

Spring 2009

Absent meaning: Fascination, narrative, and trauma in the Holocaust imaginary

Christopher Scott Massey
University of New Hampshire, Durham

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation>

Recommended Citation

Massey, Christopher Scott, "Absent meaning: Fascination, narrative, and trauma in the Holocaust imaginary" (2009). *Doctoral Dissertations*. 479.
<https://scholars.unh.edu/dissertation/479>

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Scholarship at University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Doctoral Dissertations by an authorized administrator of University of New Hampshire Scholars' Repository. For more information, please contact nicole.hentz@unh.edu.

ABSENT MEANING: FASCINATION, NARRATIVE, AND TRAUMA IN THE
HOLOCAUST IMAGINARY

BY

CHRISTOPHER SCOTT MASSEY

B.A. ENGLISH, EAST TENNESSEE STATE UNIVERSITY, 1994

M.A. ENGLISH, JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY, 1998

DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire

in Partial Fulfillment of

the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

May, 2009

UMI Number: 3363723

Copyright 2009 by
Massey, Christopher Scott

INFORMATION TO USERS

The quality of this reproduction is dependent upon the quality of the copy submitted. Broken or indistinct print, colored or poor quality illustrations and photographs, print bleed-through, substandard margins, and improper alignment can adversely affect reproduction.

In the unlikely event that the author did not send a complete manuscript and there are missing pages, these will be noted. Also, if unauthorized copyright material had to be removed, a note will indicate the deletion.

UMI[®]

UMI Microform 3363723
Copyright 2009 by ProQuest LLC
All rights reserved. This microform edition is protected against
unauthorized copying under Title 17, United States Code.

ProQuest LLC
789 East Eisenhower Parkway
P.O. Box 1346
Ann Arbor, MI 48106-1346

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

c 2009

Christopher Scott Massey

This dissertation has been examined and approved.

Dissertation Director, Dr. Douglas Lanier, Professor of English

Dr. Siobhan Senier, Associate Professor of English

Dr. Michael Ferber, Professor of English

Dr. Sean Moore, Assistant Professor of English

Dr. Mary Rhiel, Associate Professor of German

Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to Carrie Loewenthal, whose encouragement, patience, and love have given these pages and their author new life.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank the members of my dissertation committee, Siobhan Senier, Mary Rhiel, Sean Moore, and Michael Ferber, for their patience and support. I am especially grateful to my dissertation director, Douglas Lanier, for his advocacy of this project, his generosity of time and attention, and his valuable guidance in bringing the project to completion.

Much of this dissertation develops out of my work with Petar Ramadanovic, whose imprint on the project is deep. I thank him for the strong role he has played in developing the dissertation's central concerns and in the refinement of their expression.

Kuhio Walters has been a good friend, a critical reader, and an insightful commentator. I appreciate his help with the project and his friendship.

This project benefited from the generous assistance of the Graduate School at the University of New Hampshire. A summer teaching assistant fellowship in 2002 allowed me to do research into Pynchon's novel, and a Dissertation Fellowship for the year 2003-2004 gave me the resources to research much of the dissertation and write chapter four.

My time in Boston and at the University of Massachusetts Boston was sustained largely by the friendship of Matt Brown. I thank him for our many stimulating conversations, for our work with the UMass Theory Group, and for a summer's worth of brilliant World Cup viewing.

A special debt of thanks is owed to Michael Powell at the Imperial War Museum, London, for assistance with technical and historical material related to the V-2 rocket.

Mark Facknitz advised an M.A. thesis on Herbert Read, Paul Nash, and post-WWI romanticism, the ideas of which inform the work of this dissertation. More than that, Mark gave me invaluable lessons in how to read and write with integrity and seriousness of purpose. It was with Mark that I traveled through France exploring its memorial topography, an experience that will remain a highlight of my professional life. I cherish our decade-long collaboration and friendship, and I thank Mark for it.

My mother and father, Ken and Patsy Massey, and my brother, Ken Massey, Jr., have never wavered in their support. I thank them for their love and guidance.

Carrie Loewenthal gave me the strength and courage to come back to this project and a vision of a future in which it is complete. I thank her for our life together, the greatest gift I have ever received.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

DEDICATION.....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	v
ABSTRACT.....	x

CHAPTER	PAGE
INTRODUCTION	1
I. RECONSIDERING “FASCINATING FASCISM”.....	13
Introduction	13
“Fascinating Fascism” in Context	17
“Fascinating Fascism” and Fascist Aesthetics	20
“Fascinating Fascism’s” Intellectual Antecedents	25
Fascination, Past and Present	35
Fascination, Beauty, and Sadomasochism	38
Conclusion	44
II. KITSCH, FASCINATION, AND THE NARRATIVES OF THE “NEW DISCOURSE” IN FRIEDLANDER’S <i>REFLECTIONS OF NAZISM</i>	52
Introduction	52
“Nazism as Such”: The Psychological Dimension	57
Art and the “New Discourse”	60
An Example of the “New Discourse”: <i>The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.</i> ...	64

	Kitsch	66
	Kitsch and Emplotment in Holocaust-Themed Sexploitation Film	71
	<i>The Portage to San Cristobal of A.H.</i> as Kitsch Narrative	78
	Fascination and Fetishism	81
	Conclusion	86
III.	ON THE “EMPATHIC UNSETTLEMENT”: FASCINATION, TRAUMA, AND TRAUMA STUDIES	93
	Introduction	93
	Trauma	97
	LaCapra: Structural and Historical Trauma, Absence and Loss	99
	Melancholic Fascination	103
	Fascinated Discourse	110
	LaCapra, Lyotard	113
	Transference, Empathy, Experience	118
	Conclusion	124
IV.	“IMAGES OF THE UNCERTAINTY”: READING TRAUMA IN <i>GRAVITY’S</i> <i>RAINBOW</i>	133
	Introduction	133
	Gravity’s Rainbow	142
	A Progressive Knotting Into	154
	Dora, After	162
	Conclusion	169
V.	CONCLUSION: TOWARD AN ETHICS OF FASCINATION	181

Introduction	181
Work	187
Image	204
Fascination	215
BIBLIOGRAPHY	228

ABSTRACT

ABSENT MEANING:
FASCINATION, NARRATIVE, AND
TRAUMA IN THE HOLOCAUST IMAGINARY

BY

CHRISTOPHER SCOTT MASSEY

UNIVERSITY OF NEW HAMPSHIRE, MAY, 2009

Examining post-1970 representations of the Holocaust and Nazism along with critical responses to these representations, the dissertation demonstrates how a use of the term “fascination” has shaped contemporary understandings of how the Holocaust should and should not be represented and remembered. My argument is that despite its pervasive and influential usage in the discourse of Holocaust representation, no critical attention has been given to what the term means. In as much as the term’s usage draws the historical and ethical boundaries across which representations of the Holocaust cannot pass, this dearth of critical attention given to the term means that these boundaries are not clearly defined.

This dissertation gives definition and context to the use of the term “fascination” in three representative thinkers from the post-Holocaust epoch: Susan Sontag in the 1970s; Saul Friedlander in the 1980s; and Dominick LaCapra in the 1990s and 2000s. By focusing on their use of “fascination,” I trace the historical and aesthetic development of representations of the Holocaust and the critical discourses that develop around them. I

contend that, *contra* the understanding of “fascination” demonstrated by Sontag, Friedlander, and LaCapra, the term may in fact designate ethically responsible modes of engagement with the art and literature of the Holocaust. My assessment of “fascination” in the Holocaust Imaginary thus provides definitional contours to an oft-used but little understood term and also points toward possible new understandings of how the catastrophic past is to be given narrative representation.

INTRODUCTION

To introduce this dissertation, allow me to recount the story of how I came to the subject of fascination:

In the summer of 2000, a colleague and I developed and then co-lead a summer study abroad trip. With eighteen undergraduate students, we traveled through England, France, and Belgium in an intensive, on-site examination of what Pierre Nora characterizes as *lieux de memoire* and Jay Winter calls “sites of memory, sites of mourning”: places—battlefields, cemeteries, memorials, monuments, parks, museums—designated for the commemoration of the First and Second World Wars. In our course, devoted to exploring how contemporary commemorative culture remembers, forgets, or at times remembers in order to forget, the First and Second World Wars were offered as the two halves of one tremendous, cataclysmic historical event, beginning, antecedents aside, in 1914 and ending, aftereffects notwithstanding, in 1945. Thus our travels took us to Paris’s Memorial to the Martyrs of the Deportation 1940-1945; London’s Cabinet War Rooms, Cenotaph at Whitehall, and Imperial War Museum; the Great War battlefields of Verdun, the Somme, and Flanders; Kathe Kollwitz’s statues of grieving parents at the German military cemetery at Vladslo, Belgium; Oradour sur Glane; and Paul Landowski’s monumental statuary works *La France* and *Les phantomes* in the French countryside, to name a few. Our goal as designers and leaders of the course was to introduce students to rigorous remembrance, to a new or renewed sense of themselves as historical beings and a new responsibility for the historical past.

The item on our itinerary for which the students had greatest anticipation and, somewhat disconcertingly, the most enthusiasm and excitement was a concentration camp: Natzweiler-Struthof, located in the Vosges Mountains in the Alsace region of France. While an active camp from 1941-1945, the site was used for the forced labor and extermination of resistance partisans, homosexuals, Roma transferred from Auschwitz (primarily for medical experimentation), common criminals, and Jews. It had a gallows, a crematorium, an ash pit, and a gas chamber, all of which are preserved as part of the commemorative site. If one is looking for a site that evinces the full extent of Nazi atrocities, Natzweiler-Struthof serves these ends quite well.

A bit about the structure of the camp is pertinent here. Struthof is built into a hillside in the upper Vosges, and thus the camp is layered into a number of descending tiers. At the top tier are guards' barracks and towers, the gallows, the camp kitchen, and administrative offices, along with a large memorial and cemetery hosting the graves of resistance partisans that de Gaulle had repatriated from German camps; at the bottom is the camp prison (which includes rooms designated for medical experimentation), the ash pit (which has been converted into a large gravesite), and the crematorium. (The gas chamber is a half-mile from the main site, found at the end of the wide path through the woods at the western border of the main site.) The prisoners' barracks, which occupied the middle tiers, have since been destroyed (many of them burned by Neo-Nazi groups since the end of the war) and are now marked by small white cenotaphs, each with a name of one of the Nazi concentration camps. One enters at the top tier and descends to the lowest tier, there encountering the more compelling commemorative elements, and then makes one's way back up and out of the camp.

At the top tier, before entering the camp, visitors pass by a small stand selling black and white postcards of the camp. A visitor can purchase still images of the gas chamber, crematorium, ash pit, as well as a large number of images of the camp in its active days along with other, better-known images from other concentration camps (the gates of Auschwitz, for example). The images invite you to return to them, to purchase them as a souvenir of your experience of the space you are about to engage. Proof, also, that you have done the work of remembering what transpired in this space some fifty years ago, that you are historically responsible.

These same images are repeated, in a larger format and a different setting, in the small museum that is also the camp's entrance. Visitors walk through a long corridor (a converted officer's barracks), the walls of which feature large framed versions of the same pictures for sale at the souvenir stand.

Having glimpsed these images and the commemorative proof they offered, we tended, like most of the visitors at the site, to move through the camp in one of two ways: some hurried through the camp in order to get back to and linger with the photographic images. Such visitors moved quickly through the medical examination rooms in order to get back to a photographic image of the autopsy table they had just rushed past. They hustled past the crematorium in the need to return to its static black and white image. Something about the familiarity of the images they viewed when entering the camp called them away from the strangeness of what they saw in the crematorium, called them out of the crisis of comprehension they underwent when walking toward the gas chamber.

Others, however, seemed transfixed by the subjects of the photographs, the autopsy table and the crematorium themselves. In those rooms, visitors stood in the

haunting presence of these objects, breathing an air whose mustiness seemed to bear with it, in the present, the estranging presence of what once went on in these rooms. For those whose time was spent here, the movement out of the camp was laborious, as though they struggled to escape a strange and strong hold that those rooms and their object—and, indeed, the ghosts surrounding them—maintained on them.

Gathering in the parking lot to leave, we discussed our experiences in the camp. I was struck by the persistence of variations on the term “fascination.” “That was fascinating” or “I am fascinated” were uttered by almost all of the students and, to be certain, by my colleague and me. In each instance, the term “fascination” was attached to a *new understanding* we derived from our time in the site. I was compelled to ask myself: What precisely do we mean when we say we are fascinated by the historical past? What is at stake in our historical and ethical relationship to the past when our mode of relation is a fascination? What is this fascination, and what does it imply as a form of understanding the traumatic past?

I would argue that the question of what we mean by fascination cannot be separated from questions of representation and of memory, of mourning, and of their ethical implications. The shift in literary and cultural theory in recent years to an emphasis on trauma and those aspects of the catastrophic past that remain, as yet, unavailable to remembrance and mourning has introduced new critical and theoretical methodologies, revised our understanding of what it means to remember and mourn, and called into question the possibilities and limitations of fully understanding the traumatic past; that shift has not, however, displaced what should be the ultimate aim of any representation of historical trauma: a more ample understanding and a more ethical

memory of a past that still and by all evidence will always abide with us as a pressing, present concern.

Nor have the stakes of the critical discourse on such representations diminished, for as recent representations attest, the representational tendencies we will examine and critique in the first three chapters are still the most persistent. As I write, the sixty-fourth anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz is two weeks away, on January 27. Shortly thereafter on February 22, the film industry may award a best picture Oscar to *The Reader*, the Stephen Daldry-directed film based on Bernard Schlink's novel of the same name. Kate Winslett (herself a best actress nominee for her role) plays Hanna, a former guard at an Auschwitz satellite camp now on trial for allowing a group of Jewish women under her care to burn to death. Her former lover, now a young lawyer witnessing the trial, discovers the horrible secret Hanna bears: not that she was a concentration camp guard, but rather that she is illiterate. The film mixes the maudlin with the mildly erotic in a narrative that Jacob Heilbrunn argues "infantilizes" the Holocaust, dubiously blurs the lines between victim and perpetrator, and offers lessons of redemption while simultaneously claiming that no lessons can be drawn from the Holocaust.¹

The Reader (and this is to mention only one example from a crowded contemporary field of Holocaust-themed films) shares certain traits with a commercially promising memoir of survival in the camps that has been pulled from publication for its fictive embellishments. In the case of Herman Rosenblat's *Angel at the Fence*, the truth of the author's experiences was revised so that it corresponded more closely to a moralizing, audience-pleasing narrative of true love, bravery, and redemption: a young boy in Buchenwald survives thanks to a young girl, who throws him an apple over an

electrified camp fence every day for seven months. Some years later, a young man meets a young woman and discovers that she is the very girl who had saved his life with her acts of bravery and kindness. The two fall in love and marry; the press packet for the memoir stresses that the couple has recently celebrated fifty years of marriage.

The promised popularity of the memoir (at present, another publisher has picked the memoir up and committed to release it “in response to public demand”) and the critical success of *The Reader* should remind us that as the distance between the past of the events and the present in which we remember them increases, the pressure put on Holocaust representations to help us remember grows all the greater. Increasingly, to visit a site like Natzweiler-Struthof is to enter into a commemorative space bearing in one’s mind a pre-packaged understanding of what it represents and how we should remember, both derived from the films we watch and the novels we read. When we are fascinated, the provenance of that fascination is most often to be found in literary and cinematic representations.

This dissertation examines the role of fascination in our contemporary understanding of Nazism and the Holocaust. In the following pages I do not offer a psychological assessment of fascination, an intellectual endeavor that would be outside my scholarly purview. Rather, I intend to exploit the *occurrence* of fascination within different discursive registers in order to highlight a set of problems within contemporary trauma studies. Wherever the term takes place, I contend, it marks the site of a certain entanglement of narrative representation, historical reality, readerly or spectatorial processes, transference, affect, and trauma. Precisely because of the knotty nature of this entanglement, scholars have tended to avoid attempts to undo it. As a result, the term is

used consistently throughout the six decades following the end of the Second World War, but with no attention to what is at stake in using it.

The modest aim of this project is to determine what fascination might mean and, from there, point toward the possibilities and limitations of representing the past that open up from our understanding of it. I argue that there are two basic forms of fascination, evinced by the two behaviors or modalities I described in visitors to the Natzweiler-Struthof site. The first fascination is an uncritical engagement with the past through stock images and familiar narrative forms. This fascination suspends rigorous critical inquiry in deference to palliative, salutary versions of the past that place the individual in a state of comfort.

Chapters one and two examine this form of fascination. In chapter one I offer a close reading and contextualization of Susan Sontag's well-known article "Fascinating Fascism." Published in the early 1970s at a moment when, significantly, the first generation of fictional accounts of Nazism and the Holocaust was in its early years, Sontag's article uses "fascination" to designate the state of "subjection" orchestrated by fascist aesthetics, especially as arranged by Leni Riefenstahl. She then goes on to link that fascination to a contemporary 1970s interest *in* the fascist past, one mediated by those first generation representations. I offer readings of Sontag's article along with texts by what I contend are her intellectual predecessors—Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, and Georges Bataille—in order to provide a working definition of the state of fascination.

Moving into the 1980s, chapter two reads Saul Friedlander's *Reflections of Nazism*. Like Sontag before him, Friedlander's writing makes heavy use of the term "fascination" without suggesting what the term might mean. Whereas Sontag focused

more on the state of fascination as a condition of the observer, Friedlander's work allows us to interrogate the power of fascination found in certain objects, particularly specific narrative forms and modes. The chapter follows the methodology of the first, closely reading Friedlander's work in order to determine what fascination in his work means. Along with this reading, I offer extended examinations of narratives censured by Friedlander for creating fascination. The first two are examples of the sub-genre of Nazi- and Holocaust-themed sexploitation film. This sub-genre emerges in the early 1970s and continues to this day, though it has seen a diminished audience since its hey-day in the 70s and 80s. Throughout the sub-genre's existence, it has been criticized as among the most fascinating of representational forms, though with few exceptions these criticisms are not supported by close readings.² Despite their seemingly transgressive genre status, I show that these films actually provide conservative, compensatory interpretations of Nazism and the Nazi genocide, neatly integrating the atrocity into established narrative codes and historical understandings.

I read these films alongside George Steiner's short novel *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* This novel imagines a Hitler (the A. H. of the title) who has survived the war and found safe haven in the Amazon jungle. Safe haven until, that is, a group of Israeli Nazi hunters finds him. While attempting to carry him out of the jungle, the Israeli team realizes that Hitler, sick and possibly dying, may not make it to a trial, thus denying his victims justice. They decide to put him on trial there in the jungle, wherein Hitler is allowed to give a spirited defense of his actions, including the Final Solution. The novel provides an extraordinarily detailed answer to one of the more important questions of the post-war epoch: Why? In place of the actual Hitler, whose death deprived audiences of a

definitive answer to the question, Steiner's fictional counterpart offers a historically grounded fictional substitute.

Both the sexploitation films and Steiner's novel make use of well-worn interpretations of and conspiracy theories about Nazism. Nazis were monstrous sado-masochistic aberrations whose actions were compelled not by political or ideological aims, not by an anti-semitism found in mid-twentieth century Germany but also elsewhere (arguably everywhere) in Europe and the West, if in different forms and to different degrees, but by inhuman libidinal forces. Nazis were, therefore, singular eruptions of a monstrous psycho-sexual force independent of historical causality and, most importantly, thoroughly divorced from present-day political and ideological realities. Or, Hitler lives in some remote hideaway, plotting his return and the realization of the 1000-Year Reich, his sense of rectitude and the virtue of his actions firmly intact. Steiner's novel makes use of historical record and theories of Hitler's action to definitively situate Nazism and the genocide in a pattern of causality, performing the opposite interpretative operation of the films but achieving the same fascinating effect.

Chapters one and two examine a fascination at odds with generative, critical interrogations of the past, of how the Holocaust happened and why and what we should do to remember it. Chapter three argues that the understanding of fascination prevalent in the critical discourses of the 70s and 80s is inherited by Dominick LaCapra. A central figure in the 1990s development of trauma studies, LaCapra's work uses the term "fascination" to censure works of art and theory that elevate the Holocaust to the status of an unapproachable sublime. I argue that LaCapra's use of fascination is intended to echo earlier usage by Sontag and Friedlander but may, perhaps, mean something else entirely.

Here I introduce a second understanding of fascination, one that attends to the aspects of the past we do not yet know but that call for an interpretation, a history. Whereas earlier chapters proceeded by close readings of texts in order to determine their meaning and provide context to their claims, with LaCapra I proceed to push back against the received understanding of fascination. Contrary to what we have come to regard as a hypnotic, perversely pleasurable appropriation of the past, here I read Freud's writing on melancholia to link fascination to a provisional but necessary stage in the process of mourning and coming to terms with trauma.

My argument in chapter three is that fascination is an empathic opening up to the trauma of another, one wherein we are given an opportunity to understand what is otherwise outside of the purview of understanding. The question at the end of the chapter becomes: What kind of narrative about the past makes this opening up possible? Chapter four reads Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* as one possible answer. I demonstrate how Pynchon's novel stages a series of empathic unsettlements, crises of comprehension in which our understanding is, momentarily, fascinated on its way to apprehending a history that is other than the straightforwardly referential history by which we make claims on and for the past.

My conclusion offers a close reading of the thinker whose work has been most influential to my understanding of the traumatic past, narrative, and the ethics of writing stories about the past: Maurice Blanchot. Blanchot is among the few writers who examine what fascination means, and so I read his 1950s work *The Space of Literature* in order to show how fascination is linked to the work of literature and the image. I offer

this nexus of fascination, work, and image as the possibility for an ethics of engagement with the traumatic past.

Along with Blanchot, the writer whose work exerts the strongest influence over these pages is Freud. The reader will notice that Freud provides much of the theoretical apparatus for chapters one through three. In chapter one I go to Freud to explain fascination as a phenomenon of group psychology; chapter two reads Freud on the fetish to link fascination to anxiety-disavowing narrative forms; finally, chapter three reads Freud's use of fascination in his study of Leonardo da Vinci to establish a connection between fascination and melancholia. There is, however, another way in which Freud informs the analysis offered in these pages. The psychoanalytic method employed by Freud reads the discourse of the analysand for, among other evidence, words whose usage suggests a complex of concerns unspoken, unaccounted for, and unexamined for their full significance. In this sense I am reading the use of "fascination" in the discourse of Holocaust and trauma studies for the complex of concerns it evinces but does not examine. My hope is that by focusing on fascination, some new insight is acquired in our understanding of the past, of its subsequent narrative representation, and of the potential for our future understanding of a past to which we are always obligated.

NOTES

¹One of the few examinations of the sexploitation films can be found in Laura Frost's *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002). The conclusion to her book, "This Cellar of the Present," offers a brief analysis of several representative films from the sub-genre.

² Jacob Heilbrunn. "Telling the Holocaust Like it Wasn't." *The New York Times*. 10 January 2009.

CHAPTER ONE

RECONSIDERING “FASCINATING FASCISM”

Introduction

This first chapter examines the inaugural, most influential use of “fascination” within the post-Holocaust epoch: Susan Sontag’s oft-cited 1974 article, “Fascinating Fascism.”¹ Sontag’s ideas, put forth over thirty years ago, continue to shape discussions on the ethical and historical implications of cinematic and literary representations of the fascist past. Typically, that influence can be found in critical examinations of contemporary literary and cinematic images of Nazism and the Holocaust. For example, in her 2000 article “Fascism—Fantasy—Fascination—Film,” Florentine Strzelczyk relies upon Sontag’s “Fascinating Fascism” to read Paul Verhoeven’s 1997 sci-fi fantasy *Starship Troopers*.² Though the film is set in the distant future and depicts a militarist culture at intergalactic war with giant, super-intelligent arachnids—far removed, that is, from the historical reality of Nazism—the film achieves much of its dramatic significance from its use of sleek black SS-style uniforms, Albert Speer-inspired architectural structures, and a transparently Nazi symbol system, all of which pulses with an erotic vitality. The association of the film’s futuristic, sci-fi diegesis with the extra-diegetic historical referent of Nazism amplifies the dramatic and sensational qualities of the

former, but reduces the latter's historicity to a hollow, eroticized iconography of jack-booted, seductively powerful supermen and alluringly enigmatic symbols.

As the illustration of Strzelczyk's analysis suggests, Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism" informs a contemporary scholarly concern with the persistence of provocative, eroticized images of Nazism, a proliferation of which characterizes the cultural moment of Sontag's analysis. If, given such a proliferation, Sontag's analysis had a considerable urgency in the 1970s and 1980s, that urgency has only increased in tandem with innovations in the technological means by which images of historical catastrophe and suffering are recorded, reproduced, and disseminated. This is a point made recently by Sontag herself, who has updated the arguments first put forth in "Fascinating Fascism" and her 1973 work *On Photography*.³ Speaking of photography specifically and of contemporary image culture more generally, Sontag writes in *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004) that, "the hunt for more dramatic (as they're often described) images drives the photographic enterprise, and is part of the normality of a culture in which shock has become a leading stimulus of consumption and source of value" (*Regarding* 120). "Shock" as Sontag understands it is an erotically-tinged experience of having our senses aroused to a state of arrest, the privileging of which she reads back through Caravaggio's beheadings to Christian images of Christ's suffering to classical Greek culture to the very origins of image-making. As ever before, but perhaps never so much as now, Sontag concludes, images of catastrophe are valued for their capacity to turn us on and fuel our fascinations.

Sontag's body of work still resonates within our own contemporary moment, characterized by the omnipresence of highly sensational and shocking media images of

global catastrophe and suffering, including (still) those of the Holocaust. In this first chapter, however, I want to argue that the lasting influence of Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism" is registered most complexly elsewhere, namely in a long-standing scholarly suspicion of and prejudice against "fascination" itself. In Sontag's work as well as the subsequent scholarly work informed by it, the noun form of "fascination" and its corresponding adjective form "fascinating" are used as pejorative terms to characterize: 1) a relationship between past historical events and contemporary historical beings; 2) a mode of relation between viewers or readers and images of the past (or certain qualities of an image, or certain aspects of aesthetic reception); and 3) a constellation of diverse, often disparate texts about the past, primarily fictional films and novels, characterized by certain images. Through its repeated usage, the term acquires a remarkable rhetorical elasticity and signifying force, demarcating a negative potential of images and aesthetic forms, an equally dubious spectatorial state, and a perverse historical relationality. So self-evident is the term's explanatory power assumed to be that when Sontag concludes in her reading of Hans Jurgen Syberberg's *Hitler: A Film from Germany* that, "to simulate atrocity convincingly is to risk making the audience passive [. . .] and creating fascination," she does not feel obligated to explain the term's meaning.⁴ The powerful denotative and connotative suppositions at work in "fascination" are meant to register immediately with the reader, who understands this fascination to be an undesirable spectatorial or readerly by-product of a certain representational mode. Sontag's usage and the reader's understanding of the term assume not only a familiarity with the formal and modal characteristics of representations, but as well with a moral framework capable of situating those characteristics in a hierarchy of value.

This assumed transparency of the term, however, brings us to “Fascinating Fascism’s” considerable problem: Despite its uniquely evocative power and pervasive usage, *what* “fascination” explains or signifies remains vague. Though Sontag, followed later by the scholarship indebted to her work, consistently attributes “fascination” to a quality of representational forms that brings about an historically, critically, and morally negative engagement with the past, *how* an image fascinates or *how* one is fascinated by a representation of catastrophe remains unclear, as do the characteristics of the state of fascination itself.⁵ What, then, does Sontag mean by the “fascinating” in “fascinating fascism?”

To ask this question of Sontag’s analysis is to raise the vexed issue of what aspects of the catastrophic past are to be represented and how, especially when the artistic obligation (or the contemporary compulsion) is to bring the spectator to an encounter with the most extreme aspects of the historical horror. If, as Sontag argues, art has fascinated since its very origins, then the moral and ethical imperative of art would be, at least in part, to help determine the lines across which images (which Aristotle informs us in the *Rhetoric* are responsible for both instructing viewers and providing them pleasure and that Horace later reminds us should both teach and delight) must not cross when they seek to represent historical atrocity. For a work of art to traverse such lines and enter into the realm of fascination would seem to place that work in opposition to the work of historically responsible, ethically informed representation. Thus as imprecise as her usage of the term is, I argue that Sontag’s “fascination” nonetheless effectively demarcates the line across which historically and ethically responsible art cannot cross. Inasmuch as Sontag’s use of the term “fascination” is imprecise, however, these limits by which

proper artistic evocations of the Holocaust are fixed, and their criteria of representation and reception, remain imprecise as well.

