds out the possibility for an ideal form of memory that can access the unspeakable and make it meaningful.

As he clings to the possibility of recuperating some meaning out of the experience of trauma, Langer betrays his true intention. Because his concern with trauma aims at the signified rather than the signifier, Langer does all he can to save understanding. Langer does not recognize, as psychoanalysis does, that the subject of trauma is inherently tied to the subject of the signifier and, therefore, that it is necessarily subject to meanings it never lives as experiences. Because he does not take the materiality of the signifier into account, Langer will not be able to see that traumatic experience is not simply "beyond the periphery of experience." He will not recognize how the experience of trauma is registered in its very failure or how, in this failure, the inadequacy of the signifier makes such an idealization impossible. Since trauma is marked by and through this inadequacy, it creates, in its failed remarking, the very limit of experience. Marking the failure of interpretation, exposing the inadequacy of the signifier, trauma is an effect of the real that can only be registered negatively in the symbolic. Therefore, while trauma may belong to the register of the real, it functions in the symbolic. The symbolic, that is, is the place where traumatic repetition plays itself out. Because of its structure in repetition, the loss that conditions the experience of trauma is impossible, not prohibited. Since nothing actual is lost in the experience of trauma--the lost origin never actually had its place--trauma is necessarily shrouded by an impossible meaning that will not ever function to expand our understanding or develop our interpretive capabilities. It will never be ideal. And this is why, in its recognition of trauma as inherently tied to the inadequacy of the signifier, and in its perception of the subject as an impossibility, psychoanalysis is not a reductive idealism.

Department of English  
George Washington University  
lbelau@gwu.edu

### ***Works Cited***

- Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. Preston H. Epps. Chapel Hill: U of North Carolina P, 1970.
- Belau, Linda. *Encountering Impossibility: Trauma, Psychosis, Psychoanalysis*. Forthcoming.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- , ed. *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1995.
- Copjec, Joan. *Read My Desire: Lacan Against the Historicists*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.
- Derrida, Jacques. "La Factuer de la Vérité." *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*. Trans. Alan Bass. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. 411-496.
- Dolar, Mladen. "Beyond Interpellation." *Qui Parle?* 6.2 (1993):75-96.
- Felman, Shoshana and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.

- Felman, Shoshana. "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's Shoah." Felman and Laub, *Testimony* 204-283.
- . "Education, Crisis and the Vicissitudes of Teaching." Felman and Laub, *Testimony* 1-56.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond The Pleasure Principle*. 1920. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson, Angela Richards. Trans. James Strachey et. al. Vol. 18. London: Hogarth Press, c. 1953-1974. 3-64. 24 Vols.
- . *Civilization and its Discontents*. 1930. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson, Angela Richards. Trans. James Strachey et. al. Vol. 21. London: Hogarth Press, c. 1953-1974. 57-146. 24 Vols.
- . "Mourning and Melancholia." 1917. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Ed. James Strachey, Anna Freud, Alix Strachey, Alan Tyson, Angela Richards. Trans. James Strachey et. al. Vol. 14. London: Hogarth Press, c. 1953-1974. 237-258. 24 Vols.
- Johnson, Barbara. *The Critical Difference: Essays in the Contemporary Rhetoric of Reading*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1980.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book I: Freud's Papers on Technique*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. John Forrester and Sylvana Tomaselli. New York: Norton, 1988.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. John Forrester and Sylvana Tomaselli. New York: Norton, 1991.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Dennis Porter. New York: Norton, 1991.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI: The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Trans. Alan Sheridan. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. New York: Norton, 1978.
- . *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XX: Encore*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Bruce Fink. New York: Norton, 1998.
- . "Seminar on the Purloined Letter." Trans. Jeffrey Mehlman. *French Freud*. *Yale French Studies* 48 (1972): 39-72.
- Langer, Lawrence. *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1991
- Lanzmann, Claude. "The Obscenity of Understanding: An Evening with Claude Lanzmann." Caruth, ed., *Trauma* 200-220.
- . "Hier ist kein Warum." *Au sujet de Shoah: Le film de Claude Lanzmann*. Ed. Bernard Cuau, et al. Paris: Belin, 1990.
- Sophocles. *Oedipus*. *The Oedipus Cycle*. Trans. and ed. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Harcourt, Brace & Jovanovich, 1977.
- Zizek, Slavoj. *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. London: Verso, 1989.
- . "Grimaces of the Real, or When the Phallus Appears." *October* 58 (Fall 1991): 45-68.