The question of fascination's relation to artistic representation and the Holocaust is one we will consider throughout this dissertation. In this first chapter, I provide some necessary clarity and precision to Sontag's use of "fascination." I do this by closely reading "Fascinating Fascism" and by outlining the intellectual/critical tradition that informs its arguments. The aim of this reading is the modest one of giving some definitional contours to Sontag's key term; at stake in our reading, however, is a more nuanced understanding of the aesthetic, historical, and ethical assumptions regarding historical relationality and representation encoded in this potent but tenuous, intractable word.

"Fascinating Fascism" in Context

If Sontag's "fascination" is vague, this is due in part to the context in which she uses it: the term is intended to diagnose an unprecedented cultural condition within a unique historical moment, for which there is not yet a clear and precise descriptive vocabulary but for which there is ample evidence. In her scholarly analysis of several Italian films from the early 1970s, Kriss Ravetto reminds readers that the period of Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism" was known throughout World War Two combatant nations as *les années écreasant*, *anni di piombo*, and *die bleierne Zeit*—"the leaden years."⁶ This phrase refers to a peculiarly volatile period characterized by a number of geopolitical crises and political/cultural transformations. The *événements* of May 1968

brought about the demise of Charles de Gaulle's government in France and sent repercussive effects throughout, among other countries, the United States, (then) Czechoslovakia, Argentina, and Mexico. In Italy, the factioning of the political Left created a climate notorious for its acrimony, rhetorical violence, and aporetic confusion. The conflict in Vietnam, the cultural upheavals of the women's and civil right's movements (including the assassination of Martin Luther King, JR. on 4 April 1968), and the heightening of Cold War tensions throughout the 1960s all amounted to a combustible geopolitical situation across 1970s Europe and America.

The intensity of these events and transitions was amplified by their entanglements in an emergent and unprecedented attention to the past of the Second World War. The student protestors of 1968 indicted de Gaulle's government for its repression of truths regarding the Vichy government, collaboration with the Nazis, and French complicity in the deportation of its own citizens to Nazi labor and death camps. Political organizations on the Left and the Right throughout Europe used the term "fascism" to condemn the political maneuvers of their rivals. Civil and women's rights organizations in America offered the concentration camps as a comparative framework for understanding and describing the suffering of minorities and women. As historian Peter Novick argues, the political need for increased support and sympathy during and after the Yom Kippur War of 1973 prompted the state of Israel and Jewish communities in America and Europe to remind the world of their suffering in the Nazi genocide, contributing to the coinage of the term "Holocaust" to name the historical event of the Nazi genocide of the Jews.⁷ The "leaden years" were therefore leaden because the upheavals and transitions that marked them entered into a period during which Nazism and the Holocaust, Ravetto writes,

“occupied the unique (if not contradictory) space of a historical past and a political present.”⁸

Two points need to be stressed here. First, this unique space of historical past and political present is one that evolved out of a prolonged silence on the subjects of Nazism and the Holocaust. Literary scholar James Berger notes that throughout the 1950s and into the latter 1960s/early 1970s, “the broad facts of the Nazi genocide were known—the Eichmann trial was only a few years in the past; the first writings of Elie Wiesel, Primo Levi, and other survivors had been published—but it seemed, on the whole, that there was nothing anyone could, or cared to, say.”⁹ What discussions took place were limited to strictly historical and juridical registers—the “broad facts” of the Nazi genocide needed to be studied and interpreted primarily for the purpose of prosecuting, convicting, and punishing Nazi war criminals, as Berger’s reference to the Eichmann trial of 1961-62 suggests.

Second, what Ravetto calls the space of historical past and political present is best understood as the space of *memory*, wherein emphasis shifts away from knowing the facts about the past and toward remembering Nazism and the Holocaust. The imperative to remember the Holocaust (or to never forget the Holocaust) was stressed, to recall our earlier examples, by supporters of Israel, by women’s and civil rights organizations, and by opposing political factions vying for contemporary legitimacy by claiming some fidelity to the memory of the past. These specific and local political invocations of the past developed into a broader, popular commemorative culture comprising groups and individuals seeking to experience the past so as to remember it. Attendance at memorials sites such as Auschwitz Birkenau increased dramatically, while the commissioning and

construction of new memorials and monuments ramped up significantly. Cultural phenomena such as memorabilia fairs, photograph collections, and populist historically-themed forms such as television shows (including episodes of *The Twilight Zone* and culminating in the 1978 NBC mini-series *Holocaust*) enjoined individuals to remember the past by offering them virtual experiences of that past. Perhaps most important to this dissertation, a proliferation of fictional films and novels about Nazism and the Holocaust, ranging from the art cinema of Liliana Cavani's *The Night Porter* to cheaply made Nazi-themed pornography, from William Styron's *Sophie's Choice* to Holocaust-themed romance novels, provided new means of exercising one's obligation to remember the past.¹⁰ The result is a remarkably diverse, variously intentioned popular discourse/public memory of Nazism and the Holocaust, yielding the widespread interest and investment in the past that is "Fascinating Fascism's" most salient contextual feature.

The vagueness of Sontag's "fascination" thus bespeaks the emergence of memorial or commemorative impulses and practices (with political, cultural, and ideological contours) that do not yet have solid criteria for their production, reception, or critical assessment. Responding to its moment, Sontag's article asks two crucial questions: How to characterize and understand this sudden, widespread interest in, at times obsession with, the catastrophic past? How to evaluate the new cultural forms made necessary by and perpetuating these interests, especially the production and dissemination of extremely provocative images?

"Fascinating Fascism" and Fascist Aesthetics

“Fascinating Fascism” reviews two popular collections of photographs, both just published in early 1974 and taking part in the cultural output described above: Leni Riefenstahl’s *The Last of the Nuba*, and Jack Pia’s *SS Regalia*. Sontag has paired these two works because they “share a certain community of moral origin, a root preoccupation: the same preoccupation at different stages of evolution—the ideas that animate *The Last of the Nuba* being less out of the moral closet than the cruder, more efficient idea that lies behind *SS Regalia*” (“FF” 98). The former is a lavishly produced affair, tailored to “art lovers and the *bien-pensant*” and featuring 126 “splendid” and “ravishing” color photographs of “aloof, Godlike Nuba,” tribesmen from the Sudan (“FF” 73). *The Last of the Nuba* features an extensive introduction detailing Riefenstahl’s career (or at least a highly tendentious and de-Nazified version of it, which may or may not have been written by Riefenstahl) and a chronological sequence of photographs of the artist taken between 1927 and 1972. Sontag’s first use of “fascinating” characterizes *The Last of the Nuba*, and in particular the twelve black-and-white images of Riefenstahl with which the collection concludes: “And here is a fascinating layout of twelve black-and-white photographs of Riefenstahl on the back cover of *The Last of the Nuba*, also ravishing, a chronological sequence of expressions [. . .] vanquishing the intractable march of aging” (“FF” 73).

SS Regalia (published by Ballantine Books as part of their “Illustrated History of the Violent Century” series), also “fascinating,” assembles photographs of SS uniforms, caps, badges, and ceremonial weaponry such as daggers. The photos are shot and arranged by Jack Pia, whose other credits include album photography for 60s-era musicians like pop/folk singer Donovan. The many color photographs of *SS Regalia* are

accompanied by a three-page “historical preface” and scholarly notes, though Sontag is careful to stress that the book’s appeal is hardly scholarly. Where Riefenstahl’s collection bears the production and marketing trappings of fine art, *SS Regalia* is a cheap paperback edition, sold in airport bookstores and on newsstands and aimed toward much broader audiences with perhaps less rarefied or informed tastes.

These obvious differences of production quality, marketing strategy, and intended audience might suggest that the two books share a distant connection to the historical subject of Nazism, *The Last of the Nuba* because of its author’s personal and artistic history, *SS Regalia* by virtue of the material objects depicted in its images. Sontag, however, has something far more substantive in mind by their “root preoccupation” and shared “moral community.” She contends that Riefenstahl’s images (in both their subject matter and formal arrangement) and the glossy shots of SS uniforms evince constitutive characteristics of fascist—which for Sontag invariably means Nazi—aesthetics, of which Riefenstahl is the most infamous practitioner.

While its subject matter would seem to place it at a far remove from her formulations of Nazism and Nazi aesthetics, Sontag argues that *The Last of the Nuba* is nonetheless the third in Leni Riefenstahl’s “trptych of fascist visuals” (“FF” 87). Because Sontag does not explore this “trptych” beyond assigning titles to its three panels, it is helpful to elaborate a bit on her painterly analogy. The first panel of the triptych comprises Riefenstahl’s early mountain films. *Das Blaue Licht* (*The Blue Light*, 1932, of which Riefenstahl was the co-writer, director, editor, producer, and star) centers on Monte Cristallo, a perilous mountain from the top of which shines the mysterious and alluring blue light of the title. The men and women of the village at the mountain’s base

cannot resist the allure of the light, but in attempting to reach it meet again and again with their deaths. Riefenstahl plays “Junta,” a young woman of alluring beauty and remarkable physical strength and the only person in the village with the determination and devotion necessary to climb Monte Cristallo and return unharmed. Junta alone knows the secrets of the blue light, and Junta alone is committed to preserving its sacred mystery. The story of Junta concludes with her death, which she meets attempting to save the blue light from the villagers, who have discovered a safe path to the mountain’s peak and wish to destroy the strange light.

The dominant image of the first panel, therefore, is of the lone and determined acolyte who sacrifices herself to safeguard the hypnotic mysteries of the blue light, the true nature of which the villagers fail to comprehend and respect. The second panel features the Nazi propaganda masterpieces *Triumph of the Will* and *Olympia*, and also the lesser known films *Victory of Faith* (1933) and *Day of Freedom! Our Armed Forces!* (1935), all epic portrayals of the Nazi communities achieved by the notions of vitality and sacrifice portrayed in *The Blue Light*. Whereas Junta stood alone in her fidelity to the blue light, in *The Triumph of the Will* the masses stand and move in fascinated, uniform assembly around the hypnotizing figure of Hitler. In the Nazi films, Sontag writes, “everyday reality is transcended through ecstatic self-control and submission” (“FF” 87). In the second triptych image, the blue light is now Hitler, and Junta stands at attention by the uniformed thousands, willing to fight and, if necessary, sacrifice themselves to preserve the force of the leader.

Although the Sudanese tribesmen featured in *The Last of the Nuba* are not Aryan, to Sontag’s mind “Riefenstahl’s portrait of them evokes some of the larger themes of

Nazi ideology:” they are a striking depiction of Riefenstahl’s epic community, depicted in *Triumph of the Will*, in its final, twilight stages (“FF” 88). In this last panel, “the almost naked primitives, awaiting the final ordeal of their proud heroic community, their imminent extinction, frolic and pose under the scorching sun” (“FF” 87). Bound together by their contained vitality and their allegiance to those ideals exemplified in the body of the chieftain, the Nuba are willing to maintain their community bonds up to and in the very point of their extinction. In this respect they are no different than Junta, the athletes of *Olympia*, or Hitler’s SS troops: bodies tensed in ecstatic submission to an overwhelming figure or force. In this last image, however, the adepts of the epic community submit to the force of death itself. As Sontag puts it, “it is Götterdämmerung time” (“FF” 87).

Beginning with *The Last of the Nuba* and reading back through the long history of Riefenstahl’s work, Sontag traces the troubling endurance of a “utopian aesthetics” centered on the “triumph of power” that “implies an ideal eroticism: sexuality converted into the *magnetism of leaders and the joy of followers*” (“FF” 93; emphasis added). This ideal eroticism, present in Junta’s mountain tribulations but fully realized in the joyous followers of *Triumph of the Will*, is the animating energy of fascist aesthetics and, indeed, of fascism itself, for Sontag sees its aesthetic regime as the constitutive core of the fascist enterprise. Sontag writes that, in the fascist aesthetic demonstration,

The relations of domination and enslavement take the form of a characteristic pageantry: the massing of groups of people; the turning of people into things; and the grouping of people/things around an all-powerful, hypnotic leader-figure or force. The fascist dramaturgy centers on the orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets, uniformly garbed and shown in ever swelling numbers. (“FF” 91)

Reading this description together with our discussion of Riefenstahl's "trptych of fascist visuals," we can distill the two critical constants of Sontag's understanding of fascist aesthetics. First, fascism and fascist aesthetics bears a *group structure*: individuated subjects, transvalued into anonymous objects ("things"), amass around a hypnotically overwhelming leader-figure or image (the blue light, Hitler, death itself). Second, there is a decidedly erotic dynamic at work in the group structure: Sontag writes of sexual energies converted into the "magnetism of leaders" and the "joy of followers" and of leaders and followers participating in "orgiastic transactions;" the triptych's climactic movement from Junta to the twilit groups of Nuba tribesmen bears a markedly erotic trajectory of enthrallment, submission, tension, exertion, and release.

Both *The Last of the Nuba* and *SS Regalia* depict this particular understanding of fascism and fascist aesthetics. When Sontag reads these two texts in these terms, she situates her work within an influential critical tradition, one to which we should now turn our attention. A brief survey of this critical heritage will not only provide a more ample sense of what Sontag means by fascist aesthetics, but equally importantly it will reveal the patterns of thought from which she takes her usage of our key term, "fascination."

"Fascinating Fascism's" Intellectual Antecedents

Sontag's formulations can be traced back to three thinkers whose work helps us to critique Sontag's use of fascination: Sigmund Freud, Wilhelm Reich, and Georges Bataille. Reich and Bataille are well known for their formulations of the libidinal and sexual energies at work in fascist group dynamic, and their work is regularly cited in

scholarly explanations of Sontag's thinking on fascism as well as photography and image production more generally.¹¹

It is back to Freud, however, that we should trace the intellectual origins of fascinating fascism, especially given his strong influence on the work of both Reich and Bataille and, most importantly, his use of the term "fascination." Writing in advance of Hitler's rise to power and the historical manifestations of fascism, Freud's *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* presciently analyses the psychic behaviors characteristic of large groups gathered around the unifying presence of a leader or chief.¹² Regarding the group structures of the church and the army, Freud argues that each individual member of the group is "bound in two directions" by "libidinal ties" (GP 35). What we might call the "primary" libidinal tie binds the individual to the leader of the group. "The tie with the leader," Freud writes, "seems (at all events for these cases) to be more of a ruling factor than the other, which holds between the members of the group" (GP 40). Inasmuch as any member shares with each other member of the group the primary libidinal tie, another, "secondary" libidinal tie binds the individual member to each of his fellows. "Before the members of a random crowd can constitute something like a group in the psychological sense [. . .] these individuals must have something in common with one another, a common interest in an object, a similar emotional bias in some situation or other" (GP 21).

For Freud, the term "group" (*gruppe*) designates not the assembly of individuals (for which he reserves the German *masse*, translated as "mass" or "crowd" as in the above passage), but rather *the psychic life of the crowd*. "Group," then, is shorthand for "group mind," and Freud wants to demonstrate how the group functions in ways similar

to the psychological apparatus of the individual, complete with libidinal cathexes, identifications, drives, and the influences of the unconscious. In characterizing the broad structure of the group as “libidinal,” Freud means “the energy, regarded as a quantitative magnitude (though not at present actually measurable), of those instincts which have to do with all that may be comprised under the word ‘love.’ The nucleus of what we mean by love naturally consists [. . .] in sexual love with sexual union as its aim” (GP 29). Love relations, defined thus, Freud goes on to say, “constitute the essence of the group mind,” held together by a power that can only be “ascribed” to “Eros” (GP 31). Freud’s conclusion, therefore, is one crucial to our understanding of Sontag’s understanding of fascist aesthetics: the structure of the group is essentially *erotic*.

Its erotic nature situates the group mind squarely within the ambit of the unconscious. Freud writes that in the group, the individual finds himself “under conditions which allow him to throw off the repressions of his unconscious instinctual impulses. The apparently new characteristics which he then displays are in fact the manifestations of this unconscious” (GP 09). Chief among the new characteristics the individual displays under the sway of the group is a diminishment of the critical faculties, a tendency to “think in images” and to respond pre-critically to images (GP 13), and a dangerous habit of becoming susceptible to the “truly magical power of words; [words] can evoke the most formidable tempests in the group mind, and are also capable of stilling them” (GP 16).

Many of Freud’s formulations in *Group Psychology* derive from Gustave Le Bon’s 1895 *Psychologie des foules* (*Psychology of Crowds*), a close reading of which Freud offers in his opening chapters in order to establish the fundamental suppositions of

his analysis. Along with the emphasis on the unconscious, Freud draws from Le Bon the key notion of the contagious nature of group psychic phenomenon. Le Bon argues that contagion, the spreading of every “sentiment or act” characteristic of the group, must be “classed among those phenomena of a hypnotic order” (*GP* 10). Freud reads Le Bon here in order to stress that the contagious spread of group mind is not merely like—analogueous or homologous to—a hypnotic state; the group mind under contagion really is a type of hypnotic state, of which there are several variants sharing common characteristics. These characteristics, according to Freud’s reading of Le Bon, include those mentioned above: passivity, susceptibility to images and words, heightened erotic affectivity, and the primary influence of the unconscious.

This particular state of hypnosis unique to the group, however, does have its connections to other forms of hypnosis. Freud quotes Le Bon at length, who writes that:

The most careful investigations seem to prove that an individual immersed for some length of time in a group in action soon finds himself—either in consequence of the magnetic influence given out by the group, or from some other cause of which we are ignorant—in a special state, *which most resembles the state of “fascination” in which the hypnotized finds himself in the hands of the hypnotizer*. . . . The conscious personality has entirely vanished; will and discernment are lost. All feelings and thoughts are bent in the direction determined by the hypnotizer. (*GP* 11; ellipsis in original; emphasis added)

Here, Le Bon enlists “fascination” (given in quotation marks to distinguish it from contagion) to help describe the hypnotic state into which the group member is placed by the “hypnotizer.” Like the state of fascination, the contagious condition of the group is one in which the will and discernment of conscious personality are subsumed in the hypnosis: he who is fascinated is “in the hands of” what- or whoever fascinates.

Here I would stress that for Freud, the broad structure of group psychology is characterized by the prevalence of the unconscious and behavioral tendencies that fall under the rubric of hypnosis and most closely resemble the form of hypnosis called “fascination.” Though Freud acknowledges the vagueness that later plagues Sontag’s use of the term—he notes that “fascination” is a term that remains “plunged in obscurity” (*GP* 12)—he nonetheless quotes Le Bon’s use of “fascination” (*faszination*) four times in order to characterize what he considers to be the most prominent attributes of group behavior: an unconscious, eroticized, hypnotic passivity that renders the individual hyper-susceptible to images and words, the fundamental materials of aesthetic regimes.

Crucially, Freud’s work on group psychology grants centrality to the state of “fascination.” As later thinkers elaborate on Freud’s work in order to theorize the historically specific iterations of fascism, passive and hypnotic states like fascination remain at the conceptual core of their work. The writing of Wilhelm Reich is illustrative of this point. In *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (published as Hitler ascends to power in 1933 and later banned by the Nazis), Reich applies a Freudian understanding of group psychology to the historical reality of National Socialism.¹³ According to Reich, Nazism is a matter of sexual repression and sanctioned release, each rigorously controlled by the state as a means of subjugating its masses. He writes that,

From the point of view of mass psychology, the effect of militarism is based essentially on a libidinous mechanism. The sexual effect of a uniform, the erotically provocative effect of rhythmically executed goose-stepping, the exhibitionistic nature of military procedures, have been more practically comprehended by a salesgirl or your average secretary than by our most erudite politicians. (*MP* 32)

For Reich, the fascist manipulation of repression and release (the latter of which takes the form of orchestrated events such as the Nuremberg Rallies) determines that the self-

denial, restraint, and severity of a uniform or the marching soldiers become “sexual” and “erotically provocative.” When Sontag argues for fascism as the “containment of vital forces” in which “movements are confined, held tight, held in” (“FF” 93) and as “orgiastic transactions between mighty forces and their puppets” (“FF” 91), her thinking descends directly from Reich’s understanding of the libidinous mechanisms at work in fascism and fascist aesthetics.

Departing from the more historically specific economic, ideological, and political explanations, Reich contends that iterations of fascism (Nazism chief among them) amounts to a hyperbolic manifestation of a more general, transcultural and transnational behavioral pattern, a “basic emotional attitude” found within “man’s character” (*MP* xiii). According to Reich (who first outlined these points in his study *Character-Analysis*), the human individual functions at three levels. The first, surface level is that of social cooperation, at which the individual behaves according to the dicta of civilized (polite, respectful, decorous) society. Here the human is “reserved, polite, compassionate, responsible, conscientious.” The third and deepest level is what Reich calls the “biologic core,” that level at which primitive, pre-conditioned libidinal impulses originate. This biologic core is essentially “social” in the sense that libidinal impulses seek the most favorable conditions for their salubrious exercise. Thus natural aggressions meant to ensure the exercise of libidinal impulses originate concomitantly with altruistic energies oriented toward the same end.

Fascism, according to Reich, embodies neither the first, surface level of civilized cultivation nor the third, deepest level of the biologic core (which gives rise to everything “genuinely revolutionary, every genuine art and science”); rather, fascism functions at the

secondary, intermediate level between the biologic core and the surface. This intermediate level, which bears up the first, “consists exclusively of cruel, sadistic, lascivious, rapacious, or envious impulses” (xi), or more specifically, consists of those factors and formations which convert libidinal impulses into sadistic behavioral patterns. Reich links this level to the Freudian unconscious, which he characterizes in *Mass Psychology* as the level of perverse, “secondary drives.” (In *Group Psychology*, Freud writes that the unconscious is that reserve in which “all that is evil in the human mind is contained as a predisposition.”)¹⁴ Reich’s characterization of the second level as the unconscious corresponds to Freudian formulations of the economic modality of the psychological apparatus: libidinal energies must pass through this second level, at which point they become bound to perverse attitudes such as sadism. What would be healthy cathexes bringing the core level into direct contact with the primary level are instead corrupted as they move through the second level. Thus natural aggression becomes sadistic, natural altruisms become forms of masochism, and the libidinal impulses become entangled in both. Hence sadomasochism, which, as we shall see, is an instrumental term for Sontag and directly related to her use of “fascination.”

Fascism, in Reich’s argument, “is only the organized political expression” of this second level (xiii). The political arrangement of a psychological impulse is precisely why political fascism appeals to and depends upon the masses: fascism bespeaks the presence of irrational, sadomasochistic, and what Reich calls “orgiastic” behavioral impulses found in all men and women which are exacerbated in the presence of “like-minded” individuals. (This point is one Reich takes directly from Freud and LeBon, who argue that the individual immersed in the group achieves a “special state” they call fascination.)

Thus “fascism” in this regard needs to be differentiated from German National Socialism or Mussolini’s *Fascismo*, which are politically specific arrangements and expressions of the fascistic human impulse: the universal tendency of fascism gives rise to historically, politically, and ideologically determinate “Fascisms.” Nazism exploits the human fascistic tendency by offering orchestrated displays of authoritarian power that appeal to the essentially masochistic tendencies of the masses (Sontag’s sexual energy converted into “joyous followers”) and the sadistic tendencies of their leaders, displays which Reich stresses are dependent on a surfeit of imagery and the rhetorical affectivity of spoken word.

Also published in 1933, Georges Bataille’s “The Psychological Structure of Fascism” parallels Reich’s analysis in its focus on the psychical realities of the fascist subject.¹⁵ Mingling Marxist and Freudian cultural theories, Bataille offers a distinction between two parts of society, the homogeneous and the heterogeneous. The homogeneous part of society is productive, useful, and contains the spheres of commerce and finance. Bataille writes that in homogeneity “human relations are sustained by a reduction to fixed rules based on the consciousness of the possible identity of delineable persons and situations; in principle, all violence is excluded from this course of existence” (“PS” 138). Inasmuch as human existence is measured by adherence to a set of rules and practices, individual existence is never for or itself, but rather for something other than itself, namely the modes of economic production. The homogeneous corresponds to the Freudian ego or conscious, that capacity of the psychic apparatus that knows itself and its place within the network of rules and social obligations (a parallel to Reich’s first level).

The heterogeneous part of society comprises those elements inassimilable to the homogeneous; in dialectical terms the heterogeneous consists of that which is not homogeneous (“PS” 140). Because these elements are outside of homogeneity and always characterized by negation (the heterogeneous is that which is not homogenous), they have hitherto remained outside of the ambit of traditional modes of inquiry and analysis (science, history, philosophy) and therefore without definition. In this regard, the heterogeneous “formally recalls the exclusion of the elements described (by psychoanalysis) as *unconscious*, which censorship excludes from the conscious ego” (“PS” 141; emphasis in original). In the realm of the heterogeneous, these elements include the unconscious itself; the sacred; taboos such as contact with cadavers or menstruating women; violence, excess, delirium, and madness; and the class of elements characterized by “unproductive expenditure,” among which Bataille includes the erotic, dreams, body parts, mobs, the impoverished, poets, and madmen.

In short, the heterogeneous is that which is *other*. Whereas the elements of the homogeneous are strictly defined according to their use, value, and functionality within the whole (therefore stable and solid, defined, scientifically categorizable), the heterogeneous elements have the quality of the “force or shock” of that which comes from the outside or the exotic (“PS” 143). These elements bear a force that disrupts the proper (homogeneous) order of things, and in its alterity mobilizes *affective* registers in those who experience them.

What Bataille means by “affective” here remains imprecise throughout “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” though at times the term is a synonym to the more commonplace “emotional.” This corresponds to certain Freudian conceptions of affect,

where “affect” is applied descriptively to characterize the intensely emotional dynamics of powerful experiences or events. In *Group Psychology*, for example, Freud describes the affective state—“akin to fascination”—of the group member as one of a pleasurable heightening of emotions.¹⁶ Bataille often speaks of the relationship between the fascist leader and his subjects as a *formation d’affective* (“affective formation”), an *écoulement d’affective* (“affective flow”) and most often an *effervescence d’affective* (“affective effervescence”). “Effervescence” is an especially interesting lexical choice given its suggestions of both high emotional spiritedness and a chemical process in which a caustic agent incites a volatile reaction. We might conclude, therefore, that Bataille’s “affect” is a state of high emotional animation that formally recalls Freud’s earlier writings on affect. Inasmuch as it is linked to heterogeneity, we must also conclude that in Bataille’s understanding affect’s proper provenance is the unconscious.

Following the explication of the affective force of heterogeneous elements, the next step in Bataille’s logic of exposition is to introduce Hitler and Mussolini, both of whom, he argues, “immediately stand out as something *other*. Whatever emotions their actual existence as political agents of evolution provokes, it is impossible to ignore the *force* that situates them above men, parties, and even laws” (“PS” 143; emphasis in original). Bataille differentiates between the emotional response that the leader as “political agent of revolution” engenders (a response addressed to their political ideas, ideals, and goals, their more strictly ideologically expressions) and that affective response to the exercise of their force. In the former, the emotional response has clear parameters and is focused on achieving a goal or perpetuating an ideal (we can think here of certain expressions of anti-semitic anger aimed at Jewish communities within German culture).

The latter, however, is oriented toward the leader himself. Recalling Freud reading Le Bon's use of "fascination," Bataille notes that this force is "analogous to that exerted in hypnosis" and forms the "affective flow that unites [the leader] with his followers" ("PS" 143). Bataille writes that, "to the extent that [the fascist leader] refers to his nature, to his personal quality, as the justification for his authority, he designates his nature as *something other*, without being able to account for it rationally" ("PS" 145; emphasis in original). This "something other," concentrated in the figure of the leader, "effervesces" the "collective affectivity" (a locution drawn from Freud's *Group Psychology*) of the masses into a state Bataille describes as, echoing Freud, "akin to fascination."

Fascination, Past and Present

Though Freud and Reich focus more narrowly on the libidinal (Freud) and psycho-sexual (Reich) and Bataille the political, the similarities in their arguments allow us to put together an understanding of the thinking on fascination that Sontag inherits. We can say that fascination is a phenomenon of the group psychological dynamic similar to hypnosis wherein individuals become subsumed in the group identity and collectively submissive to the group's leader. What fascinates is what Bataille terms the heterogeneous, a force or figure the power and affectivity of which sets this force or figure (Hitler, for example, or his image, or the display of a swastika) apart from or outside of the group. Following Freud, whoever is fascinated suspends critical engagement and becomes hyper-susceptible to the words and images described above. Finally, though it is a coercive condition brought about by the fascinating power of the

heterogeneous, fascination is at the same time a pleasurable state made possible by at least a modicum of willingness on the part of the victim. In fascination, Sontag writes, “people consent to be moved” (“FF” 95).¹⁷

Now, given Sontag’s title’s phrasing and her characterization of *The Last of the Nuba* and *SS Regalia* as “fascinating,” we might conclude that “Fascinating Fascism” wants to point out the contemporary presence of texts that radiate a hypnotic quality in a manner evocative of fascist aesthetics. Sontag writes, for example, that Stanley Kubrick’s epic *2001* or a Busby Berkeley musical “strikingly exemplify certain formal structures and themes of fascist art” (“FF” 91).¹⁸ Then there are the contemporary films and novels that take Nazism and the Holocaust as their historical subject matter and *mise en scene*, the formal characteristics of which, to Sontag’s reading, make recourse to the fascinating fascist aesthetic, often despite their artistic objectives.¹⁹ “Fascinating Fascism” thus reads *The Last of the Nuba* and *SS Regalia* as demonstrative of a larger representational trend toward fascist aesthetics or fascist art comprising a diverse range of texts claiming various ends and objectives but all constellated around their shared “root preoccupation.”

Sontag acknowledges, however, that the existence of contemporary texts evocative of fascist aesthetics is on its own neither surprising nor alarming, even texts authored by Leni Riefenstahl. What alarms Sontag and sets in train her critique is a matter of both text and context. She writes that

Art which evokes the themes of fascist aesthetic is popular now [. . .] Art that seemed imminently worth defending ten years ago, as a minority or adversary taste, no longer seems defensible today, because the ethical and cultural issues it raises have become serious, even dangerous, in a way they were not then. The hard truth is that what may be acceptable in elite culture may not be acceptable in mass culture, that tastes which pose only innocuous ethical issues as the property of a minority become corrupting

when they become more established. Taste is context, and the context has changed. (“FF” 97-98)

The context, we will recall, is one in which the past of fascism returns to claim the interests of the present, occupying that dual space of memory Ravetto describes and giving shape to a widespread interest in the past. In the above passage, Sontag expresses concern with a more pervasive, less focused but no less dangerous by-product of this widespread interest and public or popular memory: fascism as a fashionable or faddish, mass cultural *objet en vogue*. As motivated interests in the past develop among rarefied political or cultural discursive registers (“elite culture” is what Sontag calls it), the past inevitably bleeds into and develops as an interest of mass or popular culture. Fascinating though they may be, *The Last of the Nuba* or a film such as Liliana Cavani’s *The Night Porter* are interesting and innocuous cultural artifacts when shared as the objects of a minority, culturally elite predilection. As the objects of a less discriminating mass cultural *taste*, however, such texts become dangerous.

We might phrase the matter this way: a text such as *The Night Porter*’s capacity to fascinate may be measured only by the number of those on which it works its affective powers, those who are fascinated. When the number of those fascinated amounts to a widespread, mass cultural constituency exhibiting its “taste” for fascist aesthetics and art, the ethical issues become “serious, even dangerous.” This brings us to the central point of Sontag’s “Fascinating Fascism” and the primary motivation behind her use of the term “fascinating:” the fascinated mass cultural audience, exhibiting a “taste” for fascist aesthetics and fascist art, is an alarming homologue to the fascinated groups found in the historical instances of fascism itself. It appears that as the past of fascism returns to occupy the interests of the 1970s present, it reconstitutes the same fascination that made

possible its historical manifestations of the 30s and 40s. In the contemporary “taste” for fascist aesthetics and art, Sontag sees the same suspension of critical engagement, the same eroticized willingness to take part in the group psychology, and the same rapt orientation toward images and words depicted in and structured by *Triumph of the Will*—fascinating fascism.

Fascination, Beauty, and Sadomasochism

Sontag’s lexical choice of “taste” is a careful and critical one, for it allows her to introduce and argue certain points about beauty and the beautiful. One might claim, Sontag asserts, that the popularity of Riefenstahl’s *The Last of the Nuba* is not related to fascism or fascist aesthetics, but rather to the “new, ampler fortunes of the beautiful” (“FF” 84). Hitherto this point in her analysis, Sontag has used the term “beautiful” to describe the quality of the images in *The Last of the Nuba* and those photographs of Riefenstahl herself found in the book’s final layout. In those earlier descriptive instances of “beautiful,” the term is used alongside, and indeed is made to appear coterminous with, the terms “ravishing” and, most importantly, “fascinating.” Now Sontag wants to link beauty more directly to Riefenstahl’s fascist aesthetic, taste to a predilection for fascist aesthetics, and beauty and taste to fascinations both past and present.

We know from Kant that within the Western philosophical tradition, beauty is, along with the sublime, one of the two primary aesthetic categories. In *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant commences his examination of beauty with a consideration of taste, which he calls that faculty of “estimating beauty.”²⁰ For Kant, taste is emphatically *not* a

cognitive logical judgment of the object; it is, rather, a subjective aesthetic judgment that refers to the individual's feelings of pleasure or displeasure. He writes that taste "denotes nothing of the object, but is a feeling which the Subject has of itself and of *the manner in which it is affected by the representation*" (CJ 42; emphasis added). This means that what Kant calls the "real existence" of the object matters little to considerations of its beauty and judgments of taste; indeed, interest in and cognitive engagement with the object *qua* object corrupts pure aesthetic judgment. It is not that for Kant the aesthetic judgment of taste is strictly a-critical or irrational; it is rather that the manner by which one arrives at a critical judgment via taste is strikingly different from the cognitive pathways. In matters of taste, the emphasis is on the subjective experience of the perceiving individual and on the manner by which the individual is, in Kant's language, affected by the representation. An aesthetic judgment of taste is nonetheless a judgment, though it is limited by its subjective provenance.

When Sontag uses "taste" to denote the contemporary interest in fascism, her usage resonates with Kant's formulation of taste as sensual, subjective, and self-referential. In Sontag's eyes, "taste" as a mode of relation appears to draw attention away from the historical object of fascism and toward the perceiving subject, whose relation to the object is assessed in terms of pleasure and displeasure, the subjective ephemera of affective sensation. It is not fascism itself—its causal explanations, its consequential losses, its historical assessment—but rather how one is excited, animated, or effervesced *by* fascism that becomes important. Therefore the vicissitudes of taste, contingent as taste is on the individual perceiver of the object of beauty, determine that fascism is not approached by contemporary audiences via critically informed historical, moral, and

political understandings but is, rather, the impressionistically-determined “object” of what Sontag names a “curiously absentminded connoisseurship” (“FF” 97).

As for beauty itself, Kant tends to characterize it not as a quality possessed by an object (which would draw attention away from the perceiving subject), but rather as an individual’s *experience* of an object. This is precisely why Kant proceeds toward beauty by way of taste: if taste is the faculty of estimating beauty, then beauty is itself the subjective experience of pleasure and displeasure that taste assesses. When an object is declared beautiful, it is so because of its capacity to engender the experience of beauty rather than because of its fidelity to a set of criteria. These Kantian contours hold in “beauty’s” common acceptance, wherein it means the sensual pleasure one derives from perceiving a harmonious combination of form, color, shape, etc. Like taste, which remains more or less nebulous because of its radically subjective nature, the abiding characteristic of beauty is its subjective experiential dynamics.

This discussion of taste and beauty suggests that at the very least, the popularity of *The Last of the Nuba* evinces an uncritical aesthetic predilection incapable of parsing the distinctions between Riefenstahl’s contemporary work and her notorious fascist past. At worst, a self-reflexive taste for beauty purifies Riefenstahl’s “reputation of its Nazi dross,” rescuing her from her damning history by claiming that she always has been only concerned with beauty (“FF” 84). These are points Sontag stresses, but they are made on the way to a much more important point regarding Riefenstahl’s current popularity. Sontag quotes an infamous 1965 *Cahiers du cinéma* interview with Riefenstahl. The interviewer asks Riefenstahl if she believes that the aesthetic image can give form to a

certain reality by representing a specific idea and ideal of absolute beauty. Riefenstahl responds:

I can simply say that I feel spontaneously attracted by everything that is beautiful. Yes: beauty, harmony. And perhaps this care for composition, this aspiration to form is in effect something very German. But I don't know these things myself, exactly. It comes from the unconscious and not from my knowledge . . . *I am fascinated by what is beautiful*, strong, healthy, what is living. I seek harmony. ("FF" 85; emphasis added)

Inasmuch as the response brings together Sontag's analysis of the thematic elements of Riefenstahl's "fascist visuals"—strength and vitality, harmony, unity—with the category of the beautiful, Sontag means to offer Riefenstahl's response as a succinct expression of the latter's, and by extension Nazism's aesthetics. The manner in which this aesthetic predilection is phrased—"I am fascinated by what is beautiful"—also binds Riefenstahl's response to the psychological structure of fascism as outlined by Freud, Reich, and Bataille, several key features of which are reiterated in Riefenstahl's expression. Riefenstahl cannot theorize this German aspiration to form and harmony, for *their provenance is in the unconscious* and consequently is unavailable to her "knowledge." She can thus only characterize her response to the beautiful as a "fascination." The term "spontaneity," which implies an absence of premeditation and a more instinctual, pre-critical impulse, resonates with the sense of the unconscious attraction to beauty. The spontaneity of the attraction also recalls Bataille's use of the term "effervescence" to characterize the affectivity of the subject under the fascinated sway of the heterogeneous. Finally, the passive construction of Riefenstahl's phrasing (she is "spontaneously attracted by" and "fascinated by what is beautiful") grammatically reflects the passivity characteristic of the state of fascination endemic to the psychological structure of fascism. In each of Riefenstahl's articulation of her aesthetics, agency belongs to the

beautiful, and its fascinated object is Riefenstahl who, because of the spontaneous and unconscious nature of her fascination, can but succumb to beauty's mesmerizing force.

Sontag's use of this material from Riefenstahl is intended to nullify the arguments of those who would excuse Riefenstahl's work for its beauty. Sontag also means to provide further nuance to our understanding of the contemporary fascination with fascism; while she does not want to argue that beauty is fascistic or fascism is beautiful, she does intend to show how the contemporary taste for the beautiful is of a piece with the broader fascination with fascism, both characterized by a passive suspension of critical faculties in obeisance to an alluring power and a self-reflexive effervescence or excitement.

I would also argue that Riefenstahl's use of "fascinated" here brings us back to Reich's emphasis on the erotic dynamics of fascism and traverses Sontag's second critical concept after "beauty": "somasochism." We might recall that for Reich, fascism is essentially somasochistic in that it is the organized political expression of the so-called second level, unconscious and affective libidinal impulses. We should also recall that Bataille uses "sadism" to designate the unilateral administration of psychological forces aimed at rendering the subject affectively aroused or "effervesced" to the point of arrest. Sontag's use of "somasochism" recalls both Reich and Bataille's formulations of the erotic, sadistic essence of fascism, though Sontag's use of the term fixes the reader's attention to a reciprocity that is missing from Bataille's definition of "sadism:" in Sontag's formulation of fascism and fascist aesthetics, the audience/subject's masochistic desire to be objectified is as compelling a factor as the sadistic perpetrator's desire to objectify. This is not the mutually consensual, rapturous

shattering of (inter)subjectivity of an erotism that, in Bataille's critical calculus, bears a decidedly ethical dynamic; rather, for Sontag the masochistic participation in the sadomasochistic exchange is a dubious choice to give in to what she labels base "desires to be moved."²¹ Such urges, which are, like beauty, a matter of taste, discover in fascism generally and Nazism more particularly what Sontag terms a "master scenario" for their actualization ("FF" 105). Sontag's characterization of the relation of Nazism to "sadomasochism" corresponds to Reich's argument for Nazism as the organized political expression of sadomasochistic, fascistic urges.

While most contemporary readers of "Fascinating Fascism" focus on its concluding discussion of *SS Regalia*, the erotic, and sadomasochism rather than its more substantial discussion of Riefenstahl, aesthetics, and beauty (and here we might recall Strzelczyk's analysis of *Starship Troopers* as one example), it should be understood that "sadomasochism" for Sontag is simply the hyperbolic potentiation of the conditions that subtend "beauty." Sadomasochism, a bit more "out of the moral closet" than beauty, theatrically stages what beauty no less effectively or complexly enacts. We should therefore regard the relationship, within the broader context of fascism, between beauty and the aesthetic on the one hand, and the erotic and sadomasochism on the other hand, not as two potential but separate forms the state of fascist fascination might take. The point Sontag wants to put across is that the erotic scenario of sadomasochism is essentially aesthetic in its structuration, and that conversely to be touched by the beautiful is to find oneself in the province of the erotic and the sadomasochistic. Bringing together her analyses of Riefenstahl, *The Last of the Nuba*, and *SS Regalia*, Sontag concludes that "between sadomasochism and fascism there is a natural link" ("FF" 103) and that "never

before [Nazism] was the relation of masters and slaves so consciously aestheticized” (“FF” 105).

Conclusion

With this last statement, the contours of Sontag’s argument become fully apparent. Inasmuch as fascism was, to Sontag’s mind, constituted and administered by dint of its aesthetic regime, fascism made catastrophically effective use of the psychological dynamics of fascination, beauty, and sadomasochism. While all three of these components were characteristic of the fascist aesthetic program, none on their own or in combination is inherently fascistic. Rather, they are inherently *aesthetic* in the sense we have described in the preceding pages, a reality of which the fascist enterprise, characterized by its master/slave power axis, made alarmingly successful use. Hence Sontag’s claim that never before Nazism was the master/slave scenario rendered so fascinatingly, so beautifully, so sadomasochistically, and thus aesthetically.

For our purposes, the most important point to take away from our reading of Sontag’s article is one regarding the contemporary representation of this reality. In the representational trends, both of production and reception, characteristic of the 1970s, Sontag sees the same aesthetic economies of fascination, beauty, and sadomasochism at work, determining that the past of fascism becomes not an object of critical inquiry and rigorous scholarly examination, but rather an aestheticized object useful for the self-reflexive, a-critical end of fascination. Thus *The Last of the Nuba* may be read for its sheer beauty, which blinds readers to the dangerous fascist elements at work in the

images; *SS Regalia* may be appreciated for its sexual or erotic contours, in which the reader remains oblivious the historical bodies which once filled out those uniforms or felt the brunt of their violent “ministrations.” Finally, a film such as Cavani’s *The Night Porter* may seek to depict the master/slave reality of Nazism, but by doing so with a degree of beauty, the audience is fascinated rather than informed. Blind, oblivious, and fascinated that audience may be, but by no means is it immune to the insinuating forces of fascism, for it must be said that the aesthetic successes of fascism were the subterfuges by which its violence was allowed to exist. Thus Sontag concludes that the current fascination with fascism does not “augur well for the keenness of current abilities to detect the fascist longings in our midst” (“FF” 97).

We are now in a better position to understand precisely what fascination is and how it compromises those abilities to detect contemporary “fascist longings.” By attributing intellectual antecedents to Sontag’s use of the term and by providing the clarity of a working definition, we can begin to see how and why the term suggested itself to Sontag as a logical choice for characterizing both fascist aesthetics and a then contemporary interest in fascism. With this working definition of fascination in place, subsequent chapters will examine uses of the term that descend directly from Sontag’s reading of fascism and fascist aesthetics. Such work follows Sontag not only in her use of the term “fascination,” but also in the practice of foregrounding the term without the necessary critical apparatus this chapter has scaffolded. Our critical reading of “Fascinating Fascism” thus establishes a safer critical framework for reading subsequent iterations of fascinating fascism, for it must be said that the risk of using a word such as

“fascination” in the absence of definition and explanation is to risk giving the word itself a fascinating allure.

In the following chapter we will read the work of historian Saul Friedlander in order to see how fascinating fascism and Sontag’s reading continues to exert its influence over contemporary understanding and critiques of art and its relation to historical catastrophe and the Holocaust. Reading Saul Friedlander’s 1984 analysis *Reflections of Nazism*, the next chapter will inspect more closely those aestheticized representations of Nazism and the Holocaust said to fascinate readers and viewers. This is to open up a consideration of the relation between fictional aesthetic forms (like a film or novel) and the history of the past of Nazism and the Holocaust. Reading the work of Friedlander and focusing on his use of “fascination,” we will consider what becomes of the history of the catastrophic past when one is fascinated by its aesthetic evocations.

NOTES

¹ Susan Sontag, "Fascinating Fascism." *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991): 73-108. Hereafter cited as "FF."

² Florentine Strzelcyk, "Fascism—Fantasy—Fascination—Film." *Arachne* 7.1/7.2 (2002): 94-111.

³ Susan Sontag, *Regarding The Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).

⁴ Susan Sontag, "Syberberg's Hitler," *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Anchor, 1991): 139.

⁵ Subsequent chapters of the dissertation will consider the uses of fascination found in work by Saul Friedlander and Dominick LaCapra. In advance of these analyses, I would here make the point that most often, "fascination" is a term used by historians to denote the historiographic consequences of literary and cinematic representation. This is not to say that the term marks the discipline of history's failure to understand literary or cinematic representation, though I would argue that the term's persistent appearance in the discourses of history and historiography mark the site of a tension between history and art. In the work that has developed in the light of Sontag's analysis, "fascination" bears a literary and cinematic specificity that seems to provoke the anxiety of historians in particular.

⁶ Kriss Ravetto, *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002): 17.

⁷ Peter Novick, *The Holocaust in American Life* (New York: Mariner Books, 2000).

⁸ Ravetto 18.

⁹ James Berger, *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998): 76-77.

¹⁰ We might consider the following selective survey of films and novels produced in the period surrounding Sontag's analysis. Films include Kenneth Anger's *Scorpio Rising* (US, 1964); Lucino Visconti's *La caduta degli dei* (*The Damned*) (Italy, 1969); Jean-Marie Straub's *Les Yeux ne veulent pas en tout temps se fermer, ou Peut-être qu'un jour Rome se permettra de choisir à son tour* (*Eyes Do Not Want to Close at Times, or, One Day Rome Will Allow Herself to Choose in Her Turn*) (France, 1970); Louis Malle's *Lacombe, Lucien* (France, 1974); Liliana Cavani's *Il portiere de notte* (*The Night Porter*) (Italy, 1974); Pier Paolo Pasolini's *Le 120 giornate di Sodoma* (*Salò*) (Italy, 1975); Lena Wertmueller's *Pasqualino settebelleze* (*Seven Beauties*) (Italy, 1976); and the television mini-series *Holocaust* (US, 1978). Among literary works we might mention: Saul Bellow, *Mr. Sammler's Planet* (US, 1969); Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (US, 1974); Tadeusz Borowski, *This Way for the Gas, Ladies and Gentleman* (Poland, 1976); William Styron, *Sophie's Choice* (US, 1976); Leslie Epstein, *King of the Jews* (US, 1979); Philip Roth, *The Ghost Writer* (US, 1979); and Aharon Appelfeld, *Badenheim 1939* (Israel, 1980). We might also mention the sub-genre of Nazi- and Holocaust-themed pornographic film and literature, much of which takes Cavani's film as a source text and which includes titles such as *SS Love Camp*, *Holocaust Two*, and *The Gestapo's Last Orgy*.

This bibliography is of course not exhaustive, and in bringing them together I do not mean to suggest that they amount to a unified field. Nor do I mean to flatten the

differences between the literary evocations and their cinematic counterparts. I would point out that the short list I have provided includes both biographical testimony, fiction based loosely on first-hand experience, and fiction. While I contend that a serious problem with Sontag's argument is its failure to read closely any of the text she cites, it is not the place of this chapter to remedy Sontag's failing. The following chapter will offer closer consideration of some of the texts cited by Sontag. The sub-genre of Holocaust themed pornography, about which we will have more to say in the following chapter, is a vexing one for scholars, so vexing as to be apparently beyond the scope of scholarly consideration. A glance at the history of the sub-genre suggests that by the time of Sontag's analysis, the first stages of a developing industry built around these films have been achieved. Distribution channels have by 1974 been allocated for dealing exclusively with these titles, evidence of the widespread popularity with which they are quickly met.

¹¹ Sontag does mention Bataille in her discussion of sadomasochism. She writes that, "the end to which all sexual experience tends, as Bataille insisted in a lifetime of writing, is defilement, blasphemy." This requires some qualification, as Bataille stressed throughout his work that the distance between the sacred and the profane is non-existent, so that anything sacred can easily be transvalued into the profane, and the profane can readily be elevated to the status of sacred. Thus sexual relations may easily be perverted into defilement and blasphemy, though it is not necessarily inevitable that they do so.

¹² Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* (New York: Norton, 1959). Hereafter cited as *GP*.

¹³ Wilhelm Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism* (New York: Noonday, 1970). Hereafter cited as *MP*.

¹⁴ Freud, *Group Psychology* 09.

¹⁵ Georges Bataille, "The Psychological Structure of Fascism." *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985). Hereafter cited as "PS."

¹⁶ See Freud, *Group Psychology* 22.

¹⁷ Though I do not examine the work in my discussion of "Fascinating Fascism's" antecedents, Hannah Arendt's analysis of fascist propaganda must be mentioned here. In the third part of *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Arendt offers the well-known argument that, "only the mob and the elite can be attracted by the momentum of totalitarianism itself; the masses have to be won by propaganda" (39). Having been won, however, Arendt argues that propoaganda moves to a different role in maintaining totalitarian systems. Whereas Sontag sees the propoagandistic force of fascist aesthetics as the most important mechanism to both its establishment and maintenance, Arendt contends that direct violence is the means by which totalitarianism reigns over a subjugated population ("where the rule of terror is brought to perfection, as in concentration camps, propaganda disappears completely") (42). For Arendt, propaganda and aesthetics are not the means by which fascism controls its already subdued population, but rather the means by which totalitarianism deals with the nontotalitarian world.

Arendt does stress the role of "mysteriousness" and the "longings" of the masses in the totalitarian use of propaganda. When the totalitarian regime becomes weak, it resorts to propaganda to reunify (to "effervesce," in Bataille's term) the masses. Propaganda and aesthetics thus become the fascinating means by which the masses are brought together or reconstituted after a crisis or moment of weakness, but it is a violence

akin to gangsterism by which those masses are kept together. See Arendt, Hannah, *Totalitarianism: Part Three of The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968).

18 Sontag does not specify the “formal structures and themes of fascist art” exemplified by such work. We might suppose, though, that Berkeley’s highly erotic, often outright vulgar, always intricate dance numbers involving dozens of dancers strike a chord with the prancing and wrestling of the Nuba tribesmen. The hypnotizing appearance and voice of *2001*’s HAL might be seen as a captivating, seductive force evocative of Junta’s blue light and the rhetorical delivery of fascist aesthetics, especially Adolph Hitler.

19 Among the films Sontag mentions are Cavani’s *The Night Porter*, Louis Malle’s *Lacombe Lucien*, Kenneth Anger’s *Scorpio Rising*, and Lucino Visconti’s *The Damned*.

20 Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith (London: Oxford UP, 1952) 41.

21 See Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986).

CHAPTER TWO

KITSCH, FASCINATION, AND THE NARRATIVES OF THE “NEW DISCOURSE” IN FRIEDLANDER’S *REFLECTIONS OF NAZISM*

At last, the dead man, 'mid that beauteous scene
Of trees and hills and water, bolt upright
Rose, with his ghastly face, a spectre shape
Of terror; yet no soul-debasing fear,
Young as I was, a child not nine years old,
Possessed me, for my inner eye had seen
Such sights before, among the shining streams
Of faery land, the forest of romance.

(William Wordsworth, *The Prelude*¹)

It is as if there were in Auschwitz something like a Gorgon’s head, which one cannot—and does not want to—see at any cost, something so unprecedented that one tries to make it comprehensible by bringing it back to categories that are both extreme and absolutely familiar.

(Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz*²)

Introduction

Writing a decade after Susan Sontag's "Fascinating Fascism," historian Saul Friedlander considers the health of Western culture's memorial and historical relationship with its past. In the intervening decade between Sontag's article and Friedlander's observations, those texts that gave Sontag such alarm in the early 1970s—Riefenstahl's *The Last of the Nuba*, *SS Regalia*, a handful of American and European films and novels—have joined an ever-increasing number of not only films and novels, but also television shows, stage plays, comic books, art exhibitions, and even sexploitation and pornography film, all claiming Nazism or the Holocaust as their historical referents. As literary scholar James Berger points out, by the mid-1980s an established genre of "Holocaust representation" has taken its place alongside more traditional historical work as one of Western culture's two privileged modes of engagement with the past of Nazism and the Holocaust.³ For historians like Friedlander, this increasing reliance upon works of art to disclose historical reality brings with it a considerable risk: that works of art do not disclose, but rather cover over and obscure historical reality. In his 1984 study *Reflections of Nazism*, Friedlander dramatizes the contemporary situation with a striking image: "In facing this past today," he writes, Western culture has turned "to words, to images [. . .] They billow in serried waves, sometimes covering the black rock that one sees from all sides off the shores of our common history. One feels, here and there, the return of a fascination."⁴

After chapter one, we can say that by "fascination," Friedlander means an hypnotic suspension of critical faculties that seduces a viewer of a film or a reader of a novel to, as Freud puts it, "think in images" like those being presented to the viewer or

reader. Like Sontag, whom he credits with introducing the term into the conversation about Nazism, the Holocaust, and contemporary culture, Friedlander links “fascination” to the political and aesthetic realities of Nazism. Nazi aesthetics relied on the fascinating allure of words and images to seduce its subjects into submission to its political program. When Friedlander notes the “return of a fascination,” then, he is in part drawing upon Sontag’s critical calculus and its constitutive tie between fascination and fascism: contemporary fascination “returns” from the very past that mid-1980s forms of Holocaust representation seek to evoke. In this sense, Friedlander’s use of “fascination” extends the discourse of “fascinating fascism” into his own cultural moment, wherein an ever-widening tapestry of words and images displaces Western audiences’ attention away from the difficult work of understanding historical reality and toward the hypnotic pleasures derived from representations variously “about” that historical reality.

Far more than a reiteration and updating of Sontag’s argument, however, I contend that Friedlander’s use of “fascination” presents an opportunity to interrogate art’s possibilities and limitations in promoting critical historical understandings of the catastrophic past and to complicate our understanding of what is at stake in representing atrocity. Such an interrogation, of course, raises large, unwieldy questions; chief among such questions is one that, as we discussed in the dissertation’s introduction, reaches back to Plato and concerns the relation between art and historical truth and the former’s potentially deleterious consequences for the latter. The present chapter raises those questions, but within the narrow frame of its consideration of certain types of narrative representations—films and novels—that purport to be about Nazism and the Holocaust and are said to create fascination. This chapter therefore asks: What forms of narrative

representation promote a fascination? What kind of historical understanding, what kind of historical memory, does fascination create?

Reading Friedlander's *Reflections of Nazism*, I argue that in covering over the "black rock" of the past, fascination shapes a particular understanding of that past. I claim that fascination with Nazism and the Holocaust promotes conservative, compensatory understandings of the historical past. That is to say, where there is a fascination with the Holocaust, there is a rigidly codified historical version of it, a neutralization of its horrific enormity and a reduction of its catastrophic scale. The state of fascination thus becomes a means of falsely, or prematurely, "working through" the catastrophic past. To demonstrate this, I will focus on *Reflections of Nazism's* use of "fascination" and the lexicon of keywords of which "fascination" is a component. These keywords, which include "kitsch," "exorcism," and "neutralization," point toward a powerful tendency in the artistic representation of the past to reduce and contain its catastrophic enormity.

If, as I will demonstrate, fascination is a specific relation of understanding and particular mode of remembering the Holocaust, I would also argue that fascination is made possible by specific representations—stories and the ways they are told—of the Holocaust. Just as the narrator of Wordsworth's *Prelude* feels no "soul-debasing fear" in his confrontation with the dead man because he has witnessed "Such sights before, among the shining streams/ Of faery land, the forest of romance," so too do certain narrative forms make possible a compensatory fascination with catastrophe. Friedlander's fascination thus shifts our focus from fascination as a state experienced by the subject and toward fascination as a capacity of the object, in this case specific narrative forms.

To show this, I will offer readings of three texts Friedlander cites, but does not

discuss, in *Reflections of Nazism*. First, I will read two examples from the sub-genre of Nazi and Holocaust-themed sexploitation cinema: *Love Camp 7* and *Holocaust 2*. These are (more or less) badly made films that appropriate Nazism and the Holocaust as an historical stage for the sensational presentation of graphic violence and sex. To what extent they are “about” the Holocaust and Nazism (an issue we will discuss later in the chapter), they fall well outside the purview of historically responsible and ethical cinematic treatments of their historical occasions.⁵

To that end, I will also read George Steiner’s novel *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* Playing with a popular post-war conspiracy theory, Steiner’s novel imagines a Hitler who has survived the war’s end and lived for years in a South American jungle. A group of Israeli Nazi hunters discovers him in poor health and, realizing he will not survive a trip out of the jungle, put him on trial there. The novel concludes with Hitler’s impassioned justification for the Final Solution. By reading Steiner’s novel alongside these films, I reveal the critical suppositions that motivate Friedlander to censure *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* and *Love Camp 7* for the *same* fascination, the same historical deformation, thus revealing the scope and significance of his critique of specific narrative qualities and their fascinating relation to historical reality. My reading shows that the spectatorial pleasures the films enact are exaggerated illustrations of a more general problem at work in narrative representation and image reception as they relate to historical catastrophe. This tendency of certain narrative modes and certain types of images, from a range of genres and a variety of intentions, to fascinate and, in so doing, foreclose on the difficult work of rigorous historical inquiry is one this chapter intends to examine.

“Nazism as such:” The Psychological Dimension

Friedlander opens *Reflections of Nazism* with an appreciative nod to the “mountain of monographs” that has, in the forty years since the end of the war, explained Nazism as a consequence of 1920s German and European economic conditions, as a phenomenon of early twentieth century modernity and industrialization, and as a political and ideological re-organization of the post WWII German nation-state. Such studies have gone far in outlining the causal factors that made possible German fascism, the rise of Adolf Hitler, and even certain aspects of the “Final Solution.” Thanks to these contributions from the field of history, Nazism and its genocidal campaign have, in many respects, been situated in our understanding as a product of specific conditions of interwar European culture, an historical event, that is, having taken place roughly from the early 1930s to 1945 with clearly defined causes and effects.

Important, informative, and thorough as these studies may be, they have not solved the problem of Nazism’s “psychological dimension, which, being autonomous, has followed its own course” (RN 14). The “psychological dimension” of Nazism must be understood in two related ways. First, the focus of historical inquiry into Nazism should be on what Friedlander terms “Nazism as such,” the “horror and pain” of its victims, which extant analyses of Nazism circle around but have not yet managed to center on. The “psychological dimension” would thus include those psychological states like fear and horror originating from and subtending the victims’ experiences of pain.

It is not pain alone, however, but that to which pain is often prelude that Friedlander wants to confront: “death, real death in its everyday horror and tragic

banality” (RN 43). The death Friedlander has in mind here is that form and fact of death in the concentration camps, where the “tragic banality” and “everyday horror” of death reach genocidal proportions. To understand the “psychological dimension” of Nazism and the Holocaust is thus to understand the experience of the victim up to and in the event of his death, something no historical approach has made possible.

This aspect of the past, being “autonomous,” that is, not contained by any historical category or accounting, has continued to “follow its own course” within post-war attempts to understand it. Characterizing this situation in Freudian terms, we might say that the psychological dimension is an element of the past that cannot be “bound.”⁶ As such, the psychological dimension returns again and again to disrupt attempts at its understanding and belie the inadequacies and failures of those historical assessments (theses, expositions, approaches, and so on) that claim to have come to terms with death in the concentration camps. We can say then that the second and, for Friedlander the historian, most vexing aspect of the psychological dimension has to do with the contemporary inability to reckon fully with the historical past of the Holocaust and the crisis in understanding that inability causes.

With this second point regarding the psychological dimension, we are placing in the foreground of our analysis an element of the past that has not yet been made available to historical understanding. In the following chapter, we will formulate this fact in terms of psychic and historical trauma; here, we should stress that Friedlander’s critique of specific narrative modes and his use of the term “fascination” are situated at what he sees as a crisis moment in the post-war epoch: the experience of suffering and death in the concentration camps, which for Friedlander is the central and constitutive element of the

Holocaust, is precisely that element that eludes every attempt at its historical reckoning. In the late 1970s, historians such as Lucy Dawidowicz have begun to recognize the perhaps unique challenge to historical understanding posed by the events of the Second World War. She writes that,

The Final Solution transcended the bounds of modern historical experience. History has, to be sure, recorded terrible massacres and destruction that one people perpetrated against another, but all—however cruel and unjustifiable—were intended to achieve instrumental ends, being means to ends, not ends in themselves.⁷

By the middle years of the 1980s, a full forty years after the end of the war and the liberation of the concentration camps, it has become evident to some historians that the imperative to know and understand the events of the Final Solution, which transcended modern experience, could not be satisfied by traditional historical methodologies.

At this crisis point in the post-Holocaust, Friedlander thus writes that faced with the fact of death in the camps, “we discover [. . .] the failure of our ideologies and the impotence of our own traditional approaches” (RN 129). For Friedlander, the first step in moving forward from this impasse is to acknowledge the psychological dimension for what it is: a horrifying experience for which there are not yet words or categories of explanation. To that end, Friedlander contends that in the absence of the understanding made available by history, one (the historian or scholar, the reader or spectator) should experience the “*impact* of past horror,” an anxious engagement with the past for which Friedlander reserves the term “affect” (RN 97; emphasis added). Friedlander defines “affect” as an “*authentic* feeling of loneliness and dread” that attends and informs one’s relation to the psychological dimension of the Holocaust (RN 27; emphasis in original). The historian or reader, confronted by the psychological dimension, would feel the

“impact” of those feelings most common to the victim’s experience of suffering: loneliness, dread. By what measurements such feelings are deemed “authentic” Friedlander does not say; what is made obvious, however, is that affect is at once an empathic experience of another’s suffering and an anxious acknowledgement that such suffering is beyond one’s ambit of understanding. We can understand Friedlander’s point through the analogy discussed in the introduction: undergoing the affective impact of past horror would not fill in or cover over the black rock of the lacunae in historical comprehension, but rather force the individual *to encounter them precisely as lacunae*.⁹ The point of any extra-historical methodology would therefore be to draw attention to these gaps in historical knowledge and encourage readers or viewers to undergo the affective, and paradoxical, experience of what that methodology represents (death, genocide) and the failure of representation itself.

Art and the “New Discourse”

We are accustomed in Western culture to the belief that art, which Friedlander uses loosely in *Reflections of Nazism* to mean “aesthetic evocations,” is unique in its capacity to call forth strong emotional and affective responses. Given this, it is not surprising that Friedlander would ask if art might be capable of engineering the affective and empathic engagement he deems necessary to the progression of historical understanding. Friedlander does not, however, pose the question to the broad category of “aesthetic evocations,” or at least not initially. Instead, he poses the question to a select but diverse assembly of films and novels that he dubs the “new discourse.” Friedlander includes in the new discourse novels by George Steiner, Anthony Burgess, Michel

Tournier, Leslie Epstein, William Styron, and Thomas Pynchon, and films by Lucino Visconti, Liliana Cavani, Paulo Pasolini, Hans Jurgen Syberberg, and Alan Pakula. He also includes those films we mentioned in the introduction, representative of the sub-genre of Holocaust-themed exploitation and pornography cinema.

We will examine some of the key formal features of the new discourse shortly; for now, our attention should focus on what distinguishes this discourse as “new.” The new discourse is distinct from previous historiographic work on the subject of Nazism (including Friedlander’s own contributions) and also, significantly, from literary testimonial by survivors and documentary cinematic work such as Alain Resnais’ *Night and Fog* or *The Sorrow and the Pity* by Marcel Ophuls. The categorical modality of such works is a strict adherence to historical fact and eyewitness experiences, their constitutive criterion historical truth. By contrast, though its works are meant to display a high degree of historical authenticity, the constitutive characteristic of the new discourse is its *fictional* and what Friedlander calls “highly aesthetic” imaginings of the historical material.

At this point, we might pause to reflect on the suppositions that our discussion of Friedlander and the “new discourse” draws from. In chapter one, I showed how Riefenstahl’s *The Last of the Nuba* and *SS Regalia* are imbricated in a specific moment in the post-war era wherein cultural emphasis shifted toward remembering the victims of the Holocaust. There, we considered the relation of art to history as one determined by that moment and its historical/cultural/political realities. With Friedlander, too, we see a relation of art to history that develops out of a particular moment in the post-war epoch, one we have characterized above as a crisis in comprehension. We are also, it must be

said, examining a relation of art to history that exceeds these historical and cultural contexts and that will shape the subsequent chapter of this dissertation and that still, it must be said, shapes much of the discourse of Holocaust studies. I am talking here about that relation wherein the role played by art is to enlarge the imaginative capacity of the audience and the methodological capacity of history to accommodate events the complexity of which has hitherto been too great to grasp. Further, the role of art is to refuse to reduce such complexity to traditional, positivist historical methodologies, precisely those methodologies that Friedlander argues are insufficient to the task of approaching the psychological dimension.

In his thinking on this relation between art and history, Friedlander is in dialogue with Lawrence Langer, whose work he cites on multiple occasions in *Reflections of Nazism*. In *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*, Langer hypothesizes a "literature of atrocity" and what he will later, in *Admitting the Holocaust*, term a "discourse of ruin."⁹ A literature of atrocity, Langer argues, would recognize the Holocaust's position outside of any established "way of knowing or imagining" (HL 21) and insist on "the conscious and deliberate alienation of the reader's sensibilities from the world of the usual and familiar, with an accompanying infiltration into the work of the grotesque, the senseless, and the unimaginable" (HL 03). Confronting, or better to say confronted by a disfigured narrative form (an here we might recall Friedlander's use of "impact" to describe the effect a representation of past horror would have), the spectator or reader is similarly "disfigured," stripped of any comfortable and handy aesthetic, historical, or moral presuppositions and brought "inside" the truth of the "new reality" brought about by the Holocaust (HL 75).

Langer's privileged illustration of an art of atrocity is Picasso's *Guernica*, which is the "first valid example of an art of atrocity in our time" (*HL* 21). An example more immediately relevant to our analysis is D. M. Thomas's 1981 novel *The White Hotel*, which Langer praises in *Admitting the Holocaust* for its use of aesthetic strategies capable of augmenting or enlarging the historical province of fact. Langer argues that the novel may be read as a model of the fruitful coincidence of historical, documentary (eyewitness) evidence and "imaginative fiction." Citing Thomas's use of Anatoli Kuznetsov's nonfiction account of the Babi Yar massacre (itself an account of Dina Pronicheva's eyewitness account) in the novel's most graphic, Holocaust-specific moments, Langer commends Thomas for creating a "factual fiction" that does not ask the reader to see life other than it literally was and brings him closer, imaginatively, to the Holocaust in fact, to those feelings of loneliness and dread with which readers need to be engaged (*AH* 79). An art of atrocity and ruin, motivated by and grounded in historical fact, documentary evidence, and a referential verisimilitude but aware of the limitations of fact, evidence, and reference ("history provides the details, then abruptly stops," Langer notes) thus becomes capable of representing an historical event which has ruptured the continuity of history and ruined whatever explanatory mechanisms of cause and effect gave such a continuity its force.

I argue that Langer's criteria for an art of atrocity—the alienation and disfigurement of the audience, a confrontation with the grotesque and senseless—may be read as analogues to Friedlander's "authentic feelings of loneliness and dread," "affect," and "impact of past horror." Langer's work thus helps us to understand what Friedlander hopes the narratives of the new discourse might accomplish: a stripping away of

preconceived assumptions and ready-made frameworks for understanding, replaced by the authentic affective experience of the grotesque and senseless, the psychological dimension of the past. For Langer and Friedlander, the enormity of the events of Nazism and the Holocaust give a new urgency and obligation to art: the experience of an art of atrocity would be, like the events to which such art gives expression, without precedent. As such, the experience would also force viewers or readers to engage in the crisis of comprehension brought about by the psychological dimension as just that, a crisis of comprehension. Ideally, this experience of an art of atrocity would encourage those authentic, affective feelings of loneliness and dread that Friedlander believes are requisite for understanding fully the psychological dimension.

Langer writes that a novel like *The White Hotel* takes historical fact and makes it available to readers in profoundly affecting images and narrative (or to remember his archetypal example of *Guernica*, painterly) forms, but always returns the readers' attention to the historical fact. That return is accompanied by an enlarged understanding, predicated on an affective, empathic identification with what Friedlander calls "past horror," of suffering and death as outside of history but nonetheless historical.

An Example of the New Discourse: The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.

After this discussion of art and the new discourse's potential for enlarging historical understanding, we can turn to one of the examples of the new discourse Friedlander cites in *Reflections of Nazism*. In his 1981 novella *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.*, George Steiner imagines a Hitler who has survived the end of the war

(a decoy committed suicide and burned in the chancellery bunker), escaped Germany, and managed to elude capture for thirty years by hiding in the Amazonian jungle.¹⁰ In 1977, a group of Israeli Nazi hunters tracks Hitler deep into the jungle, finding an old, diminished man squatting in mean accommodations. Realizing they cannot port him out of the jungle and bring him to justice through proper juridical channels (a member of the team has died, others have contracted malarial poisoning, and Hitler may himself die), the Nazi hunters determine to put Hitler on trial in the jungle. The latter half of the novel fictively enacts what, because of Hitler's suicide, the world was denied: the opportunity to ask Hitler why he committed his crimes, and the chance to hear a full explanation in response.

The final chapter of Steiner's novel is an extended monologue, written in the voice of Adolf Hitler, which mimics the rhetorical histrionics to which we have become accustomed. For example, Steiner's Hitler slams fist into palm and occasionally interrupts his own discourse to declaim, "Gentlemen, I have trouble containing myself!" Here, however, those histrionics are in service to a spirited accounting of why, given the long history of the Jews as a "cancer of unrest," Hitler was compelled to murder them. Steiner, well known for his eloquent critical exposition of the nature of language in relation to the Holocaust in *Language and Silence*, has clearly grounded his fictional work in historical research. For example, Hitler's concluding monologue reads as an updating and elaboration of points Hitler made in his *Mein Kampf*, of which Steiner demonstrates a scholar's expertise. The concluding monologue shows, too, a scholar's awareness of the contemporary debates around Hitler and the Holocaust, especially the question of how to situate the event within comparative frameworks based on statistics

such as the number of the dead.

The novel builds upon, but ultimately takes leave of, that historical research by fictively allowing Hitler to speak of what his historical death has deprived historians and historical audiences: an accounting of why he orchestrated the murders of millions of Jewish men, women, and children. Steiner's intention is to recreate the same rhetorical environment in which millions were persuaded by the force of Hitler's words. As the audience reads, it begins to feel itself pulled along by the suasive dint of Hitler's speaking, though Steiner's Hitler is a touch more intellectual in his argument than its more emotional historical counterpart. The effect of this monologue is to contour a rationalization of the murder of millions with the emotional, rhetorically affecting oratorical power that, in the middle part of the twentieth century, played a major role in making possible the Final Solution. Though it does not open up audiences to the authentic feelings of loneliness and dread for which Friedlander calls, Steiner's monologue attempts to clear a space for such empathic identifications by giving readers a vicarious experience of the rhetorical tool and its subsequent psychological state by which "past horror" was made possible.

Kitsch

Taking Steiner's novel as representative, Friedlander registers across the range of filmic and literary narratives of the new discourse a common, disquieting "dissonance" between, on the one hand, the enormity and complexity of the historical event and its central concern, death on a genocidal scale and, on the other hand, the artistic narrative forms tasked with representing it (*RN* 19). This pervasive lack of harmony between the

event and the narrative's capacity to communicate it suggests to Friedlander that the new discourse's narrative modes are insufficient to the task of engendering the affective discomfort of the psychological dimension, no matter the intentions of the narrative. In fact, the narratives of the new discourse achieve the opposite result of their aim: rather than the hoped for "impact of past horror," novels like *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* perform the "neutralization of 'extreme situations,' particularly death, by turning them into some sentimental idyll" or some other generic mode with which audiences are well familiar (RN 27).

The term Friedlander offers to characterize this dissonance is "kitsch." In its common usage, kitsch suggests bad taste, garishness, sentimentality, or cheapness: a coffee mug with a reproduction of Van Gogh's *Starry Night*, for one example, or a plastic machine-molded figure of the Madonna holding the Christ child placed atop a television set, as another. The term typically implies a profanation of the cultural or religious sacred by reducing it to clichéd and commonplace forms. Friedlander's understanding of "kitsch" is indebted to the well known arguments made by Matei Calinescu in his *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch*, a work that Friedlander cites in *Reflections of Nazism*.¹¹ Calinescu argues that kitsch is a *narrative insufficiency*, a condition revealed only when a narrative attempts to transmit the meaning of an object or event for which it is too meager or mean. "No matter how we classify its contexts of usage," Calinescu writes,

Kitsch always implies the notion of aesthetic inadequacy. Such inadequacy is often found in single objects whose formal qualities (material, shape, size, etc.) are inappropriate in relation to their cultural context or intention. But this 'law of aesthetic inadequacy' has a much wider scope, and we may well speak of kitsch effects in connection with combinations of objects that, taken individually, have absolutely nothing

kitschy about them.¹²

Any survey of the Holocaust in contemporary popular culture yields an abundance of kitsch examples: postcards of the “Arbeit Macht Frei” stele at the gates of Auschwitz; the 1978 mini-series *Holocaust*; certain elements of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum; the infamous hot-dog stand at Auschwitz. Certainly the formal qualities of a postcard—its inexpensive materials, its size, its intended uses—are incommensurate to the gates of Auschwitz, just as the formal characteristics of a prime-time television mini-series are incongruous to the historical reality they seek to serially represent. In such instances, the aesthetic inadequacy derives from an already kitsch object’s (the postcard, the mini-series) application to a severe subject such as the Holocaust.

The significant relation between the subject or occasion of representation (the history) and the form by which it is expressed (the art) determines that the identifying features of the past events—for Friedlander, the “psychological dimension,” the genocide—should rule out certain modes of expression or representation: postcards, coffee mugs, and mini-series, for example. The claim Friedlander wants to make with his use of “kitsch” is a somewhat deeper and broader one about art’s relation to historical catastrophe. Though death is, in Friedlander’s words, everyday and banal, there is nothing natively kitsch about it, just as there is nothing inherently kitsch about the Holocaust. Nor is there a congenital kitsch to the narrative forms Friedlander sees in the new discourse. When the two are brought together, however, the result is ineluctably a coupled kitsch effect: the “neutralization of extreme situations” and the revelation of what Friedlander bluntly calls “the inadequacy of art” (*RN* 99).

The term “neutralization” is critical to Friedlander’s argument and our understanding of “fascination;” along with “fascination,” “neutralization” is *Reflections of Nazism*’s most regularly occurring and suggestive keyword.¹³ Typically, the term “neutralize” means to render something harmless through the application of some countering force or effect. To neutralize a threat is to transform it as such, from a threat into something that can be managed, thwarted or, even better, disregarded altogether. Friedlander sees the neutralizing counterforce of kitsch as deriving both from the formal qualities of filmic or literary narratives and from the experiences they aim to engender in the spectator or reader. In the kitsch event, the characteristics of the new discourse’s cinematic and literary narratives—their narrative structures or plots, the composition of their visual or textual image—tend to reduce the threat of past horror to manageable categories of, among others, narrative structure, plot, and composition. Such categories are manageable precisely because the spectator or reader has them available as part of the reservoir of stock, familiar categories of understanding (that “inner eye” that the narrator of Wordsworth’s *Prelude* uses to place the dead man in the “shining streams/ Of faery land, the forest of romance”). By making the subjects of death and the Holocaust conform to the codified characteristics of narrative forms, these subjects are given a salutary coherence and a comfortable meaning for the reader, who in turn responds with matching images, narrative patterns, and so on—the “thinking in images” that Freud associates with fascination.

Nuanced in this manner, Friedlander’s “kitsch” and “neutralization” anticipate Hayden White’s formulation of “historical emplotment.”¹⁴ According to White, a potent contemporary historiographic tendency derives from the 19th century and resorts to

familiar, generic narrative codes that provide salutary formulae for the writing of history. These narrative codes are drawn from literary history: romance, comedy, tragedy, and satire. As the work of, among others, Northrop Frye has demonstrated, these four categories share a set of characteristics that are modulated to suit the unique needs of each: the narrative structure (typically divided into three parts); plot; ascending and descending action (a rising action, a conflict, and a resolution); the classical Aristotelean narrative requirements of *hamartia*, *peripeteia*, and *anagnorisis*; and the perceived relationship of audience to protagonist and antagonist (in a tragedy, for example, the audience sees the hero as stationed above itself at the narrative's beginning, and through his tragic fall, at the end below themselves).¹⁵

White shows how historians mobilize these four modes to "emplot" historical events within presupposed narrative frameworks. Emplotted historical narratives offer obvious heroes and villains, clear conflicts with explicit causes and effects, and resolutions that provide the narrative with closure and present the history within self-contained units. As an emplotted historical reality, we could say that the Holocaust is "romantic" in the sense that its narrative depicts survivors who overcome extraordinary tribulation and whose stories evince the triumphant and ineluctable return of the good to defeat evil. Similarly, the Holocaust might be classically "comedic" in that heroes endure seemingly impossible pain and suffering to the extent that they appear to have cheated death itself, thereby valorizing a set of shared human values such as fortitude and forbearance. If a "tragic" emplotment, the burden of responsibility for the Holocaust is born by those who, through their tragic flaws, have brought the events upon themselves. Each mode of emplotment gives the historical event a specific set of meanings and values

with which the reader or spectator is already comfortably equipped.

“Kitsch,” Friedlander writes, “is a means of digesting the past” (RN 40). With White, we can better understand Friedlander’s critique of the neutralizing kitsch effect of new discourse narratives. Friedlander’s argument aims at the narratives’ shared tendency to nullify the alienating, affecting force of past horror by containing and communicating that horror in stock forms that meet and match audience expectations. What White calls emplotted histories, which make use of codes drawn from literary history and that are found in both literary and cinematic narratives, offer versions of the catastrophe in “digestible” forms—readily available to consumers for their consumption.

Kitsch and Emplotment in Holocaust-Themed Sexploitation Film

The claim I am making in my reading of Friedlander—that certain narrative modes reduce the complexity of the catastrophe and make it digestible to consumers—is by no means a new one. What I hope we have seen thus far in our reading of Friedlander are the constants of a persistent problem in representing the catastrophic past: Certain elements of that past (what we have referred to, following Friedlander, as the psychological dimension) are of a nature that requires a new representative mode commensurate with the complexity of the past event (Friedlander’s hope for the new discourse, Langer’s argument for an art of atrocity and a discourse of ruin). Friedlander suggests, however, that the artistic attempts to transmit the affecting experience of “authentic feelings of loneliness and dread” fail largely because of, say, a film’s reliance on precisely that which makes it an art *form*: narrative structures, character types, conflict

and resolution, engineered audience experiences, genre characteristics.

What I am working toward here is an understanding of what Friedlander means when he says that in this return to narrative coherence created by certain narrative forms, there is the return of a fascination. That is, fascination is a mode of relating to a neutralized version of the catastrophic past created by specific narrative forms or modes. In order to understand fully this fascination, let us more closely consider examples of narratives that Friedlander would argue create it. At this juncture I would like to open a reading of the two films I mentioned in my introduction, *Love Camp 7* and *Holocaust 2*. By doing so, I do not mean to flatten the important differences between Steiner's literary narrative and these two cinematic narratives. I am motivated to read these two films as illustrations of the problem we have been considering in this chapter precisely because Friedlander cites the genre as the most fascinating of new discourse narratives. As such, they help us to understand more completely how fascination is related to the neutralization of horror, the disavowal of authentic feelings of loneliness and dread, and the emplotment of historical catastrophe into digestible packages.

As Linda Williams has pointed out, the "body genres" of pornography, horror, and melodrama demonstrate the strongest dependency on generic patterns and standard tropes.¹⁶ Concomitantly, the audience brings to a horror or pornography film the most deeply entrenched set of filmic expectations. A pornography film must have a "money shot," a horror film must have the "final girl," and a melodrama must have characteristic displays of and appeals to heightened emotions. Spectatorial satisfaction is immediately linked to the fulfillment of genre expectations (a point one may make about *anything* corresponding to genre, which Fredric Jameson reminds us is first and foremost a social

contract wherein we agree to certain characteristics and expectations to be satisfied).¹⁷ Eric Schaefer argues that the sexual exploitation film draws from all three of the body genres in order to guarantee the audience a very specific type of pleasurable, voyeuristic cinematic experience.¹⁸ Thus the pleasurable experience of viewing the sexploitation film depends heavily upon the satisfaction of stock expectations. Schaeffer stresses that among these expectations is the reduction of complex characters or events to crude composite depictions such as stock villains and protagonists.

Love Camp 7 (USA; 1979) opens in present-day London, where an American dignitary notices a map of WWII-era Poland on the wall of the British MP whose office he is visiting.¹⁹ Recognizing the map as an artifact of the same war in which he served, the American is told by the MP's assistant that without the wartime service of the British officer, "we would all be speaking German right now." The map then focalizes a temporal shift into the past, where it now hangs on the wall of a secret military planning room somewhere in German territory, 1945. A group of officers, including the future British MP, instructs two young women in their mission to infiltrate the most notorious of the Nazi "love camps," facilities where women are kept for the exclusive purpose of their sexual servitude to Nazi officers, troops, and functionaries. The liberation of the women prisoners and the destruction of the camps, the audience is told, will change the course of the war.²⁰

From this point the film unfolds as an extended flashback of the spies' liberation from the camp, though the flashback is the visualization of the tale the British MP relates to his American interlocutor in the present. The flashbacks are thus embroidered by the diegetic commentary of the British MP, which provides the audience with information

regarding the logistics of the mission and later rescue, the backgrounds of the women chosen for the mission, and historical details placing the mission within the broader context of the war. *Love Camp 7* concludes back in the present: the British MP, his story of atrocity and heroism concluded, is picked up by his wife outside his office in Whitehall, where the audience discovers that he has married and lived out his post-war life with one of the two heroines of the mission. The film ends where it began, as the camera fades out on a wide-shot of the Houses of Parliament.

Drawing from the same historical source material, the fictional plot of *Holocaust 2* (Italy; 1980) imbricates the Nazi “love camps” with Joseph Mengele’s medical experimentations and Simon Wiesenthal’s Nazi hunters.²¹ As in *Love Camp 7*, the film’s temporal setting is the present, wherein a group of Jewish survivors of the concentration camps and their children assembles to capture and bring to justice their Nazi perpetrators. Their primary objective is to kill the doctor responsible for orchestrating the acts of sexual and medical torture to which they, their families, and their friends were subjected while imprisoned at Spandau. The audience is told in a voice over narration that this doctor performed experimental brain surgeries on 783 victims, 300 of which were children. The surgeries were meant to manipulate the memories of the victims, whose vivid recollections of their repeated rape and abuse the Nazi criminals sought to erase. All died as a result of the experimentation.

Most of the film’s action takes place in the present, as the Nazi-hunters find and take revenge on their erstwhile victimizers. With each act of revenge, however, the crimes of the perpetrators are featured in extended flashback sequences, wherein the audience witnesses the evidence on which the former Nazis’ “trials and executions” are

predicated. At times the memories, and therefore the subjectivity of the spectator, belong to the former Nazi (as he dies, Colonel Hans, a former camp officer, recalls his brutal murder of a priest before the watching eyes of young children); at other times, the memories and the spectator's perspective belongs to the victims of the Nazi crimes. Whatever the memorial/spectatorial subjectivity, the flashbacks are always some variant of a montage of black and white documentary photographs of Mengele and victims of Nazi medical experiments; the fictional filmic depiction of the Nazi crimes as they occurred in the camps (the proper flashback); and close-ups of either the face of the former Nazi as he is murdered or that of the former victim turned vindicator as he commits the act.

Through formal devices characteristic of films about Nazism and the Holocaust, both *Love Camp 7* and *Holocaust 2* commence by emphasizing their historical veracity. As *Love Camp 7* opens, a long shot of the Thames with the Houses of Parliament in middle and background is accompanied by a voice-over narration, which announces that, "The story you are about to see is true. It is based on actual facts, as told by one who lived it." The voice-over attaches two forms of historical authenticity to the film's plot. The first derives from the phrase "actual facts" which, when delivered in tandem with the shot of the Houses of Parliament, is meant to invest the story with a legal/judicial, evidentiary integrity. The second is the testimonial and experiential authenticity supposed by the phrasing of "as told by one who lived it."

The opening credit sequence of *Holocaust 2* is a montage of still photographs. Names of the cast and crew are presented alongside photographic images of the parade grounds of the Nuremberg Rallies (actually a still frame lifted from Riefenstahl's

Triumph of the Will), the gates of Auschwitz (the focal point of which is the iron-wrought “Arbeit Macht Frei”), an experimentation/ autopsy table from Auschwitz, starving concentration camp inmates, piles of bodies assembled for mass burial, and charred corpses. Many of these images would be familiar to the average American or European cinema spectator as part of the broader Western memorial reservoir of Holocaust/Nazi imagery. The average spectator would also recognize the narrative trajectory of the montage as it moves from images of the Nazi political and industrial structure, to photos of the concentration camp system to, finally, images of the catastrophic consequences of the Final Solution. These elements, combined with the grainy, black and white documentary tone of the photographs, give the film that follows a precise historical indexicality and an obvious economy of historical referentiality.

Love Camp 7 and *Holocaust 2* attempt to give historical authenticity to their respective narrative accounts; they also adhere faithfully to the formal and thematic requirements of their genre: their plots are vehicles for dramatically staged spectacles of sexual and non-sexual, though invariably eroticized, violence and murder. Formal filmic choices such as overhead camera angles and intimate, almost claustrophobic shot proxemics; the variously dusky and shockingly bright lighting of scenes; obscenely intimate sounds of heavy breathing, ripping flesh, screams and moans; and the boudoir arrangement of the concentration camp *mise-en-scène* all promote a voluptuous, sensorily ravishing spectatorial response. In one scene from *Holocaust 2*, for example, low-angle shots of a Nazi soldier in the act of raping a young woman focus on his twisted, animal expressions of sadistic glee. The spectatorial perspective of these shots is that of the victim, and the audience thus feels its proximity to the sweaty, contorted face of the

perpetrator and, by extension, its voyeuristic presence in the scene.

These shots are intercut with documentary photos of familiar Holocaust images such as the entrance to Auschwitz, repeated from the film's opening montage. This movement back and forth between the graphic shots of sexual violence and the documentary images serves a dual purpose: it suggests a historical credibility to the former (Nazis really were sexually deviant monsters driven by their sadistic impulses) and erotic contours to the latter (the historical reality of the camps is defined by the acts of sexual torture that took place there). As the film oscillates between an insistence on and reminders of its own veracity and an eroticized engagement with the historical material, the aesthetic pleasure one derives from this movement has serious implications for historical interpretation. The opening montage of *Holocaust 2* not only claims the film is *about* Nazism and the Holocaust, but more importantly about a Nazism and a Holocaust with which the audience is already familiar, and quite comfortably so: the automaton masses at attention before the swastika banners, furred and unfurled above the Nazi magic circle; the train rails running into the gates of Auschwitz; the countenances of victims frozen in a death stare; bodies piled into a horrifying pyramid. The formal choice of juxtaposing shots of the film's action with documentary images provides an explanation for the images of suffering and death: Nazi perversity and sadism. Like Steiner's explanation for Hitler's actions, these films offer cause-and-effect narratives that situate the horror in accessible explanatory models (the Nazis were sexual deviants, more monster than human) that also provide compensatory pleasures (these monsters were singular and therefore could never emerge again).

The pleasure of a film like *Holocaust 2* thus comes not only from the sensual satisfactions its images offer, but as well from the audience's pleasurable ability to identify what has become a mythic, universal figuration of the Nazi: sadistic perversion, inhuman monstrosity, absolute evil. Death and the Holocaust are explained away through the counterforce of pleasure, a pleasure at once sensual and historical. Or put somewhat differently, the sensual pleasure of the image and the historiographic choices of representing the Nazi and the concentration camp determine a pleasurable, neutralizing historical *interpretation*. "Evil and infamy are again limited to small group the viewer can easily ignore," Friedlander writes. "One may breathe again" (RN 101). The "new discourse" provides the pleasure of that déjà vu characterized in this chapter's epigraph from Wordsworth, a déjà vu stripped of its uncanny dimensions. *Holocaust 2's* montage provides the comfort that the history one is about to engage is one the spectator has, always, already seen before.

The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H. as Kitsch Narrative

We are beginning to understand those dynamics that animate Friedlander's analogy of that tapestry of images distracting attention from the black rock of history. Those images rippling in serried waves provide spectators or readers with a pleasurable anodyne to the threat of the impact of past horror represented by the black rock. The aesthetic pleasure of narrative form overtakes the authentic feelings of loneliness and dread, the compensatory experience of meeting expected tropes and narrative codes neutralizes the anxiety of an encounter with what has yet to be comprehended, and any

rigorous engagement with the psychological dimension of the past is foreclosed.

Here we can return to Steiner's *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* and ask: How does the novella neutralize the threatening impact of its past horror? By entering into a reading of Steiner's novel here, I do not mean to flatten the differences between that work and the sexploitation films described above. By reading these texts alongside each other, I am attempting to understand how Friedlander can indict these strikingly different works for the same kitsch containment, the same fascination.

Generically, with its story of a troop of Israeli Nazi hunters penetrating the jungle to capture and transport their quarry, the narrative matches neatly the patterns of the thriller. The novel also recalls earlier tales of journeys into the variously configured hearts of darkness, Joseph Conrad's most prominent among them. Here the jungle, with Hitler as the isolated icon of iniquity nestled deeply at its center, develops as an all too easy metaphor for human evil. Its relation to literary history and its narrative forebears aside, the image fits neatly within a popular memorial image reserve of evil residing in a darkening wood, an ancient forest, or, here, a menacing and mysterious jungle.²²

It is the figure of Hitler himself, however, that offers the true kitsch moment of the novel. When the Israeli men discover him, he is as non-threateningly frail as one would expect a 90 year-old man sequestered in a jungle hide-out would be. As he begins to speak in the novel's peroration, however, his voice transforms from a wheezy asthmatic rattle to the youthfully hale, stentorian force a reader would expect from any representation of the "historical" Hitler. If his body does not actually gain strength, if his limbs do not actually regain flexibility and musculature, that voice at least gives the appearance of such. The result is the restoration of the Hitler captured in low-angle by so

many shots on Riefenstahl's *Triumph of the Will*, the mythic Hitler whose words elevate the man to the status of a god. It is once again, to borrow from Sontag, *Götterdämmerung* time.²³ For the reader of the novel, the fascinating figure of Hitler rising up in a return to his mythic form yields the reader's "attraction much more than horror, seduction much more than repulsion" (RN 70).

The monologue itself integrates the Final Solution into Hitler's particular brand of anti-Semitism described in *Mein Kampf*, but also takes the further step of stitching Hitler's own anti-Semitism into a larger historical/cultural tapestry of anti-Semitism. Hitler's actions thus become the entelechy of pre-existing patterns of thought, belief, and action, made intelligible to the reader as the logical consequence of historical causality. The statistical dispute over the number of victims allows Hitler to explain that, while Stalin killed indiscriminately and with a sadistic glee, Hitler himself grudgingly undertook the ugly task of killing those who threatened the health of the nation in his charge. In thus explaining his actions, Steiner's imaginary Hitler offers a potential solution to the problem of the historical Hitler's purported evil. The reader is left with an explanation of the Final Solution that fits neatly into the established currents of historical anti-Semitism as a seemingly inevitable and at the same time singular (therefore inimitable) product of extant historical conditions. Perhaps most comfortingly, the murder of millions may be seen not in terms of the "psychological dimension" (the horrific experience of the victim), but rather as a political necessity created by causal factors and undertaken for the good of the German nation-state. Familiar historical arguments for Nazism as an economic, political, national and ideological reality intervene to neutralize the impact of genocidal horror. It is as though, against its best intentions, the

novel makes recourse to those historical explanations for which art, in Friedlander's argument, was meant to be a catalyst for advanced understanding.

The kitsch moments constitutive of Steiner's imaginative evocation of the past make that past digestible, but also *palatable*, for it must be said that "kitsch" in Friedlander's sense points to a strong dimension of *aesthetic pleasure*. The aesthetically pleasurable aspect of kitsch helps us to understand more fully Friedlander's deep suspicion of *fictional* and *artistic* evocations of the historical past: unlike straightforward historical accounts, documentaries, and testimonials (which can, White reminds us, "emplot" the past as rigidly as any work of art), a novel or film about Nazism and the Holocaust are always, first and foremost, *a novel or a film about Nazism and the Holocaust*. That is, works of art are always primarily aesthetic, not historical, phenomena, elevating their respective forms above any historical content. Consequently, when viewing a film or reading a novel, attention gradually but necessarily shifts from the history to the aesthetic qualities of its narrative expression. The primary pleasure of encountering qualities one anticipates—the stock moves of the thriller genre, the development of a well-worn metaphor for evil—overtakes and outdistances the attempt at historical understanding.²⁴

Fascination and Fetishism

We can say that the kitsch effect of "new discourse" narratives is a distancing and disconnecting from the horror of the historical past through a nurtured, pleasurable captivation by compensatory, comforting narrative patterns and images. Because the narrative modes and the images tend to be ones the viewer or spectator is already familiar

with, the kitsch effect strengthens the position of such images within the spectator's historical understanding. As we have seen in our reading of the two sexploitation films, even supposedly transgressive or extreme of genres or their representatives can create conservative historical understandings that neutralize the catastrophic enormity of the past. Friedlander writes in language evocative of his opening analogy, "the endless stream of words and images becomes an ever more effective screen hiding the past, when the only open avenue may well be that of quietness, simplicity, of the constant presence of the unsaid" (RN 97). One can readily understand the argument in favor of silence and the estranging presence of the unsaid over an endless stream of images such as those offered in *Love Camp 7* and *Holocaust 2*. Friedlander's point in *Reflections of Nazism*, however, is aimed more broadly at the wider world of artistic representation and is meant to draw attention to art's inability to achieve a "penetration of the core of the phenomenon" (RN 120).

Now, I would not be offering this reading of these films if it did not yield a more complicated understanding of Friedlander's fascination. For Friedlander, fascination is a condition or state of comfort that comes from the threatening impact of past horror having been neutralized. Though Friedlander's use of the term does not (necessarily) suggest the hypnosis-like states we described in the previous chapter, there are similarities among Friedlander's fascination and that described by Freud et al. in chapter one. For example, in each there is a suspension of critical faculties and a tendency to think in images like those being presented to the viewer. Freud argues that fascination can be a stilling of the most formidable tempests of the psyche, which certainly

corresponds to Friedlander's argument that in fascination one is comforted in the nullification of "authentic feelings of loneliness and dread."

Locating fascination more specifically within the terms of this analysis, our analysis of Friedlander reveals that fascination is a product of the kitsch coincidence of the Holocaust and inadequate narrative representations of it. As such, the condition of fascination has serious implications for the historical understanding of the one who is fascinated. Consider in this regard Friedlander's definition of fascination. He writes that fascinated is an:

Exorcism, finally, whose total endeavor [. . .] is—in the face of Nazi criminality and extermination policies—to maintain distance by means of language, to affirm the existence of another reality by inverting the signs of this one, and finally to appease by showing that all the chaos and horror is, after all, coherent and explainable. (RN 19)

The concluding point in this passage is the most important, for we must understand fascination not as the means to appeasement, but rather the *state of appeasement* brought about by strategies of neutralization and disavowal. Fascination is the totality of an "exorcism" wherein whatever threatening (because as yet unknown, as yet unaccounted for) elements of the past that might be authentically confronted are arrested by familiar, salutary categories.

What I am claiming for Friedlander's analysis of narratives and their relation to "fascination" brings to mind the *fetish*, a consideration of which gives us an opportunity to consider the etymology of "fascination." According to Sigmund Freud's reading, the fetish is an object used to disavow the fundamental threat of castration. The male child, seeing that the female (in the typical Freudian scenario, the child's mother) has no penis, senses that the penis has been cut off. The woman's reality—her castration—becomes a

potential reality with which the male child is constantly threatened, creating in the child an abiding anxiety. In order to compensate for the threat of castration and nullify its attendant anxiety, the child invests substitute objects with a sense of plenitude that can cover over or “fill in” the absence. The fetish object (which Freud initially argues is the first object the child sees after he looks away in horror from the missing penis but later argues can become any object, even an idea) disavows the threat of castration and displaces anxiety, but also represses the act of substitution itself. Thus the fetish object represses an originary act of repression, thereby supporting a neutralizing fantasy of pre-castration, pre-anxiety wholeness.²⁵

In Freud’s work and as I am using here, “fetish” retains some semblance of its origins in ancient mystical and religious belief and ritual. Etymologically, the English “fetish” derives from the French *fétiche* and in turn from the Portuguese *feitiço*, meaning a charm or amulet believed capable of warding off evil. The French and Portuguese terms are modulations of the Latin term *facticius*, meaning “made by or resulting from art or artifice.” The earliest fetishes were phallic objects and images fashioned in homage to the Roman deity *Liber*, equivalent of the Greek god *Priapus*—the gods of fertility, virility, and the male reproductive organs. *Priapus* and *Liber* are typically represented bearing unusually large and persistently erect penises (it is after Priapus that the medical condition of *priapism* is named). These early fetishes were initially worn around the neck and then later hung in homes, places of worship, and other public spaces in the belief that the magical power of the object would annul the threat of spells or wicked enchantments and would banish evil spirits, which were typically regarded as feminine.

The earliest fetish was called a *fascinum*, which is a noun form of the older verb

fascinare, meaning to cast a spell or enchant through magic and is the classical origins of our modern verb “fascinate.” *Fascinum* was used also to designate the penis and, most often and most generally, an image wrought by human hands—a work of art. The power of the *fascinum* was two-fold: invested with a virile, masculine and magical agency (in fact, the god *Liber* was later renamed *Fascinus*), it was capable of negating other forms of bewitching, enchanting, and spell-casting by absorbing and averting its power; given this countervailing force, when worn around the neck or hung in the home of the individual, the *fascinum* was capable of neutralizing a threat and providing a sense of comfort and appeasement, what was called *fascinationem*—fascination.

One of the more commonplace *fascinum* was an image of the Gorgon Medusa, whose hair was a nest of writhing serpents. To behold her directly (to look into her evil eye) would transform anyone who did so into stone. As Jean-Pierre Vernant describes it, using language very like that from Agamben’s epigraph and which resonates within our analysis, “to look the Gorgon in the eye is to find yourself face to face with the beyond in its dimension of terror, exchanging looks with an eye which, while it fixes you, is the negation of the look, encountering a light which has the blinding power of darkness.”²⁶ The *fascinum* repeated the craft by which Perseus vanquished the Gorgon: guided by her reflected image, which allowed him to look upon Medusa without succumbing to terror, Perseus approached and beheaded her. Thus the *fascinum*, crafted in a fashion that made recourse to pre-existing mythic tales of good vanquishing evil, of threats banished, of ghosts exorcised and demons called out, allowed for its creator or bearer to approach any threat with no fear of its impact, with no fear of being affected by it. In a word, fascinated.²⁷

Conclusion

With the return to an emplotted, “fetishistic” narrative of the past, there is the return of an anxiety-disavowing, exorcising fascination. As a concluding point, I would like to linger a bit longer with one more of Friedlander’s keywords: “exorcism,” by which he characterizes the state of fascination “Exorcism” (like yet another of Friedlander’s terms, “evocation”) indicates the summoning forth of spirits, a form of conjuration in which the disembodied remainders of the once living are called to the spot, so to speak. “Exorcism” also designates the ritualistic, typically religious/liturgical processes by which a spirit is cast out of its dwelling place, be it a haunted house, an ancient forest, or an unwilling host’s body, mind, and spirit. Finally, “exorcism” names the state of normalcy to which a body, a house, a people are returned by the banishment of the ghost. Taken together, “exorcism” offers a way of understanding the fascinating narrative enterprise we have discussed in the previous pages: Just as an exorcism conjures only in order to banish a spirit, fascinating, fetishistic narratives make reference to the history of Nazism and the Holocaust only in order to restrict their place, arrest their movement, and banish them to the distant past.

Friedlander would not choose the term “exorcism” if he did not want to suggest something about history as *revenant*, as that which comes back. Ghosts, we know from *Hamlet*, return for a reason. Friedlander’s formulation of the “psychological dimension” suggests that the past comes back in part because there is no available framework for making sense of, understanding, or working through certain aspects of that past. By

coming back, they draw attention to both the past as something that haunts the present *and* to contemporary frameworks of understanding as structures haunted by an absence of meaning. Over the past fifteen years, historians (including Friedlander), film scholars, and especially literary scholars have come to rely on the psychoanalytic notion of *trauma* to characterize and understand the haunting presence of the historical past. Indeed, much of the language introduced in our reading of Friedlander—*anxiety, affect, disavowal, fetish, and indeed, fascination*—are important terms in the lexicon of trauma.

In the next chapter, I want to examine the concept of trauma more closely, and to do so in the context of an analysis of what historiographic, theoretical, and artistic modes are appropriate and inappropriate to engaging trauma. With Dominick LaCapra, I will examine the field of trauma studies and his use of the term “*fascination*,” which seems, initially, to follow Sontag and Friedlander in its negative characterization of inappropriate modes of relation to the Holocaust. Here, however, I will start to read against this understanding of *fascination* in order to suggest a different, more generative understanding of *fascination* that in turn reveals a new understanding of the relation of trauma to narrative.

NOTES

¹ William Wordsworth. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*. Ed. M. H. Abrams (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.) The lines quoted are from the final, 1850 edition, Book Five, lines 473-481.

² Giorgio Agamben. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans; Daniel Heller Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999): 81.

³ James Berger. *After the End: Representations of the Post-Apocalypse* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999).

⁴ Saul Friedlander. *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death* (New York: Harper & Row, 1982): 119. Hereafter referred to as *RN*.

⁵ Within the discipline of Holocaust studies, and especially within the sub-field that focuses on literary and cinematic representations of the Holocaust, films like *Love Camp 7* and *Holocaust 2* are regarded as so far outside the ambit of ethical representation as to be unworthy even of scholarly consideration. For example, Berel Lang argues in *Holocaust Representation* that any scholarly consideration of pornography and exploitation films about the Holocaust risks succumbing to the same fascination that such films engender in their audiences. While this may be true, one could argue the same for any representation of the Holocaust, and so just as I hope to show how these films enact a fascination like their more “traditional” counterparts, I would also argue that these films offer an exaggerated illustration of the transference dynamic at work in any scholarly consideration of art and catastrophe. For more on this transference dynamic, see chapter three of this dissertation. For more on Lang’s discussion of these films, see

Lang, *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003).

⁶ In his work, Freud describes a non-quiescent energy that has as of yet no relation to the ego and the ego-cathexes. This can be repressed material, for example, or what Freud calls an “untamed mnemonic image.” The energy thus needs to be “bound” to the ego in order to restore the ego to its proper homeopathic state. See Jean Laplanche and J.-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1973): 50.

⁷ Lucy Dawidowicz. *The War Against the Jews, 1933-45* (London: Pelican, 1977): 18.

⁸ Freud describes the profound feelings of unpleasantness and anxiety that attend the disruptive course of unbound energy. He writes, in language that is relevant to our discussion, that unbound energy arouses “affect and unpleasantness.” This affect is precisely that which Friedlander calls for in an encounter with the “psychological dimension” of the past. See Laplanche and Pontalis, 50.

⁹ Lawrence Langer. *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1977), hereafter referred to as *HL*, and *Admitting the Holocaust* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995), hereafter referred to as *AH*.

¹⁰ George Steiner. *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981).

¹¹ Matei Calinescu. *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977).

¹² Calinescu, 174.

¹³ Like “fascination,” “neutralize” and its variants are used consistently throughout *Reflections of Nazism* to designate the effect of the new discourse. The term’s implications of counterforce, nullification, and the disarming of a threat are important clues to Friedlander’s use of “fascination.” However, inasmuch as the meaning of Friedlander’s keywords are left unexplained, their meanings only become clear when viewed as a lexical set.

¹⁴ Hayden White. *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Truth* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1987). For further discussion of emplotment in relation to the Holocaust, see White, “Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth.” *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*. Ed. Saul Friedlander (Harvard UP, 1992): 37-53.

¹⁵ Northrop Frye. *Anatomy of Criticism*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971).

¹⁶ Linda Williams. *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible* (Berkeley: U of California P, 1989).

¹⁷ Fredric Jameson. *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. (New York: Verso, 1998).

¹⁸ Eric Schaefer. *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).

¹⁹ *Love Camp 7* (also known as *Nazi Love Camp 7*). Dir. Lee Frost. DVD distribution by DVD Classics, 1979.

²⁰ The actual existence of “love camps” is a matter of some dispute. Several of the women filmed in *Memory of the Camps* testify to such camps existing as part of the Auschwitz system. Though the testimonials reference sexual torture and murder, they do

not specify the provenance of the women, and many speculate they were German prostitutes hired to serve German soldiers and officers. A novel titled *House of Dolls* supposedly recounts the experiences of the author, Yehiel De-Nur, who was imprisoned at Auschwitz and whose younger sister was a member of the Auschwitz “Joy Division.” The Joy Division was a group of Jewish women assembled for the sole purpose of sexual servitude. De-Nur’s younger sister was, according to the novel, murdered after a brutal act of rape. Some scholars have called the authenticity of the novel into question based on suspicions about the actual existence of something like the Joy Division. Though apocryphal, the “love camps” and “joy divisions” have, thanks in large part to their extreme nature, become an important piece of evidence for those convinced of Nazi sadistic perversity.

²¹ *Holocaust Two: The Memories, Delirium, and Vengeance*. Dir. Angelo Pannaccio. DVD distribution by Spazmondo, 1982.

²² We can also list Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle* along with a number of films that make use of the symbolic value, including *Apocalypse Now* (which of course references Conrad’s novel) and the two sexploitation films we will discuss in this chapter.

²³ Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism.” *Under the Sign of Saturn* (New York: Anchor Books, 1991): 93.

²⁴ Langer also critiques Steiner’s novel on the basis of his version of Hitler. Langer notes that Steiner’s Hitler “replaces” the historical Hitler by corresponding to easily to a version of Hitler defined by his mythic qualities. See Langer, *The Holocaust and Literary Imagination*.

²⁵ My thinking on fascination and the fetish in relation to Friedlander's work owes much to the work of Eric Santner. A discussion of Santner's notion of "narrative fetishism," however, demands a consideration of trauma, which is the subject of the following chapter. I will therefore reserve further reference to Santner for chapter three.

²⁶ Jean-Pierre Vernant. *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*. Ed. Froma Zeitlin (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991): 146.

²⁷ Friedlander, like Sontag, links "fascination" to the historical reality of Nazism, but much more loosely. For Friedlander, the Nazis "knew something about confronting death and evading it at the same time." By this he means that the Nazis also knew something about the power of the image and the power of narrative modes to neutralize the affective impact of death.

CHAPTER THREE

ON THE “EMPATHIC UNSETTLEMENT”:

Fascination, Trauma, and Trauma Studies

The thing that’s between us is fascination, and the fascination resides in our being alike.
(Marguerite Duras, *Practicalities*¹)

Introduction

In his 2000 study *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, Dominick LaCapra argues that “the response of even secondary witnesses (including historians) to traumatic events must involve empathic unsettlement that should register in one’s very mode of address.”² The “mode of address” LaCapra calls for would be a form of *relating* traumatic events (in the sense of communicating, studying and explaining, reckoning) that depends, at least in part, on a *relating* to the traumatic event. Based on the common understanding of the term “empathy,” we could say that by “empathic unsettlement” LaCapra means a disturbance in intellectual presuppositions, beliefs, values, and categories of identity caused by the “virtual experience” of a victim of trauma’s suffering. The category of “secondary witnesses” would include those not directly implicated in traumatic events by virtue of first-hand experience (eyewitnesses, for example). Historians, then, but also those scholars and artists, readers and spectators invested in literary and cinematic

representations of traumatic events “should” make their “empathic unsettlement” evident in methodology, style, genre form, idiom, strategy of reading, or process of spectatorship. For LaCapra, an adequate response to the traumatic event (one “must,” one “should,” LaCapra prescribes) will contain clear evidence of how the intellectual, historical, temporal, political, and emotional borders separating a scholar or reader of atrocity from that atrocity’s victim have been blurred or breached by the empathic unsettlement.

Thus writing, reading, or thinking about trauma is predicated on a critically reflexive awareness of one’s experience of feeling *for* and *with* the victim of historical catastrophe, of somehow and to some extent experiencing the victim’s experience as one’s own. Explained in these terms, LaCapra’s “empathic unsettlement” harkens back to the “authentic feelings of loneliness and dread” Friedlander calls for in *Reflections of Nazism*. We saw in chapter two that for Friedlander, such feelings are part of an anxious engagement with those elements of the catastrophic past that have not yet been adequately explained by historical accounts. By undergoing the anxious experience of “authentic feelings of loneliness and dread,” the historian of the Holocaust or the reader of a novel about the Holocaust vicariously *experiences* what has not yet been *explained* by history or literature. Such an affectively charged experience, Friedlander hopes, will open onto new historical methodologies adequate to the task of explaining and understanding the events.

LaCapra’s argument for an “empathic unsettlement” is a recent and renewed charge to undergo, formulate, and put into practice an experiential component of a historical and artistic methodology that would be adequate to the task of “confronting

head on,” as Friedlander phrased it, the catastrophic past. Our focus in chapter two was on the narrative means by which such confrontations were thwarted. Through a critical assessment of LaCapra’s major contributions to the field of trauma studies (historical versus structural traumas, transference, empathy), the present chapter examines the experience of “empathic unsettlement” itself. Within LaCapra’s body of work, which includes earlier writings like *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (1994) and *History and Memory After Auschwitz* (1998), this call for an “empathic unsettlement” as arguably *the* constitutive moment of an ethically rigorous and historically responsible relation to historical catastrophe is never followed by an analysis of *what* an empathic unsettlement might be.³ LaCapra does pose important questions about the empathic unsettlement:

What is the relation between the experiences of agents or subjects in the past and the differentiated experience of observers or secondary witnesses, including historians in one of their roles, in the present? [. . .] How does one relate actual and imaginary or virtual experience? [. . .] How does trauma or traumatic “experience” disrupt experience and raise specific problems for representation and writing? (*WH* 37)

LaCapra raises crucial questions about how an empathic unsettlement might pose problems for and inform representation and writing, questions to which we shall return in this chapter’s conclusion. In LaCapra’s work, however, the question of “how” does not follow a consideration of “what” the empathic unsettlement in fact is. What precisely can one say about the empathic unsettlement? By what means does it take place and what are its characteristics? What does it mean to experience empathically another’s trauma?

The difficulties of working through such questions are worth mentioning up front. If there is indeed an empathic unsettlement in the encounter with trauma, empathy with another’s suffering involves not only critical intellection, but more fugitive, fleeting

sensations like pain, abjection, fear. Empathy therefore bears a decidedly affective dimension that is difficult, if not impossible, to translate into critical discourse, for as Freud repeatedly reminds us, affect is precisely that which cannot be theorized. Perhaps because of this impossibility, such fugitive sensations entangled in an empathic unsettlement have been kept fairly low on the critical hierarchy, regarded by thinkers of historical trauma as dubious *precisely because* they are transient, ephemeral, elusive, subjectively indeterminate. This promotes the supposition that when one is “feeling” or “experiencing,” one is not maintaining that distance requisite for critical work, sense-making, knowledge and understanding. (Here we might recall Sontag’s argument that to simulate atrocity too convincingly in a work of art risks engendering an overly stimulating, hyper-affective experience and “creating fascination.”)⁴

Perhaps the most compelling difficulty in thinking through an “empathic unsettlement” is the fact that writing about empathy would mean describing the effects of an experience that cannot properly be thought as “one’s” experience, belonging to “me.” Thinking through the “empathic unsettlement” may thus reveal the way trauma opens “me” to the other in such a way as to make “my” experience at the very least difficult to separate from the other’s, perhaps exploding the categories of empathy and experience themselves. How, then, to understand the non-experience, the happening/not-happening of the “empathic unsettlement” that must nonetheless register in one’s mode of address? The awkwardness of describing the thinking necessitated by this question suggests its very difficulty: one must describe and explain the experience of experiencing another’s experience.

In interrogating the “empathic unsettlement,” this chapter will follow the methodology of previous chapters: As I have done in chapters one and two, I will focus in chapter three on LaCapra’s use of the term “fascination.” In chapter two we saw how Friedlander’s fascination is a disavowal of the difficult but necessary affective experience of loneliness and dread, a disavowal made possible through a narrative’s recourse to stock images, standard tropes, the compensatory comfort of emplotted narratives and kitsch effects. Upon first reading, LaCapra’s “fascination” appears to update both Friedlander’s and Sontag’s “fascinations:” fascination is a hypnotic state of a-critical enthrallment, brought on by the allure of words or images, wherein rigorous historical understanding is foreclosed.

When “fascination” occurs in LaCapra’s work, however, it indicates a host of insufficiently differentiated “experiences of” and “responses to” trauma, in particular what Freud characterizes as melancholia. My analysis in chapter three will therefore read Freud’s work on melancholia and his own significant use of “fascination” in the psychobiography of Leonardo Da Vinci to argue that the fascination LaCapra dismisses is in fact a generative way of defining and explaining the “empathic unsettlement.” Read in this manner, LaCapra’s “fascination” becomes the site of a thinking that, within LaCapra’s work and within “trauma studies,” remains largely unthought: the vicarious experience of another’s suffering created, across generational, cultural, and experiential borders, by the scholarly intervention or the work of art.

Trauma

Before opening our reading of LaCapra's work, it is essential to discuss briefly that work's primary subject, trauma, for which it is useful to return once again to the work of Sigmund Freud. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud remarks that the proliferation of stimuli assaulting the psychic apparatus is radically disproportionate to the relatively small "samplings" of external stimulation it can accept and process.⁵ The "protection against stimuli," he thus concludes, "is an almost more important function for the living organism than *reception of stimuli*" (BP 30; emphasis in original). For the individual human psyche, "protection against stimuli" means in part the ability to anticipate and prepare for potential danger. Freud writes that, "'anxiety' describes a particular state of expecting danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one. 'Fear' requires a definite object of which to be afraid" (BP 11). Freud formulates fear and anxiety as "signal affects," affective states of preparedness signaling potential *future* events of threat and danger.

Sometimes, however, what Freud phrases as an "excitation from the outside" is powerful enough to overwhelm the protective mechanisms of the psychic apparatus. These "excitations" or events, overwhelming in their nature and in the manner of their taking place, cause "fright," which Freud writes is "a state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it, it emphasizes the factor of surprise" (BP 11). When an event occurs in this manner, *in the absence of affective preparedness*, an excess of excitation "floods" a breach in the psychic apparatus, yielding an amount of stimulus that cannot be bound and discharged. This unbound, excess stimulation is the cause of what Freud calls "traumatic neurosis."

Freud observes that dreams have the strange tendency to bring the victim of the traumatic neurosis back to the scene of the frightening event. This oneiric activity contrasts the mental processes of the victim's waking life, in which he is rarely disturbed by memories of the event. Freud typically regards dream activity to be a matter of wish fulfillment in the regulation of the pleasure principle. In the matter of traumatic neuroses, Freud writes:

We may assume, rather, that dreams are here helping to carry out another task [than wish fulfillment], which must be accomplished before the dominance of the pleasure principle can even begin. These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis. (*BP* 36-37)

As Freud characterizes it here, the dream is one attempt, along with verbal tics, unexplained motor spasms, and other forms of "acting out," to return to the site of the traumatizing event in order to restore the missing affect. Only in undertaking and achieving this return can Freud achieve his analytic aim: to bring the patient from *repeating* the traumatic event as contemporary experience to *remembering* the event as part of the past.

LaCapra: Structural and Historical Trauma, Absence and Loss

Freud's formulations in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* develop in response to his experiences of treating combatant veterans of the Great War. These men, suffering from what was then termed typically "shellshock" or "neurasthenia," led more or less normal waking lives but returned, in their dreams, to the site of terrific combat and unspeakable atrocity in the No Man's Land of the Western Front. Freud thus theorizes trauma in

response to an historical event the scale and horror of which, for individual combatants and combatant nations, was without precedent or frame of reference. After the Great War was eclipsed in its catastrophic enormity by the concentration camps of World War Two and the Holocaust, and as post-Holocaust generations struggled to make sense of past events that refused to take their proper place in the past, Freud's formulations emerged within the field of "trauma studies" as an elegant and exemplary explanatory framework for confronting this singular historical catastrophe.

To better frame LaCapra's work, I might mention two foundational works of trauma studies. In her influential *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth reads Alain Resnais's film *Hiroshima Mon Amour* in order to argue that a filmic spectatorship of loss must result in a witnessing of trauma, a "new mode of seeing and of listening--a seeing and a listening *from the site of trauma*."⁵ In Caruth's reading, the "site of trauma" is multiple: it is at once Hiroshima, Occupation-era France, the post-war meeting of the film's two main characters, the filmic text, and finally the event of film spectatorship itself. Witnessing from the site of trauma therefore becomes a manner of cinematic spectatorship in which "we" the film viewers are made to see and hear another's suffering from the site of a shared (our, their) trauma.

One encounters a similar argument in another important work: Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub's *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (1992).⁶ Discussing Albert Camus's novels *The Fall* and *The Plague*, Felman claims that reading about trauma opens up the imaginary position of a "belated witness, which the reader now *historically* becomes." Felman contends that the reader's belated witnessing of trauma, emergent in a reading of the trauma, involves "the imaginative

capability of perceiving history--what is happening to others--*in one's own body*, with the power of sight (of insight) usually afforded only by one's own immediate physical involvement [as victim of loss or catastrophe]."⁷ Through reading about trauma, one somehow *lives through a trauma*, a trauma that belongs to another but, at some moment, is *embodied* in the reader as his own experience.

Like LaCapra, then, both Caruth and Felman situate the vicarious experience of another's trauma at the center of their examination and understanding of trauma. We will have more to say regarding the differences among these thinkers later in the chapter; here I offer their work as illustrative of a shared interest in the experiential dynamics of writing on and representing trauma.⁸ One of LaCapra's contributions to the discipline is a critical distinction between two types of trauma: *historical trauma* and *structural trauma*. According to LaCapra, the historical trauma has stable contours and is known to have occurred at a specific place and in a specific time. Further, we could say that the historical trauma is "historical" in that it has causes and effects that can be measured against other, alternative explanations for the same historical trauma or compared to other, similar atrocities or events. The attributes of historical trauma—temporal and geophysical specificity, cause and effect relationships, comparative frameworks of understanding—determine perhaps its most powerful quality: the historical trauma is an event of the past, known to have taken place in the past and engaged, therefore, from the distance of the present. We could say, more or less definitively, that the historical trauma *was* the bombing of Hiroshima at 8:15 a. m. on the 6th of August 1945 or the destruction of the World Trade Center's Twin Towers in New

York City on the 11th of September of 2001. As LaCapra argues, the accent here is on the capacity to locate, more or less precisely, the traumatizing *event* (*WH* 81).

By contrast, structural trauma is characterized by its transhistorical, abstract nature. It is most often “figured” as unrepresentable and outside of compensatory methods of historiography, analysis, and inquiry. According to LaCapra, structural trauma is most often the object of theoretical discourse, which figures it as a constitutive “shattering” of the subject. In *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, LaCapra contends that the structural trauma

May be evoked or addressed in various fashions: in terms of the passage from nature to culture, the eruption of the pre-Oedipal or pre-symbolic, the entry into language, the encounter with the Real, the inevitable generation of the aporia, and so forth. Structural trauma is often figured as deeply ambivalent, as both painfully shattering and the occasion for jouissance, ecstatic elation, or the sublime. (*HM* 47).

The figures by which the structural trauma is given expression that LaCapra references here—the Derridean aporia, a missed encounter with the Lacanian Real, or the Freudian shattering of sexual differentiation—share certain characteristics: the event’s creation of a constitutive lack or absence, the unconsciously-seated nature of the trauma, its ambivalence (structural trauma is both shattering and pleasurable). Because the structural trauma is not historically determined or localizable, it may not be treated as an “event,” but must be regarded as what LaCapra calls an “anxiety-producing condition of possibility” that is personal, subjective, and universal (*WH* 82).

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra nuances the distinction between structural and historical trauma with a corresponding distinction between (structural) lack or absence and (historical) loss. Lack and absence are, like the structural trauma, constitutive and without borders. Lack and absence are not events or things, nor are they

individuals or objects, but more nebulous realities like feelings and experiences that one has but can never localize and name. Lack or absence contrast what LaCapra calls loss. If, as Frederic Jameson puts it, history is what hurts, then we might say it is by virtue of its placement within the historical as *an event of wounding resulting in real loss* that trauma may be said to hurt.⁹ Loss may be assessed in terms of lives, material resources, or national borders. For LaCapra the stakes here are not only historical but political as well in that loss is a *category of measurement*, the opposite of which is gain, that makes possible various post-historical trauma reckonings like the Nuremberg trials or South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the debate over reparations for American slavery, or commemorative practices like monuments or memorials. Loss is to be understood as a direct result of particular events or actions, and the degree of loss becomes a way of measuring the enormity and influence of such events or actions.¹⁰ One must approach historical trauma in terms of losses entailed in order to anchor the historical event as one of the past, effect "structural transformation" of polity, economy, and juridical practices in the present, and open up the possibility for further change in the future (*WH 57*).

Melancholic Fascination

In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra implicates fascination in a counter-productive fixation on the limits and excess associated with structural trauma. He writes that "fascination [. . .] may blind one to the significance of everything between the excremental and the sublime" (*WH 47*). Fascination, LaCapra argues here, is a fixed

attention at the extreme poles of experience, points at which comprehension and intellection fail and a pleasurable, a-critical hypnosis intervenes. Each in their own way, the “excremental” and the “sublime” represent discursive limits and what, beyond them, cannot be delimited. Georges Bataille, for example, theorizes the excremental in Heideggerian terms: the excremental is the evidence of the human body divested of its equipmentality (its capacity to be put to use as a form of equipment), and thus represents the brute, formless and incomprehensible materiality from which the human emerges and to which, in death, it is destined to return.¹¹ Regarding the sublime, we learn from Kant that its experience involves a loss of critical faculties and a trembling before the incomprehensible.¹² The fascination LaCapra offers relates to the fascination we examined in chapter one, wherein one is hypnotically transfixed by what Bataille describes as heterogeneous, as wholly other.

LaCapra’s work may be read as a sustained critique of those thinkers and artists who indulge in a fascination with the incomprehensible, thereby foregoing the critical task of situating the trauma somewhere on the spectrum between the excremental and the sublime. LaCapra argues that “in recent thinking, there’s an incredible fascination with [in particular] an aesthetic of the sublime,” evinced in the work of, among others, Jean-Francois Lyotard, Maurice Blanchot, and Jacques Derrida (*WH* 155). I will treat this critical focus on limits and excess in some detail later on in the chapter. Here it is sufficient to note a general critical attitude regarding fascination. As an orientation toward limits and the excesses of the “excremental and the sublime” which amounts to, for LaCapra, a critical blindness, fascination fixes on a traumatic event removed from historical consideration and any framework of historical understanding. Fascination thus

characterizes a discourse of constitutive limits and may be seen as situating thought at its limit by insisting on an unrepresentable, ahistorical, inassimilable traumatic excess. As such, LaCapra contends that fascination opposes healthier, more critically rigorous and historically specific forms of engagement, forms of what he calls mourning. LaCapra would therefore agree with Eric Santner when Santner argues that “*fascination is circumvented mourning*,” a forestalling of the processes by which the traumatic event may be mourned.¹³

Now, when LaCapra and Santner oppose fascination to regenerative mourning, they do so by recalling a fundamental distinction offered by Freud between two patterns of bereavement: mourning and melancholia. In general terms, mourning and melancholia are both responses to a lost object. “Object” here can be understood as a person but also some substitute for a person, such as a national identity or an ideal. The work of mourning (*Trauerarbeit*) involves gradually withdrawing grief from the lost object. At the end of this process of withdrawal, the lost object is declared dead and put in its proper place (as belonging to the past) and the bereaved is free to go on to form new object relations, reenter social life, and resume normal patterns of behavior. By contrast, melancholy is interminable mourning, a *pathology* or dangerous acting out that opposes the more productive psychical *work* of mourning. Melancholy is a sustained pathological devotion to the lost object that does not allow the bereaved to separate herself from it and get on with her life. Mourning achieves completion and offers something like closure on the loss and an end to the grieving process—Freud characterizes mourning as “killing death”—whereas melancholy forestalls such completion and closure, maintaining death

as an ongoing event in or as the present.¹⁴ The melancholic thus cannot attest to the fact that a loss has occurred as an event of the past.

Freud's better-known treatise on bereavement is the 1919 essay "Mourning and Melancholia." What is interesting to consider is the manner in which the description of melancholia found in that essay formally recalls an earlier work, *Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of His Childhood* (1910).¹⁵ Freud's psychobiography of Leonardo da Vinci is crucial to the present analysis because it is, to my knowledge, Freud's only elaboration on the psychic state of fascination. "Fascination" is the term Freud uses repeatedly to name Leonardo's state of being or condition—his relation—to the smile of the Florentine lady, the Mona Lisa del Gioconda.¹⁶ What is of critical importance to the present analysis is that fascination in Freud's essay is a psychic and physiological state brought on by the fact that the trauma of a real loss (here, Leonardo's mother) refers back to an earlier, unconscious and constitutive trauma, what LaCapra calls *structural* trauma.

Freud's analysis of Leonardo begins with an enigma, or better to say a series of enigmas: First, Freud wants to understand what Leonardo found so compelling in the "strange, enigmatic smile that he conjured up on the lips of his female figures" (*Leonardo* 80). Second, Freud is interested in what subsequent generations of historians have found so fascinating about Leonardo. Finally, Freud wants to figure out what he himself finds so fascinating about the historical figure of Leonardo da Vinci: "I have yielded, like others, to the fascination of this great and enigmatic figure" (103). Just as "this smile [of the *Mona Lisa*] called for an interpretation," so too does the figure of Leonardo, a full explanation and understanding of whom has eluded thinkers for generations (81). Crucially, Freud's essay begins by linking fascination to the lure of the "insoluble and

enthraling enigma” and to the crisis into which thought is pitched by the unknown. Leonardo fascinates, we might say, because something about him cannot be known. We might characterize this something that cannot be known as an *excess* that thwarts attempts to explain Leonardo or his work. This fascinating excess is precisely what “calls for an interpretation,” situating modes of critical thinking and inquiry (art history, biography, psychoanalysis) at their limits.¹⁷ We can here note a connection between LaCapra’s and Freud’s thinking on fascination: in both instances the first characteristic of fascination offered is its intimacy with a radical limit for thinking and knowledge, where thinking and knowledge are confronted with what they cannot, as yet, think or know.

Freud is thus out to explain the fascination exerted by the smile of the Mona Lisa on Leonardo and, at the same time, discern something about the nature of fascination itself. For Freud, fascination is linked to memory, loss, and repetition. Freud writes that “maybe Leonardo was captivated by Mona Lisa’s smile because it awoke in him something that had long lain dormant in his mind, probably an old memory, but one so significant that, once aroused, it did not release its hold on him, so that he was repeatedly compelled to give it fresh expression” (85). First and most immediately, Freud argues, this memory is of Leonardo’s mother, Caterina, who at the time of the *Mona Lisa*’s composition has just died. So we can say that the smile of the Florentine Lady has a certain effect on the painter because it reminds him of his mother, the loss of whom is still fresh on his mind. The painting of the smile becomes a sublimation of loss, a way for the painter to exercise his grief so as to exorcise his grief.

The sublimation thesis fails to explain, however, what Freud calls Leonardo’s “fascination” with the smile, which is first figured in the *Mona Lisa* and gets *repeated* in

all his subsequent work. Freud writes that “[the Mona Lisa’s] smile *fascinated* the artist . . . From now on this entrancing smile recurred in all his paintings and in those of his pupils” (84; my emphasis). Accordingly, Freud continues, “there must be a deeper reason for the attraction of the Gioconda’s smile, which took hold of the artist and never released its hold” (85). Freud must wonder: if the painting of the smile sublimates the loss of his mother, whose memory the smile awakened, why its compulsive repetition? Freud contends that Leonardo is fascinated by the smile because it refers directly to the loss of his mother Caterina but *repeats* a more primitive loss. In Freudian terms, the loss of Caterina provokes the repetition of the structural loss of the mother on which the subject is founded. The image of the Florentine Lady’s smile is fascinating because of the manner in which it refers real loss (of Caterina) to a more primitive, constitutive unconscious loss that cannot be known, named, or sublimated by conscious processes, only repeated. The emphasis Freud places on reference is important: on one level Leonardo can identify the smile’s referent as his lost mother, but he is *fascinated* by the smile because the smile repeats a loss for which there is no direct reference, representation, or process of sublimation.

“Fascination” as used by Freud to characterize Leonardo’s condition may be summarized thus: as a response to traumatic loss, fascination is the experience of the repetition of an unconscious, structural trauma brought on by a more immediate, “real” or historically bound loss. The characteristics of the experience of fascination given by Freud—entrancement, a state of being held, an orientation toward the unknown or unknowable—are familiar to us from our readings in previous chapters. With Freud, however, we are encouraged to regard fascination as a state of being held or *entranced by*

the repetition of a loss the nature of which is enigmatic, excessive, unknowable.

Crucially, the qualities Freud attributes to fascination in the Leonardo essay may be linked to certain characteristics of the psychic state he will come to call melancholia in the 1919 essay “Mourning and Melancholia.”¹⁸ Both fascination and melancholia behave something “like an open wound, drawing to itself cathectic energies [. . .] from all directions, and emptying the ego until it is totally impoverished” (“Mourning” 253). In both fascination and melancholia, the open wound does not allow binding of the loss, therefore forcing a sustained fixation on or being held by the loss as contemporary.

Most importantly, both fascination and melancholia share the quality of being oriented, so to speak, toward an excess of the lost object. Freud notes that in the case of mourning, the lost object is clearly defined, with solid contours and a distinct identity separate from that of the bereaved. This corresponds to Leonardo’s capacity to name his departed mother as the object of his bereaved practice of painting the smile. We could say that Freud’s description of mourning and Leonardo’s capacity to name the loss of his mother as the object of his bereavement can be mapped onto what LaCapra calls historical trauma. The loss (of the object of mourning, of Leonardo’s mother) can be situated in place and time, and one’s grief can be causally linked to the clearly defined objects of loss.

In other cases, however, the lost object seems to point to something outside of itself, something to which the bereaved does not have access through the conscious processes. Bearing in mind the various types of loss typical of mourning (loss of a loved one, a failed relationship, loss of a leader or national identity), Freud writes of melancholia that

A loss of this 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. (SE 245; Freud's emphases).

Reading the above passage closely reveals a homology between the structure of melancholia and fascination: Though the patient may be able to name the object of loss (Leonardo knows whom he has lost in that he can name the object of loss his mother Caterina), something about the loss, some aspect of it, cannot be localized in the object and thus cannot be named or directly referenced, cannot be sublimated. And while this excess of the object cannot be seen or named by the conscious processes, this excess can nonetheless be *felt* as an absence or lack in the structures and processes of knowledge, naming, sublimation. This affective dimension—the state of *feeling* a loss for which there is no referent, explanation, or clear object of cathexis—results in a sort of crisis for the bereaved. This characteristic of melancholia would account for Leonardo's repetition of the figure of the smile and Freud's characterization of that repetition as a fascination: Leonardo cannot escape the grasp of the smile because he cannot locate, name, or sublimate the loss the repetition of which the smile provokes. He does not know where to orient and focus the intense psychic energies that are brought on by the loss, resulting in a state of arrest, of being held by loss, or, fascinated.¹⁹

Fascinated Discourse

After Freud, we can now return to LaCapra's work in order to state more precisely what is at stake in a fascination with limits and the excess of the traumatic

event. We have seen how, in Freud, melancholic fascination attests to an undergoing of the repetition of a constitutive or structural loss brought about by an external, “real” loss. One is fascinated with external loss to the extent that this loss opens up anew an originary structural loss, thus in essence conflating the external (historical) loss with the structural. This is why, as Freud formulates it, melancholia tends to collapse the distinctions between the lost object and the ego to the extent that the ego is itself seen as the object of loss. We could say, in LaCapra’s terms, that a discourse of limits and excess is fascinated to the extent that it focuses on a problematic relation between one’s (the historian, the reader, the painter) unrepresentable structural loss and the unrepresentable excess of “real” historical loss (the subject of one’s analysis, the Holocaust). Or put in the language of LaCapra’s *critique*, fascination counters productive mourning and working through by fixing attention on the melancholia of structural loss in such a way as to stall or arrest the movement toward working through historical loss.

Through the discussion of Leonardo’s melancholic fascination on structural loss, we have a better sense of how the structural trauma might contrast the historical. Mourning involves an object known by the bereaved to have been lost, to be an object of loss. The lost object is gone, and one must move on to other objects in order to function normally within social structures. Assessing loss thus depends upon a completion of the mourning process that allows the historical trauma to be named as such so it hence may be positioned as the origin and explanation of loss. Mourning’s object is *loss* effected by an event; by contrast, *lack* or *absence* are implicated in melancholia and structural trauma.²⁰ Absence or lack are not localizable in any object or historical event, and therefore cannot be reconciled, gotten over, mourned. LaCapra associates absence and

lack with certain affective formations: anxiety, ecstasy, and fascination, the last of which we have seen is linked to excess and may be said to comprise both anxiety and ecstasy.²¹ In each instance the affective orientation is toward an absence or lack (after Kierkegaard and Heidegger, the “something that is nothing,” as LaCapra puts it) that cannot be worked through, mourned, localized, or sublimated, only felt or acted out.

At this point we can translate these distinctions into discursive or interpretative terms and offer two possible forms of what we might call bereaved modes of address or critical thought. Critical thinking as a work of mourning takes as its object the historical trauma, which may be precisely located and assessed, at least partially, in terms of the losses it effects. This, I would argue, is the paradigm for most historiographic work including, at its foundational level, LaCapra’s as well as the enterprises of Sontag and Friedlander described in chapters one and two. The contrasting mode of critical thought would be fascinated with excess and limits, thus focused on that unrepresentable, “nomadic” (or non-localizable) absence left by structural trauma. Such discourse is fascinated with the lack that “haunts” structures of knowledge and understanding but cannot be contained and encoded by them. Thus what is most at stake for LaCapra in maintaining these distinctions is the capacity to discern and critique theoretical approaches that “routinize” trauma into a fascinated discourse of limits, excess, the sublime, and the unrepresentable or reduce the facticity of historical trauma to an iteration of structural trauma.

A propos this last statement, LaCapra argues that “it is deceptive to reduce, or transfer the qualities of, one dimension of trauma to the other, to generalize structural trauma so that it absorbs historical trauma, thereby rendering all references to the latter

merely illustrative, homogeneous, allusive, and perhaps equivocal” (47-48). That is to say, suffering caused by historical trauma must not be arrogated as an example or manifestation of a transhistorical structural trauma, and attempts to work through the losses and aftereffects of historical trauma cannot take the form of a fascinated discourse of limits and excess. LaCapra cites, among other examples, the work of Derrida, Blanchot, Levinas, Lacan, and Lyotard in order to demonstrate the risks of conflating structural trauma and lack with historical trauma and loss. Derrida, for example, makes absence, not loss, the object of mourning, a theoretical move that, in LaCapra’s view, renders mourning impossible and replaces it with a melancholic fascination on the excess or limit of constitutive absence.

LaCapra, Lyotard

The text LaCapra cites most frequently for its fascination with excess and limits is Jean-Francois Lyotard’s *Heidegger and “the jews.”*²² In *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, LaCapra reads *Heidegger and “the jews”* as a compelling illustration of the displacement of historical trauma and loss in favor of an emphasis on the structural absence. Briefly, Lyotard’s text offers “the jews,” always written in quotation marks and lowercase, as a trope for the other of the European Occident, scientifically-determined pursuit of knowledge, and metaphysical speculative discourse. “I write ‘the jews’” this way neither out of prudence nor lack of something better,” Lyotard begins. “I use lowercase to indicate that I am not thinking of a nation. I make it plural to signify that it

is neither a figure nor a political (Zionism), religious (Judaism), or philosophical (Jewish philosophy) subject that I put forward under this name” (*HJ* 03).

What, then, would Lyotard’s “the jews” suggest if not any form of political, philosophical, or religious specificity? “The jews” is, before representation, a “forgetting that thwarts all representation” (*HJ* 05). Lyotard’s “the jews” would be, to borrow from Mark Taylor, that which thwarts “Western philosophy’s dream of enjoying a total presence that is neither disturbed by irreducible difference nor interrupted by the return of an absolute other.”²³ “The jews” thus represents the unrepresentable of absolute alterity and irreducible difference. Lyotard writes that ‘the jews’ are, “within the ‘spirit’ of the Occident that is so preoccupied with foundational thinking, what resists this spirit; within its will, the will to want, what gets in the way of this will; within its accomplishments, projects, and progress, what never ceases to reopen the wound of the unaccomplished” (*HJ* 22). As a trope, then, “the jews” references an originary forgetting, the forgetting on which Western civilization is founded and conditioned only by maintaining “the jews” as the deeply repressed, unconscious forgotten of its reality. As an originary repressed, “the jews” constantly threatens its return, a return that would thwart the historical unfolding of “accomplishment, projects, and progress.” One possible response to the threat of “the jews” is genocide as manifested in the Nazis “Final Solution.” Thus “the jews” explains why the Nazis sought to exterminate the Jews.

Given our discussion of historical and structural trauma, it is easy to map the ground on which LaCapra would object to Lyotard’s formulation. At a very basic level, to offer “the jews” as a figure for an unrepresentable excess of structural trauma, manifest in its repetition (the reopening of the wound of the unaccomplished) ostensibly ignores

the very real, brute facts of Jewish suffering and murder at the hands of the Nazis. To figure “the jews” in such a manner is also, by virtue of a troping away from historical facts, a way to transvalue Jewish suffering into a structural condition outside of understanding but shared, nonetheless, by all. Finally, “the jews” here are not the historically determined object of a mourning, but an excess beyond mourning that melancholically keeps open the wound of “our” (Europe’s, the West’s) structural shattering. “The jews” is the object of our melancholia inasmuch as “the jews” is that which we must forget in order to become subjects, the absence left by our structural trauma. Thus, “Lyotard’s histrionically allegorized appropriation of ‘the jews’ as dispossessed and abstract markers of postmodern motifs obliterates both the specificity of the Jews as a complex historical people and the problem of their actual and formal relations to other peoples or traditions” (RH 98). The Jews become less the victims of an historical trauma and, as “the jews” of a structural trauma, the object of a melancholic fascination.

As such, “the jews” cannot be the object of historiographic enterprises or, indeed, any approach that would attempt to know or understand “the jews.” In order to situate “the jews” outside of Western structures of knowledge and understanding (primarily speculative metaphysical discourse and Hegelian dialectics), Lyotard links the figure of “the jews” to a Kantian aesthetic of the sublime. This prompts LaCapra, in *Writing History, Writing Trauma*, to indict Lyotard for a construction of historical traumatic limit events—Auschwitz in particular, the Holocaust more generally—“in terms of an insufficiently differentiated, rashly generalized, hyperbolic aesthetic of the sublime or even a (positive or negative) sacralization of the event which may prompt a foreclosure,

denigration, or inadequate account not only of representation but of the difficult issue of ethical agency both then and now” (*WH* 83). The sublime for Kant, whether dynamic or mathematical, is a confrontation with chaos that brings the comprehending mind to its absolute limits.²⁴ At this limit, the mind would recoil from what it cannot confront because it would be outside and other. The sublime feeling one would experience at this limit of trying to think “the jews” cannot be interpreted, only *experienced* as an excess that has “touched the mind” resulting in a “trembling,” a “motion both attractive and repulsive at once, as a sort of spasm, according to a dynamic that both inhibits and excites” (*HJ* 32). The ambivalence noted here—simultaneous attraction and repulsion, inhibition and excitation—recalls the earlier discussions of melancholia, fascination, and structural trauma. We could say, then, that “the jews” is a fascinating figure for that which cannot be mourned, only melancholically experienced as the return of a disruptive lack or absence.

Liotard fixates on this figure, according to LaCapra, because of a lack of sufficient self-reflexivity and a critical awareness of how he is entangled in his object of analysis. Liotard fails to see *how* he is entangled in the object of his inquiry because his writing and thinking are paralyzed by their entanglement with their object. This paralysis consequently induces Liotard to “blindly act out certain problems that are not explicitly formulated and critically framed,” LaCapra argues. In this paralysis and blindness (in, that is, his fascination), Liotard “even runs the risk of repeating in his own voice the Nazi project of purveying stereotypes of the Jews [. . .], indeed, of memorializing the forgetting of the Jews as anything other than pretexts for acting out one’s own obsessions and appropriative preoccupations” (*RH* 98).²⁵

For LaCapra, Lyotard's work is stuck in its "implication of the observer in the observed, what in psychoanalytic terms is treated as transference" (WH 36). Transference is crucial here, for it offers LaCapra a mechanism for both explaining *how* the conflation between structural and historical trauma occurs and highlighting the traps of work such as Lyotard's. In this regard we might briefly consider LaCapra's "Paul de Man as Object of Transference."²⁶ LaCapra's objection to de Man's work is similar to his objections to the work of Lyotard: de Man's theoretical speculations regarding the melancholic nature of language and the structural trauma of the subject as constituted by language foreclose on a rigorous consideration of historical reality. This is especially problematic for a consideration of de Man's work, given the posthumous revelation of his wartime writing in collaborationist journals such as *Le Soir*.²⁷

More important to LaCapra, however, is the way in which de Man's work is read by those who have, to greater or lesser extent, been influenced by his thinking. LaCapra critiques Shoshana Felman, Jacques Derrida, and Frederic Jameson for their tendency to repeat the "blocked or circumvented mourning" (read: melancholia, fascination) at the heart of de Man's critical work. In Felman's case, for example, her transferential entanglement leads to a dubious apologetics of de Man's silence on his past, one which blurs the boundaries in Felman's argument between survivors like Primo Levi and so-called "survivors" (Felman's term) such as de Man. Thus de Man's own silence on his problematic past is transferentially displaced onto those who seek to explain that silence, occluding the necessary critical distance across which Felman, Derrida, and Jameson might see de Man's silence differently (more critically, more clearly).

Transference, like the distinction between the structural and the historical, serves LaCapra's aims of critiquing inadequate approaches to the subject such as Lyotard's and Felman's. The point to stress here is that LaCapra critiques modes of address that fail to see how their work *repeats* certain unresolved elements attendant to but not clearly defined by or situated in their object of analysis. By offering transference as an implication of the observer in the observed, LaCapra can highlight the dangerous manner in which scholars repeat problematic elements of the works, thinkers, or historical events they study. More important than the nature of LaCapra's critique, however, are the assumptions on which it rests: LaCapra's use of transference to explain the entanglement between scholar and the subject of scholarly work (Lyotard and "the jews," Felman and de Man) implies that on some level and by some means the borders separating I and you, here and there, now and then are compromised enough to allow for a displacement from one to the other. Thus it is with a consideration of transference that the issues of the belated nature of the traumatic event, the fact and the manner by which trauma repeats, and how that is made possible in scholarly work become most evident. Now the question becomes: how to understand transference outside of the clinical scenario and as an event of scholarly work?

Transference, Empathy, Experience

In clinical psychoanalytic terms, transference is the constitutive moment of analysis in which the analysand's unconscious, repressed formations are made evident to the analyst through repetition and resistance. The analyst can recognize these

unconscious formations as such only by an identification at the level of his own unconscious. As Freud puts it, and in terms that suggest a way of understanding empathy, transference is made possible by the fact that “everyone possesses in his own unconscious an instrument with which he can interpret the utterances of the unconscious in other people.”²⁸ Transference is thus the moment such an unconscious instrument achieves an identification with another or, as Jean Laplanche characterizes it, the *enigmatic experience* in which the economy of displacement transfers affective formations from one unconscious to the other.²⁹

LaCapra proceeds from the clinical, interpersonal transferential dynamic toward a more hermeneutic, interpretative, and discursive understanding of transference. He states that, “the basic sense of transference I would stress is the tendency to repeat or reenact performatively in one’s own discourse or relations processes active in the object of study” (*WH* 36). As an entanglement of the observer in the observed, transference is manifest when certain constitutive elements or processes of the object of study are somehow transferred into the behaviors, modes of relation, and discursive practices of the scholar. When the object of study is historical trauma, repeating or reenacting those processes means experiencing a secondary or “muted trauma.” LaCapra writes that, “with respect to traumatic events . . . one must, I think, undergo at least a muted trauma and allow the trauma (or unsettlement) to affect one’s approach to problems” (47). So we can say here that when LaCapra argues for an empathic unsettlement, transference is the condition of possibility for these claims.

In order for transference to take place, LaCapra continues, empathy must play a critical role. “Empathy,” he writes, “may be understood in terms of attending to, even

trying, in limited ways, to recapture the possibly split-off, affective dimension of the experience of others. It involves affectivity as a crucial aspect of understanding” (40). What LaCapra means by “split-off, affective dimensions” of experience is not specified, though we may assert that because the experience is a traumatic one, recapturing “split-off, affective” dimensions means recapturing by repeating or reenacting unconscious, repressed aspects of the experience, those affective aspects that could not be mourned, sublimated, or represented. When LaCapra speaks of affect, he generally means the non-cognizable, fleeting or fugitive elements of one’s experience, those elements that cannot be assimilated by traditional objectivist historical methods: shock, anxiety, pain. In trauma and its transference through empathy, LaCapra writes, “one disorientingly *feels* what one cannot represent” (42).

We should perhaps try and reconstruct the scenario within which LaCapra is asking us to think and understand these terms. The secondary witness as scholar studies the historical trauma of the Holocaust; or, alternatively, the reader engages in a novel about the concentration camps. In doing so, a transferenceal unsettlement, predicated on empathy, implicates the scholar or reader in the subject (the observer in the observed) in compelling ways. This empathic involvement occurs by virtue of the scholar or reader repeating the split-off, repressed affective dimensions of the historical trauma through the processes of studying, reading, examining, and so on. By repeating those affective dimensions, the scholar or reader experiences the trauma of another as his own. The scholar thus undergoes a muted trauma.

In order for this to happen, LaCapra argues that transference would “depend on one’s own potential for traumatization (related to absence and structural trauma)” (*WH*

79). The realization of this potential for traumatization, which is related to the absence left by structural trauma, would therefore be the repetition of structural trauma brought about by the affective dimensions of the historical trauma. To put this in terms of our earlier discussion, transference would be the experience of melancholic fascination engendered when one trauma provokes the return to and repetition of another.

To this point we, following LaCapra, have focused on the distinction between structural and historical trauma as a rigid one; indeed, LaCapra's critique of Lyotard, Felman, et al. derives its force from the maintenance of this distinction. LaCapra concedes, however, that the structural trauma may be "in some problematic sense" the *precondition* for the historical trauma. Analogously, Freud concludes "Mourning and Melancholia" by going to his topographical model of the psyche in order to stress that melancholia may be a necessary stage on the way to mourning. He contends that any loss "goes," so to speak, directly to the unconscious, thus provoking a repetition of structural loss. The process of grieving then moves loss through the preconscious to the level of conscious, at which point it may be named as an object of mourning. Melancholia, rather than contrasting "normal" mourning, is here described as a critical stage of a larger process. Melancholia becomes the condition of possibility for mourning any loss. Thus melancholia is the *necessary* repetition of one's own structural shattering, provoked by the real or external loss but also opening up the possibility of acknowledging real loss as such. This would be to suggest that some aspect of the real or external loss is always melancholic, outside of or in excess of the lost object, that provokes the repetition of the structural loss. Melancholia therefore testifies to some excess that is not only unrepresentable or inassimilable to the bereaved (the structural loss of subject formation)

but crucially that also exceeds the categories by which “real” or external loss is understood as such.

In the same way that Freud identifies melancholia as a necessary precondition for mourning, in order for there to be a relation to the historical trauma, there must be a melancholic identification predicated on the repetition of one’s own structural trauma. Thus LaCapra writes that empathy should be “understood in terms of an affective relation, rapport, or bond with the other” that yields an “affirmation of otherness within the self” (*WH* 212-213). As an affective bond, empathy would testify to, would form a relation based on, what cannot be related, an inassimilable alterity the affective experience of which, we have seen, brings thought to its limits and exceeds any structure. This affective relation between structural and historical, here and there, scholar and subject matter, present and past, is what Blanchot or Levinas might call a relation of non-relation, for it supposes an intimacy—empathy—predicated on a sharing of what exceeds any category of relation, including structural and historical.

Let me state as succinctly as possible what I am arguing here. The empathic unsettlement can be characterized as a transference, in which empathy is the affective bond between that which exceeds the individual’s conscious awareness (the affective, melancholic residue or lack left by the structural trauma) and those affective dimensions that exceed the historical. Thus the repetition is of that which is un-experienced in (subjective, historical) experience, and empathic unsettlement “testifies,” so to speak, to what can be felt but not represented, to what can be experienced only as that which is outside of experience. For LaCapra, the necessary component of ethical historical inquiry is the empathic unsettlement of transference, and yet the constitutive element of

experience is elided, passed over, or assumed to be outside of the purview of analysis. This is a crucial elision that subtends all of LaCapra's work and, significantly, leads him to critically dismiss the mode of discourse he associates with melancholia and fascination, that of limits and excess, for I would argue that those thinkers critiqued by LaCapra are engaged in precisely the thinking LaCapra dismisses. That is to say, the fascinated discourse LaCapra dismisses is precisely the discourse engaged in the consideration and enactment of the "empathic unsettlement" for which LaCapra calls.³⁰

To rehearse these critical omissions in LaCapra's work is to demonstrate a constitutive limitation to his own thinking, one that leads to a suspicion of critical and theoretical explorations of constitutive limitations related to trauma. Thus the double function of fascination in LaCapra's work: fascination characterizes a discourse of limits and excess, as in Lyotard's focus on the excess of the sublime. Fascination is also, as demonstrated in the reading of Freud and melancholia, *the experience inherent to the repetition of structural trauma brought on by what is traumatic in historical loss*. As an experience of melancholia in which the historical trauma repeats a structural trauma, fascination is also a way of characterizing the experience of transference, a thinking of which is the limit of LaCapra's own approach to trauma. To borrow from the epigraph from Marguerite Duras, the thing that is between us is fascination, and fascination resides in *our being alike*. That is, what is to be found there, in our being alike--in the experience of empathic unsettlement when "I" am opened to "your" experience, when structural trauma opens the historical, when the past is opened in the present in the repetition of trauma—is fascination.³⁰ This experience is precisely what must be thought but what, for LaCapra, cannot be thought inasmuch as it situates his own discourse at their limits,

confronted with an inassimilable excess before which one must be (think? read? write?) for a moment fascinated.³¹

Conclusion

At this point in our thinking of transference, empathic unsettlement, and structural/historical trauma, I want to repeat those questions posed by LaCapra in this chapter's introduction: "How does one relate actual and imaginary or virtual experience? [. . .] How does trauma or traumatic "experience" disrupt experience and raise specific problems for representation and writing?" Having posed these questions, LaCapra goes on to write, "I shall not pretend to answer these important questions. Rather, I would conclude by contending that the problem of experience should lead to the question of the role of empathy in historical understanding" (*WH* 37-38). The preceding pages have argued that fascination, which I have linked to melancholia and transference as an empathic moment of recognition of the other within the self, offers a way of characterizing and explaining the empathic unsettlement. I offer LaCapra's questions again, here, to suggest that having examined *what* the empathic unsettlement might be, the question of *how* the empathic unsettlement might inform a mode of address, a writing about or representation of the traumatic past, emerges as the limit case of not only LaCapra's work, but of the work typical of "trauma studies" more generally and, indeed, the present project.

To return briefly to Lyotard's *Heidegger and "the jews,"* it is important to mention that Lyotard offers not only a certain thinking of the sublime, but a thinking of

how the sublime *leaves its imprint* in, among other places or situations, literature. Lyotard writes that this imprint will have made itself *known* and *understood* in terms of a literary “anaesthetics” in which one encounters:

Feeling, fear, anxiety, feeling of a threatening excess whose motive is obviously not in the present context. This sudden feeling is as good as a testimony, through its unsettling strangeness, which ‘from the exterior’ lies in reserve in the interior, hidden away and from where it can on occasion depart to return from the outside to assail the mind as if it were issued not from it but from the incidental situation. (13)

The challenge for critical work and artistic representation of trauma is not to avoid fascination and melancholia, for as we have seen, they are the components of precisely that empathic unsettlement that LaCapra deems crucial to a discourse about trauma. The challenge, rather, is to develop a discourse that takes into account and uses fascination as a constitutive component of methodology, critique, representation and response. In Lyotard’s phrasing, then, a history of trauma or a work of art about trauma or an informed thinking on an artwork about trauma has to take into account what one disorientingly *feels* but cannot represent.

Having come out on the other side of the empathic unsettlement, having passed through fascination, what would a work of literature informed by this experience look like? How would a discourse not fascinated, but shaped by having been fascinated, take shape? How can that feeling Lyotard describes, “as good as a testimony,” actually become a testimony? What would such a testimony look like?

NOTES

¹ Marguerite Duras. *Practicalities*. Trans., Barbara Bray. (New York: Grove Press, 1987): 93.

² Dominick LaCapra. *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001): 47.

³ *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994); and *History and Memory After Auschwitz*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998). The emphasis on empathy and empathic unsettlement in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* is an extension and amplification of a thinking of transference found throughout LaCapra's body of work. I have chosen to focus on empathic unsettlement because, as LaCapra's latest call for a specific type of investment in historical events, the locution carries with it not only transference but as well issues of experience that are crucial to our understanding of fascination. This nexus of experience, transference, and empathy is discussed in the second half of the present chapter.

⁴ Susan Sontag, "Syberberg's Hitler," *Under the Sign of Saturn*. (New York: Anchor, 1991): 139.

⁵ Sigmund Freud. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. (New York: Norton, 1961). Hereafter cited as *BTPP*.

⁶ Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996): 56

⁷ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. (New York: Routledge, 1992).

⁸ My motivation in bringing together LaCapra, Caruth, and Felman is not only their status as foundational or representational thinkers in the field of “trauma studies.” While LaCapra focuses on philosophy and, primarily, what might be called literary theory, Caruth and Felman focus more directly on literature. Interestingly, in the conclusion of *Writing History, Writing Trauma* LaCapra brings his thinking together with Caruth and Felman’s in order to critically dismiss their work for insufficiently thinking the same empathic unsettlement he calls for. More precisely, LaCapra censures Caruth and Felman for devoting too much attention to literature and thus depending on literature too heavily for their exploration of psychic investment in historical trauma. One may read LaCapra’s critique as an attempt to temper the literary emphasis of Caruth and Felman in the same way he calls for more rigorously historical attention in, say, Derrida or Blanchot. While I agree with LaCapra that Caruth and Felman fail to think through their critical claims, I am of course arguing that LaCapra commits the same critical mistake. The more interesting point to consider, given the nature of the work most often critiqued by LaCapra, is what amounts to a dismissal based on a deep mistrust of literature’s relation to history. See “Writing (about) Trauma” in *Writing History, Writing Trauma* 181-220.

⁹ Frederic Jameson. “Marxism and Historicism.” *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Volume Two*. (St. Paul: U of Minnesota P, 1988): 148-177.

¹⁰ A debate regarding the Holocaust and centered on loss is that over the supposedly singular nature of the Nazi genocide. Those who argue against such claims often cite losses of life at, say, the hands of Stalin, the totals of which exceed those of the

Holocaust. Thus loss as a category of measurement has direct implications for the political as well as historical dimensions of remembering events.

¹¹ Georges Bataille. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985).

¹² Immanuel Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. (London: Oxford UP, 1952).

¹³ Eric Santner. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Post-War Germany*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990).

¹⁴ The reference to killing death is cited in Laplanche and Pontalis's *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. See See Jean Laplanche and J. B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1973. 455-462.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud. "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood." *The Uncanny and other Essays*. Trans. David McLintock. (New York: Penguin, 2003): 43-120.

¹⁶ "Fascination" is a translation of the German original "*faszination*." Freud uses "fascination" some thirty times in his essay, and in each instance the term signifies a state of total, unwilled or involuntary absorption in an image. The word is also closely linked in Freud's text to "strange" and "estranging," "enigma," and "uncanny."

¹⁷ In *Unclaimed Experience*, Cathy Caruth introduces her analysis by describing a scene like that of Freud reading the life of Leonardo. Caruth reads Freud reading Tasso's *Gerusalemme Liberata*, in which the hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda.. After her burial, Tancred wanders into a mysterious forest where, in his disorientation and fear, begins hacking at the trees with his sword. Upon striking one

particular tree, blood flows forth and the voice of Clorinda can be heard complaining that Tancred has repeated his act of wounding her mortally. Caruth repeatedly notes how Freud was “moved” by the story, the enigmatic nature of which called for a psychoanalytic interpretative intervention. Caruth concludes that it is the “moving quality of this literary story [. . .] that best represents Freud’s intuition of, and his passionate *fascination with*, traumatic experiences” (03). The term “fascination” here suggests, as it does in Freud’s work on Leonardo, a double relationality: first, an engagement with some enigmatic material that challenges understanding, and second a rapprochement among one’s own losses and the loss depicted in a story or in a work of history. See Caruth, 02-03.

¹⁸ Sigmund Freud. “Mourning and Melancholia.” *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. (London: Hogarth, 1957): 14: 243-258.

¹⁹ In this respect we might understand Julia Kristeva’s description of the melancholic, who does not mourn the lost object but *feels* the Thing, the “real that does not lend itself to signification, the center of attraction and repulsion, seat of the sexuality from which the object of desire will become separated.” Fascination is the affective experience of this feeling, brought on by loss, what is “inscribed within us without memory, the buried accomplice of our unspeakable anguishes.” See Julia Kristeva. *Black Sun: Melancholia and Depression*. (New York: Columbia UP, 1989):13-14.

²⁰ LaCapra’s distinctions are here at their most rigid. In his discussion of absence, lack, and loss, he essentially charts the division as mourning/loss/working through as opposed to melancholia/lack/acting out. That there are key relations between the two

LaCapra concedes, but again the question of how these relations take place is left untouched. See *Writing History, Writing Trauma* 43-85.

²¹ Lacan, for example, links fascination to anxiety in his seminar *L'Angoisse*. Anxiety for Lacan is not without its object, for it is an orientation toward the threatening Thing. This corresponds to what Kristeva describes as melancholia and we have characterized as fascination. Lacan also uses fascination to describe a certain state brought on by the “splendor” of Antigone, a splendor linked to the Lacanian Real. Regarding anxiety, see Roberto Harari. *Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety*. (New York: The Other Press, 2001). On fascination and Antigone, see Jacques Lacan. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Dennis Porter. (New York: Norton, 1986).

²² Jean-Francois Lyotard. *Heidegger and “the jews.”* Trans. Andreas Mitchell and Mark Roberts. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990).

²³ Mark Taylor. *Altarity*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987. xxxii.

²⁴ See Kant, *The Critique of Judgment*.

²⁵ We can relate this repetition back to analyses in previous chapters. Both Sontag and Friedlander worry that a fascination with fascism repeats the fascination by which Hitler, for example, held sway over his subjects. For the contemporary audiences of the 1970s (Sontag) or those of the 1980s (Friedlander), the fascination with which they engaged representations of Nazism and the Holocaust bespoke a blind willingness to act out certain elements of the past that had not yet been sufficiently critically framed.

²⁶ See LaCapra, “Paul de Man as Object of Transference” in *Representing the Holocaust*. 111-136.

²⁷ For a collection of these writings, see Werner Hamacher, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, eds. *Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943, by Paul de Man*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988. I find one of the more compelling discussions of de Man's journalism, his defenders and detractors, and the relation of critical theory to fascism to be offered by Rodolph Gasché. See Rodolphe Gasché. "Appendix: On the Edges." *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998): 235-268.

²⁸ As quoted in Laplanche and Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. 93.

²⁹ For example, LaCapra critiques Derrida's defense of Paul de Man in "The Sound of the Sea Deep Within the Shell" for its repetition of certain silences and melancholic formulations in de Man's work. LaCapra overlooks, however, the essays in *Memoires for Paul de Man* that precede this last, essays that explore with considerable rigor the problem of transference and memory within the literary text. On another note, LaCapra consistently cites the work of Maurice Blanchot for valorizing the unrepresentable excess of structural trauma through the construction of figures such as the outside, the neuter, and the disaster. Overlooked in his critique are the explorations of the way in which these figures are manifest through the singularity of literary experience. Finally, LaCapra's version of Lyotard's *Heidegger and 'the jews'* ignores what may be a compelling parallel formulation of his own distinction between structural and historical in the form of "the jews" and the Jews. See Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man*.

³⁰ It is worth noting that recent scientific research supports the notion of empathy as an fascinating embodied experience. Researchers at University College London have discovered that empathy activates regions of the brain involved in processing pain. By measuring and comparing brain waves when men and women were undergoing electrical

shock or witnessing the administration of such shocks, the researchers definitively concluded that empathy involves a psychic and physiological experiencing of another's pain, and that in some cases the brain activity for processing pain was greater in the empathic observer than in the individual suffering the pain. Further, subjects reported a disorienting inability to speak of the other's pain as other; in a striking number of cases, the subjects referred to the other's experiences in the first person. Researchers described the subjects as speaking in a fog or, strikingly, as though under hypnosis.

³¹ The thinking of fascination I have developed here counters that of Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe, who links the estranging force of representation to the uncanny rather than fascination. He writes that art is "disquieting rather than 'fascinating.' It could not be fascinating unless it occupied its own place, exercised its attraction in a particular direction. But that is just the point: art has no place of its own." Fascination for Lacoue-Labarthe appears to be a fixation oriented toward a specific place, in a fixed direction, as between two poles. With Freud, we are in a position to think of fascination as an orientation toward what Lacoue-Labarthe calls art, what we are calling, for the moment, structural loss: placeless, outside, at once familiar and strange, attractive and repulsive. The question to ask may not be how fascination opposes the uncanny, but instead how fascination might be thought as a response to the uncanny. See Lacoue-Labarthe. *Poetry as Experience*. Trans. Andrea Tarnowski. (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999): 44.

CHAPTER FOUR

“IMAGES OF THE UNCERTAINTY:”

Reading Trauma in *Gravity's Rainbow*

And as for the primordial conflict, we have only lived it as though having always already lived it, lived it as other and as though lived by another, consequently never ever living it but reliving it again and again, unable to live it. It is precisely this lag in time, this inextricable distance, this redoubling and indefinite coupling that each time constitutes the substance of the episode, its unfortunate fatality as well as its formative force, rendering it ungraspable as fact and fascinating as remembrance [. . .] We should little by little become able to speak of it, give an account of it, make of this narrative a language that remembers and make this language the animated truth of the ungraspable event—ungraspable because it is always missed, a lack in relation to itself.

(Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*¹)

Introduction

Let me begin with a scene from Thomas Pynchon's 1973 novel *Gravity's Rainbow*.² I offer it as one that dramatizes both the critical concerns addressed in the previous chapters and the critical task remaining for this final chapter:

It is 1945, immediately following the surrender of Germany to Allied forces, and American G.I. Lt. Tyrone Slothrop treks through post-war Europe on a quest to discover the etiology of a peculiar symptom he began to present in the last year of the war. His quest eventually brings him to Nordhausen, Germany. There he finds the vast V-2 rocket manufacturing complex that includes Dora-Mittelbau, a concentration camp whose prisoners served in the various V-2 factories and depots. In the days after the American liberation of Dora, an American Army Ordnance detail has taken up residency in the *Mittlewerke*, the underground network of caves in which the rockets were researched and constructed, in hopes of discovering the secrets of the V-2. The soldiers, military and civilian scientists, intelligence officers, and ordnance experts collect and study rocket-related materiel such as plans, assembly housing, fuel lines, and cladding amid the still unburied bodies of the men and a few women imprisoned in the camp. Around them (around, that is, both the living and the dead), a lively souvenir industry hawking postcards, scraps of prisoner uniforms, a V-2 “scatter-pin for that special gal back home,” and original photographs has sprung up in response to the clamor for some authenticating memento of one’s visit to and time in the site.

Into this scene wanders Slothrop as part of a tour guided by an amateur historian, Micro Graham, who fluently informs the group of the rocket assembly protocol and the number of rockets built during its operations (4,500 or so). Pausing theatrically and surrounded by that decaying material detritus of the rocket works that has not yet been transvalued into artifact, Micro whispers alluringly to Slothrop: “Ever wonder to yourself: ‘What really went on in here?’” Pynchon then writes:

Micro knows the secret doors to rock passages that lead through to Dora, the prisoner camp next to the Mittlewerke. Each member of the party is

given his own electric lantern. There is hurried, basic instruction on what to do in case of any encounter with the dead. “Remember they were always on the defensive here. When the Americans liberated Dora, the prisoners who were still alive went on a rampage after the material—they looted, they ate and drank themselves sick. For others, Death came like the American Army, and liberated them spiritually. So they’re apt to be on a spiritual rampage now. Guard your thoughts. Use the natural balance of your mind against them. They’ll be coming at you off-balance, remember.” (*GR* 296)

This scene depicts a complex of variously invested entities formed around the site of the historical trauma and dedicated to converting every remnant of it into some form or some combination of intelligence, evidence, or kitsch commodity.³ Even those bodies left unburied, Micro suggests in language that disturbingly echoes the Nazi understanding of the use-value of the prisoner’s bodies, can be “converted.” The only remnant of the past event that cannot be contained and commodified, it seems, is the *revenant*, the rampaging spirit that threatens to assault the guarded thoughts and balanced mind of the visitor, for whom no instruction is adequate preparation for the encounter. These ghosts ruin the “symmetries we were programmed to expect,” for “what you thought was a balanced mind is little help” (*GR* 297).

Pynchon’s scene compels the question: What to do with what remains? By “remains” here, we are concerned with both the material artifacts, testimonies, and documentary evidence, and the facts and details derived from them, that allow us to know the historical trauma and, no less important to our comprehensive understanding of the event, those ghostly remnants of the past that turn back our desire and disrupt our capacity to know “what really went on in here.” As readers of this scene and as twenty-first century witnesses to the traumatic past, we can say—we *must*, always, say—that the Holocaust happened, that it had specific causes, that millions of lives were lost, that

millions more suffered, and that the effects of these individuals' loss and suffering reach into our own contemporary moment in ways that are measurable, that can be traced back to their causes, and from which, it must be said, we might learn.⁴ At the same time, it is important to acknowledge that some aspect of the Holocaust, some experience of the loss or some component of the suffering or some element buried in the heap of causes and effects has not, like the rampaging spirits of Dora, been given its proper place in our understanding.

At the conclusion of chapter two, I argued that Friedlander's use of "exorcism" in *Reflections of Nazism* characterizes the effect of rigidly emplotted, kitsch narratives of the Holocaust that yield a fetishistic, compensatory historical understanding of the past. Such exorcising narratives, which claim perhaps too ardently to "know" the events of the past, disavow the necessarily anxious encounter with "ghosts," whose presence evinces a past that still demands to be worked through. As such, their haunting reveals the necessity for a more complex historical understanding and a more ethical remembrance than what is currently possible through available modes of historical inquiry or artistic representation. Chapter three continued our analysis of these narratives of disavowal, though with LaCapra we saw how a captivation with the Holocaust as a sublime *mysterium tremendum* erred in the opposite representational direction: rather than disavowing the ghostly remnants of the past or rather than attempting to engage such elements of the past alongside a rigorous examination of what we called the historical trauma, certain discourses read the ghostly remainders of the past synecdochically, mistaking what of the Holocaust is not yet known for the whole of the Holocaust. A different kind of disavowal, then, one wherein an authentic encounter with the ghostly

remnants of the past is displaced through claims for the unrepresentability, the incomprehensibility, or the sublime impossibility of the past.

To this point, our focus on fascination has partially delimited the field of acceptable representations of the Holocaust, censoring certain representational modes or historical approaches that variously deny, disavow, codify, or appropriate the traumatic past. At this juncture in our analysis, then, to ask with Pynchon “what to do with what remains?” is to ask what kind of narrative *should* be written, what kind of story *should* be told about the traumatic past. By asking this question, I am supposing that there must be stories about the traumatic past and that stories can serve to arouse our memory, arrest our tendency to forget, enlarge our conscious understanding and inflame our conscience, and call us to redress the injustices that compel the ghosts of the past to haunt us still.

By asking this question, however, I do not mean to interrogate if a narrative about the past of the Holocaust can be *commensurate* with its enormity, with the scope of its losses and the scale of its aftereffects, for here it seems appropriate to assert that no narrative can pass the test of commensurability.⁵ Chief among the many possible reasons for this is that in relation to the events under consideration, history and art share the same condition of their belatedness, of always coming after the events under consideration (and it is always an event “under consideration,” seen from a place and time other than that of the event itself). This belatedness determines that any narrative of the past is always a retroactive forming of it into what Daniel Schwarz calls an “illuminating distortion” of what happened: an interpretative shape derived through the application of an admittedly limited number of available narrative modes and conventions.⁶ Even Langer’s art of atrocity, discussed in chapter two, would necessarily make recourse to some level of

convention, lest it be altogether unrecognizable as a work about or in reference to the Holocaust.⁷ Narrative is always a shape given to or a structure belatedly built from the past, thus subject to the predilections, the designs and desires of those who shape and who structure. As Shoshana Felman explains it, “the significance of the occurrence can only be articulated in a language foreign to the language(s) of the occurrence.”⁸ If the language of the event and the languages by which we now, from here, speak and give meaning to the event are foreign to each other, then what occurs between the events and their narratives are acts of translation.

The task remaining for us is not to discover the narrative about the past commensurate with what happened in the past, but instead to interrogate what kind of story should be written about the past given narrative’s limitations, given the fact of narrative’s belatedness. My contention is that a generative trauma narrative should perform two crucial functions: first, it should point to the event as one in and of the past in a way that emphasizes the narrative’s own and the reader’s belatedness; second, as a trauma narrative, it should demonstrate how the trauma is never, properly speaking, in the past, but is instead a belated condition and concern of the present and, perhaps most importantly, of the future. The narrative should thus bear signs of the disruptive shock of what it attempts but fails to represent, and in doing so communicate—transmit, transfer—that shock to its reader.

The imperative of trauma narrative is to shock our stable sense of history, opening our understanding of the past and our capacity to claim it as an object of knowledge to what we do not yet know, to what we cannot yet claim. In this chapter I read Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* in order to argue for it as this sort of trauma narrative. My claim is

that Pynchon's novel self-consciously articulates its own belatedness, positioning the reader as a witness to events that are both within and without the structure of historical understanding. In doing so, the novel calls into question those narratives, both historical and artistic, that claim to reconstruct the past into definitive accounts of "what happened." Pynchon's novel therefore demands that we ask what it means to compose a narrative "of" or "about" the traumatic past, terms that imply a claim of ownership for the events being represented. At the same time, the novel invests readers with the responsibility of composing ever more complex narratives and a more robust historical knowledge, refusing to elevate the past events to the remove of the sublime. *Gravity's Rainbow* thus opens readers onto an obligation for those ghostly, haunting—or put differently, traumatic—elements of the past that are as yet unavailable to extant frames of reference or comprehension *and* opens narrative possibilities that might bring those ghosts into a (certain kind of) historical understanding.

What I am suggesting here is that *Gravity's Rainbow* is a variation of the testimony the possibility of which I raised, with Lyotard, at the end of chapter three. The testimony I have in mind would "bear the imprint" of the trauma and make possible the empathic unsettlement LaCapra rightly argues is the constitutive element of a generative representation of the trauma or a scholarly intervention in such a representation. I will show how Pynchon's narrative bears the traumatic imprint by representing it as a condition for the characters and the wartime and post-war cultures of the novel's plot, but also by enacting a trauma-appropriate event of incomprehension, a necessary calling into question and destabilizing of the reader's assumptions and expectations. I do this by focusing on the narrative at three crucial structural points: its beginning, its middle, and

its end. I draw our attention to these three structural points in order to show how Pynchon compromises the integrity of his own novel's structure, therein opening it up to the belated, traumatic aspects of the past that cannot be represented, properly speaking, but are nonetheless present.

I am arguing, then, that *Gravity's Rainbow* is a trauma narrative, though in what respect this is the case requires some further qualification. Trauma, we recall, is not only the event (what happened at a specific location and at a specific time, its causes, its factual details—the concentration camps of Dora and Auschwitz, for example); trauma is more precisely the *belatedness* of that event, what Freud calls *Nachtraglichkeit*. For the one who is traumatized, this belatedness takes the form of repetition compulsion, a disruptive return of his past experience as an ongoing contemporaneous event. The victim of trauma has undergone an experience that in some respect he does not know he has undergone, rendering his capacity to integrate the event into a chronological mnemonic narrative impossible.

For the reader of *Gravity's Rainbow*—for me, the reader of the novel and also the author of this scholarly consideration of that novel—the trauma under consideration is at least doubled, for it is the secondary or vicarious trauma brought about by an unsettling empathic encounter with the trauma of another, a different (type of) trauma belonging to another place and time, an other person. What “takes place” as trauma for me is not an estranging repetition of an event or experience that I have lived through, but a disruption of my putative comprehension of what it means for an other to have experienced the events in question. This demands a destabilizing of the frameworks of understanding and economies of reference by which I invest the past with meaning and give its events, facts,

and details signification. My secondary (*natraglich* means, among other things, “secondary” or “additional”) trauma is a re-cognition that certain aspects of the past demand a re-investment of meaning and a re-signification precisely because they are not fully cognized as “meaningful” and “significant” by the language and structures of comprehension currently available.

I have hyphenated key words in the previous sentence to draw attention to the *re-*, the mark signifying that my work in reading or writing about a narrative of trauma involves continuing an ongoing project of enlarging the frames of investment, meaning, and signification so that they can accommodate, without kitschifying, the traumatizing past. Perhaps this is an interminable project, given that the very moment a trauma is declared “historical,” that declarative claim is opened up by what it cannot contain within the structure of its claim. And so: we are obligated to tell stories about the historical trauma, but what remains structurally traumatic always returns to demand a reawakening of the obligation, a revision of those stories.

The event and experience of this demand, this destabilizing, this reawakening is what I call fascination. After chapter three, it is hopefully clear that by fascination I now mean an empathic opening up of our understanding to what it cannot yet accommodate. This experience is akin to Freudian melancholia, an experience of grief in which some aspect of loss cannot be named as an *object* of loss, something with borders and delineated patterns of meaning. Fascination is therefore an *abeyance* of the process whereby lost objects are put in their proper places, as events of the past known to have occurred then, known to have taken place there. Fascination as an *abeyance*: a temporary period of inactivity and, in a juridical sense, a suspension of one’s capacity to claim

ownership so that the facts of the case can be reviewed. My argument is that as a narrative of trauma, *Gravity's Rainbow* enacts this fascinating abeyance wherein the reader suspends his claim on the past and is opened up to an obligation to what is, *as of yet*, unclaimed.

Gravity's Rainbow

Gravity's Rainbow commences with the following lines: "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare to it now." The screaming refers to the first of four V-2 rockets that German records show were fired against London on December 18, 1944, from mobile bases in the Hachenburg, Germany and Hellendorn, Holland. Dubbed the *Vergeltungswaffe*—the "Revenge Weapon"—by Goebbels and developed by Nazi rocket scientist Werner von Braun (who would later, as a naturalized American citizen, become head of NASA), the V-2 went into heavy production at the Mittelbau-Dora labor camp near Nordhausen, Germany in August of 1943. By war's end, 3,000 V-2 rockets had been fired against Allied targets from bases at The Hague and forested areas of Germany and Holland. The block-leveling detonating force of the V-2 meant that it was best suited for offensives against densely populated metropolitan areas such as Paris, Arras, and especially London.

The first V-2 rocket hit Staveley Road in the West London suburb of Chiswick on Friday, 8 September 1944. The impact left a crater thirty feet wide and ten feet deep, lifted fully-grown men and tossed them fifty feet, and leveled five suburban blocks radiating in all directions from the impact site. The explosion killed two people outright;

several died subsequently from injuries sustained at the impact. The Staveley Road Rocket was the first of 1,390 V-2 rockets that would be fired against London and its surrounding areas as the main offensive in Hitler's "Operation Penguin," an attempt to put the city of London and British war morale "on ice." Of this number, 517 rockets hit the city, leaving 2,724 dead and 6,000 injured, and causing extensive material losses. Additionally, thousands of London residents evacuated the city in fear of a V-2 hit and returned to find homes destroyed and friends or family members killed or missing.

The title of Pynchon's novel refers to the flight trajectory of the V-2, which comprised a maximum distance range of 255 miles and a maximum altitude of 55 to 60 miles. The height of which the V-2 was capable in proportional relation to its distance range gave the rocket's trajectory a decidedly parabolic shape. I will have more to say about this parabolic arc momentarily, but here it is important to point out that a parabola is the common geometric figure found in the trajectory of any body in motion in relation to a uniform gravitational field. Hence, "gravity's rainbow" as the parabolic shape created by the ascending and descending phases of the rocket's journey from launch site to point of impact.

As the rocket reached its maximum altitude and experienced *brennschluss*, or the "burn-out" of its fuel reserves, it entered into the descending phase of its parabolic arc, gaining velocity and emitting a high, screeching whistle as it approached its target. In the lexicon of ballistics this whistling is often called the "incoming" or the announcement of "incoming mail." The whistle of the incoming rocket is the "screaming" that comes across an iron London sky on the "dripping winter" morning of December 18, 1944, and with which *Gravity's Rainbow* is opened. The novel concludes nine months later on 14

September 1945, the day a final, fictional V-2, “Rocket 00000,” is fired belatedly from an outpost in Luneberg Heath, Germany. Pynchon’s novel begins at the approximate midpoint of the V-2 rocket campaign, or we might say in the ballistic parlance of the rocket’s trajectory, the novel begins as the campaign and the war enter into their descending phases. As such, *Gravity’s Rainbow* opens as a narrative that would traverse what are arguably among the most traumatic events of World War Two: the majority of British casualties occurred in the second half of the rocket campaign; the Nazi’s realization of approaching Allied troops at sites such as Auschwitz and Dora compelled them to escalate liquidations of prisoners in the camps, thus accelerating what was already a startlingly high extermination rate, or to send prisoners out of the camps on what were called “death marches;” the atomic bombings at Hiroshima and Nagasaki.

The screaming with which *Gravity’s Rainbow* commences, then, is a two-fold announcement, a doubled warning of what is to come. For those residents of Pynchon’s London, the screaming is the announcement of the impending arrival of yet another V-2 rocket; they recognize it as such because, as Pynchon writes, “it has happened before.” The liturgical season wherein the novel opens intensifies the Londoners’ sense of imminent arrival, but also animates their waiting with a messianic hope: the novel begins on the Monday following the third Sunday of Advent, the four-week period prior to the Christmas holiday. During Advent (from the Latin *adventus*, or “coming”), Christians look back to the historical period of waiting for the messiah’s first coming (“it has happened before”) and more importantly look forward to his promised return in the End of Days, the Second Coming, and the Revelation. For the London residents of Pynchon’s narrative, the penultimate Sunday of Advent has passed and they wait for its final

Sunday, which in 1944 fell on Christmas Eve, December 24. Though it announces the impending disaster, then, the screaming carries with it the possibility of a redemption: perhaps, were one to act in time, the disaster might be avoided at best, mitigated at least. What's more, the screaming speaks the promise that the coming rocket might be the last, the final rocket that signifies the end of the campaign and the end of the war. And so, as the screaming of this particular V-2 rocket comes across the sky, all of London vibrates in "a poising" of anticipation. "Lie and wait," Pynchon writes, "Lie still and be quiet. Screaming holds across the sky. When it comes, will it come in darkness, or will it bring its own light? Will the light come before or after?" (GR 04).

For the reader of the novel, the screaming serves as another kind of announcement, engineering another kind of expectation with its own particular promise. Pynchon's screaming delineates the historical place and time within which the fictional narrative will unfold and within which readers will encounter what we should call, following LaCapra, historical traumas. The trauma anticipated by the rocket's screaming is not only the devastation wrought by this particular rocket on December 18, 1944, nor is it limited to the massive destruction of metropolitan areas at the multiple points of V-2 impact during the second half of the rocket campaign between December 1944 and May 1945; the screaming also anticipates those historical traumas comprised by the temporal parameters of the narrative, all of which the reader will in some manner engage: the liquidation of Dora, Auschwitz, and other concentration camps in advance of the impending arrival of Allied troops and the atomic devastation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Further, the December 18 date of the narrative's opening marks a particular point on the historical timeline of the Second World War: the destruction of electricity

plants in Amsterdam by Nazi troops; the beginning of the Ardennes Offensive, a key moment in the Battle of the Bulge (the 101st Army Division arrived in the Ardennes on 18 December); and the Nazi's re-invasion of Belgium in the middle weeks of December, each referenced in the novel's first episode.

Gravity's Rainbow's inaugural screaming announces the historical reality the novel is "about," those historical traumas that are to take place for readers as the impeccably researched historical subject of the fictional narrative. The great extent to which the reader is brought into and through that traumatic past derives from Pynchon's attention to historical detail, an attention that invests his narrative with an extraordinarily rich historicity. Pynchon incorporates into his fictional narrative what Steven Weisenbuger calls a "chronometrics" that includes references to historically accurate moon phases and weather, BBC newsprograms and newspaper headlines, current films and popular songs, period-specific architectural details and city maps, and menus from currently operating restaurants.⁹ Further, Pynchon's fictional renderings of London and other sites such as Dora are based on meticulous research into eyewitness accounts, historical records, photographs, and histories. Finally, the integrity of the narrative's historicity is deepened by Pynchon's mapping of the Christian liturgical calendar onto the historical timeline and its key events: Book One ("Beyond the Zero") opens in the season of Advent on 18 December 1944 and concludes eight days later, on 26 December (Boxing Day); Book Two ("Un Perm au Casino Hermann Goering") begins just before Christmas, 1944 and ends on Whitsunday, 20 May 1945; Book Three ("In the Zone") commences in mid-May and ends on the Feast of the Transfiguration, 06 August 1945, which is of course also the day Hiroshima is bombed; Book Four ("The Counterforce")

begins on 06 August and concludes on 14 September 1945, the Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross.

The aggregate result of these manifold mappings of historical detail into the fiction is the historical specificity that LaCapra argues is critical to an engagement with historical trauma, a capacity to point directly to a temporal and geographical point in the historical chronology and to say “this happened here, this happened then.” (Regarding this last point, Weisenburger notes that the “story time” of the episodes can be pinpointed to within an hour of the historical calendar, so that the reader can discern at what time on Monday, December 18, 1944 Slothrop would be entering his cubicle at the offices of ACHTUNG or at what hour he enters into the evacuated Dora camp site.)¹⁰ The historicity *Gravity’s Rainbow* achieves is also the ethical imperative outlined by Berel Lang in his discussion of works of art purportedly “about” the Second World War and the Holocaust. In work such as *Act and Idea in the Nazi Genocide*, *The Future of the Holocaust*, and the recent *Holocaust Representation*, Lang has argued for a fidelity to the discipline and discourse of history as the absolute horizon of our understanding.¹¹ While respectful and knowledgeable of literary representations of the events, Lang maintains that the Holocaust must be approached first and last as an historical event situated in a complex of determining factors and lasting, if mutable, effects, animated for contemporary audiences by historical facts and details. Lang supposes that such facts and details “speak for themselves” and are thus immune to the vagaries of interpretation; an ethical work of fiction about the Holocaust would necessarily rely upon these facts to ground and stabilize the fictional structure and at the same time serve as the object and aim of the reader’s engagement with that fiction. Lang’s contention (and his criteria for

an ethically responsible literature about the traumatic past) is that such facts and details should mobilize the historical consciousness of those readers familiar with them and enlarge the historical consciousness of those readers for whom they are new material.

By opening his fictional work with the screaming of an incoming V-2 rocket known in the historical record to have been fired at a precise time, from a precise location, with a specific destination, *Gravity's Rainbow* intensely limns the historical *mise en scène* of the narrative's fictional evocation. The precision with which Pynchon locates his narrative in the past combined with the narrative's deep historicity allows us to say that *Gravity's Rainbow* is *about* the historical trauma of the V-2 rocket campaign, the Dora concentration camp, and, given the narrative's recurring references to Auschwitz and the other sites of the concentrationary universe, about the Holocaust. The crucial question, of course, is in what manner the novel is "about" the Holocaust. If the screaming references the historical reality of the Holocaust as the subject of the fictional evocation, then the larger structure of which the screaming is a part, the parabolic arc of the rocket's trajectory, figuratively illustrates the means by which the narrative will lead the reader through the traumatic events of the Holocaust on the way to an understanding of them. As mentioned above, the parabola is a geometric shape whose arc traces the determinist ballistics of any object under the influence of gravity. The term "parabola" comes into geometric parlance to designate the application of a given area to a straight line, thus designating a shaping of the line into an arc by the fixing of certain boundaries. In contemporary mathematics the parabola designates the locus of plotted points on the line arcing between the focus (a fixed point within the plane) to the directrix (a line

intersecting a conical section). The parabola is the curving assembly of points plotted at equidistance from both the focus and the directrix.¹²

The two “key points” are those that anchor the parabola at either end. These key points are especially important in parabolic assessments of objects in motion in relation to a gravitational force—the key points are the point from which an object is thrown or cast (or launched) and the point at which it lands (or detonates). Significantly, while the key points are in place prior to the casting of the object (and I should note that the term “parabola” derives from the Greek *para*, meaning “alongside” or “nearby,” and the verb *ballein*, meaning “to throw or cast”), the parabolic arc is only ever determined retroactively, after the object has completed its movement from one key point to another. The parabola is the retroactive plotting of points along a curving line determined by the distance between the two key points, the speed of travel, weather conditions, and other relevant facts or details.

For Pynchon, the parabola is also a *parable* (the two coming from the same Greek word and sharing the etymological associations of “comparison and, in a secondary sense, “application”) that illustrates traditional, what we might call (curvi)linear notions of history, historical narrative, and the fictional intervention in the past. To explain: the two key points of the parabolic arc illustrate the fixed points of, at one end, the past and, at the other end, the present. Having progressed from then to now, to plot the parabolic trajectory of the past is to proceed retroactively from the fixed point of the present into the determined point in the past, moving back along the plotted points of the curving arc. The reader opens *Gravity's Rainbow* to the screaming of the rocket's “incoming,” and thus enters into the parabolic trajectory at a precisely determined point. The movement

along that trajectory, however, is a complex one: inasmuch as the screaming heralds the disaster to come, the reader anticipates a fictional reconstruction of the past that will lead him *through* the traumatic events, through, that is, the rocket blast and the experience of Dora presaged by the screaming. The promise of the parabolic arc is to provide the reader with a vicarious “experience” of the past that invests the reader with an understanding of that past. The reader also moves backward along the parabolic arc, retracing its plotted points to get to the arc’s other “key point,” its point of origin and thus the source or origin of the disaster under consideration.

The parabolic arc thus determines the path by which we move from the historical trauma with which the novel opens (the impending rocket blast) to the “source” or “cause” of that trauma (the rocket works and concentration camp at Dora) *and* the path by which we imaginatively move from the present into the historical past. Read in this way, the parabolic arc suggests a narrative enterprise constituted by a retracing and reconstruction of the path that led from “there” to “here.” In reading the novel, the reader moves through “what happened” along a line of plotted points, arriving at an explanation of how and why it happened.¹³

Thematically, history as a reconstructing of the facts and details of the past into a determined narrative arc runs throughout *Gravity’s Rainbow*. Lt. Tyrone Slothrop is an American G.I. who works in the London offices of Allied Clearing House, Technical Units, Northern Germany, or ACHTUNG, which is under the auspices of the Supreme Headquarters, Allied Expeditionary Forces, or SHAEF. Before readers meet Slothrop, we meet a heavily dotted map of London that Slothrop keeps in his cubicle. This map marks the sites of Slothrop’s romantic dalliances and sexual conquests; it is of great interest to

his ACHTUNG and SHAEF superiors because it is a perfect replica of the impact sites of the German V-2 rockets. “There is in his history,” it turns out, “and likely, God help him, in his dossier, a peculiar sensitivity to what is revealed in the sky” (*GR 26*). As the subject of chemical experimentation when a young child (none of which he remembers), Slothrop was conditioned to respond to a plastic, Imoplex G, which has years later become a critical ingredient of the V-2 rocket. Slothrop departs on a quest to discover the origins of his condition, attempting to reconstruct the events of the past and arrange them into a sensible narrative, a reconstruction that takes him from London, the point of the rockets’ impact, to Dora-Mittlbau, the point of the rocket’s origins. In fact, were one to map the path by which Slothrop moves across Europe on his way from London to Dora, plotting the key points along his journey and connecting them with a line, one would discern a parabola.

In addition to Slothrop’s reconstructive quest, there are the Allied efforts to reconstruct the V-2 from German records, plans, photographs, and testimony; a theatre promoter’s attempt to reconstruct Dora and Auschwitz as sites for historical edification, complete with emaciated actors dressed in prisoner garb (what we would now call a living history museum); and a cadre of Freudians and Pavlovians dedicated to reconstructing the causal chain leading patients to certain pathological behaviors (chief among these is one Edward W. A. Pointsman, a Pavlovian whose surname suggests someone who builds explanatory narratives of psychological phenomena through the plotting of points).

This is to offer only a few of many relevant illustrations of the novel’s prevalent theme of narrativizing the past through the reconstruction of facts, details, and the

retracing of one's (already) plotted steps. Pynchon's use of the parabola appears to suggest that history is a reconstruction of the past through the parabolic plotting of points—facts, details, documentary evidence, and so on—that offers a neatly causal, (curvi)linear accounting for what happened and how it transpired. The parabola, too, seems to figure the relation of the literary work to the past: by applying the parameters of the fictional narrative to the line of the past, the novel shapes the past into the parabolic structure of “history,” offering the past to contemporary readers in a form that yields a determined understanding. Borrowing a phrase from *Gravity's Rainbow*, the novel as parabola is an “assertion-through-structure” whereby the available evidence of the past is shaped through the application of narrative parameters into a determined structure of interpretation and understanding (GR 10).

The historical or literary narrative as parabola “throws” the reader into the past along a determined trajectory, allowing him to vicariously experience the disastrous events and providing him with an explanatory chronology of when, where, why, and how those events happened. Arriving at a predetermined point in the past, the reader can then move back into the present with a linear, comprehensive narrative explanation of how we in the present got “here” from “there.” Pynchon points out again and again that this is a typical Western pattern of meaning-making, one that stretches back to an originary disaster and an originary promise. Pynchon writes about Slothrop and his provisional lover, Katje:

But it is a curve each of them feels, unmistakably. It is the parabola. They must have guessed, once or twice—guessed and refused to believe—that everything, always, collectively, had been moving toward that purified shape in the sky, that shape of no surprise, no second chances, no return. Yet they do move forever under it, reserved for its own black-and-white

bad news certainly as if it were the Rainbow, and they its children. . . .
(GR 209).

The “Rainbow” Pynchon refers to here is that one that God revealed to Noah as a token of the covenant between him and his creatures: a promise after the disaster never again to ruin the world by water. The association of the divine Rainbow with the parabolic arc inscribes any historical narrative within the overarching parabolic grand-narrative of Eschaton and Apocalypse. God’s promise is History’s promise: an end at which a new dispensation (of God’s truth, of history’s significance) will be revealed.

Though we may not, like Katje and Slothrop, intuitively feel the parabola, it is indeed a shaping with which we are familiar. History is, as we noted in the introduction, always a shaping of the past into a particular narrative design. We are only ever “throwing” ourselves back into a determined point in the past in order to say, “this happened then, this happened here, this happened for these reasons and with these effects.” Pynchon’s intention in *Gravity’s Rainbow*, though, is to show the inadequacies and dangers of the parabolically deterministic notion of history and historical narrative. The parabola in Pynchon’s novel is always a diseased structure contaminated by the desires of those who shape it. The parabolic arch, Pynchon informs us, is the privileged architectural figure of Albert Speer, who sees in its deterministic curvature a fitting analogue to Hitler’s argument for contemporary Germany as the logical end of a retrofitted history of Aryan supremacy. What’s more, were one to take the two “sigmoid” lightning bolt signs of the SS, connect them at their apexes and then stretch them out, one would have a parabola. Finally, the entrance to Dora and so many other concentration camps, Pynchon points out, bear the (signature?) shape of the parabola.

Exaggerated though they may be, these illustrations make a crucial, perhaps damning point about the parabola: it is the predominant shape of Western conceptions of knowledge, interpretation, narrative, history, and nation. The past as parabola becomes available as something that can be *used*, put to ideological, political, and commercial ends as determined by those who trace the arcing trajectory.¹⁴ Moreover, the parabolic narrativizing of the past is always an act of erasure. In fixing the past according to the logic and law of the parabola, any narrative will elide those aspects of the past that do not correspond to its arcing line.¹⁵ (Consider, for example, my cursory summary of the novel, which forgets, if out of expediency, some four hundred characters and several dozen plot lines in the attempt to fit the summarized narrative into the line of my argument.) Most importantly, the parabolic narrative of the past falls into those traps we examined in earlier chapters, expunging those elements of the past that threaten the integrity of the parabolic shape and our capacity to separate here from there, now from then. The parabola thus fetishistically exorcises the ghostly elements of the past, displacing (if provisionally) what in the past remains with us as a trauma: A determinist narrative of history that sustains the fantasy of a totalizing account of the past.

A Progressive Knotting Into

And yet, Pynchon tells us on the first page, while the screaming still holds across the sky, that, “this is not a disentanglement from, but a progressive knotting into” (*GR* 03). If the parabolic trajectory is the narrative means by which we retroactively untangle the knotted past and lay it out in a perfectly plotted line, then Pynchon’s aim for his novel is to show how this project is catastrophic at its origins. Perhaps we should begin again:

“A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late” (*GR* 03). Pynchon’s research would of course have uncovered that the V-2 rocket’s great innovation was the speed it was capable of achieving in the descending phase of its parabolic trajectory. Reaching a maximum impact speed of 800 meters per second, the rocket hit its target at three times the speed of sound. This meant that the rocket’s screaming—its “incoming,” the announcement of its impending arrival—was only ever heard *after* the rocket had landed and wrought its devastation. The screaming with which the novel opens is not an announcement of the event to come, but rather a proclamation that the event for which we wait has already transpired:

Imagine a missile one hears approaching only *after* it explodes. The reversal! A piece of time neatly snipped out . . . a few feet of film run backwards . . . the blast of the rocket, fallen faster than sound—then growing *out of it* the roar of its own fall, catching up to what’s already death and burning . . . a ghost in the sky. . . . (*GR* 48).

To hear this screaming means that that as readers we may not pass through the events of the past by way of the fictional evocation, for the disaster we await has only ever already taken place, is always receding into the past rather than awaiting on the horizon. The reader is only ever “catching up to what’s already death and burning,” attempting to understand an event at which we have always arrived a moment too late.

Rhetorically, the ghostly screaming of the rocket functions as a *hysteron proteron*. The *hysteron proteron* (Latin for “latter before”) is a figure of speech that draws the audience’s attention to the more important issue by situating it first in a distorted phrasing. As a figure of the “latter before,” the *hysteron proteron* of the screaming situates the disaster before the warning of its imminent arrival so that the disaster

comes—has already come—first. Our attention is drawn to the disaster itself, but more precisely to the fact that the novel and we readers have arrived belatedly, after the taking place of the events we seek to understand. Though Pynchon's novel is larded through with historically accurate facts and precise period detail, the *hysteron proteron* of the screaming announces that we are always catching up to the catastrophic events, the "death and burning," that those facts and details speak of. Because the reader hears the screaming, he is positioned by it as a survivor, but not in the sense of having experienced the event ("experienced," from *experiri*, meaning an exposure to peril, to destruction). Rather, the reader is a survivor in the sense of living after the occurrence of some event, in the aftermath of that event that takes place somewhere else and in another time.

And yet the screaming still presages a disaster to come. Or perhaps it is better to say, the screaming announces the imminent taking place of what within the disaster has not yet taken place: its belated, traumatic return. At the level of the novel's representation of the past events, the fact that the rocket detonates with no warning makes it a trauma in a strictly Freudian sense: an event for which there is no preparation that takes place with the quality of a shock and is thus destined to repeat. We could say, then, that by beginning with the *hysteron proteron* of the rocket's screaming, Pynchon informs his readers that his novel is about both the historical events *and* the shocking, traumatizing way they took place. The screaming thus points at once to the past and to the future, to what took place and what, because it has not yet taken place, promises to return.

If the event of the past is not fully in the past nor fully in the present—neither here nor there, but both at once—then there is no fixed point from which a parabolic narrativizing of the past can commence or at which it can end. Pynchon's *hysteron*

proteron ruins the parabolic reach into the past and displaces and historical narrative that would correspond to that reach. Consequently, Pynchon's novel displaces in its opening pages those historical understandings derived from parabolic arrangements of the past. Pynchon's screaming situates the reader, the narrative, the events it represents, and indeed, the event of reading in which the narrative "means" or "signifies," in a fascinating, aporetic in-between time and place. To borrow from *Hamlet*, time here is out of joint and like the ghost of Hamlet's father, the screaming—a "ghost in the sky"—announces that the past is not yet finished, its business not yet complete. *Pace* LaCapra and Lang, I would argue that Pynchon's novel situates readers *vis-à-vis* not the historical facts and details of a straightforwardly referential history (a history that is of and about the past that can be engaged parabolically from the stable temporal position of the present), but instead before a history that is to come, one that will account for a truth we do not yet have direct access to.

What we hear in the screaming of the rocket is the enigmatic, estranging address of a truth that simultaneously resists and demands our comprehension, what Cathy Caruth calls a cry belatedly released from the traumatic wound. Let me turn to Caruth's influential *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, for it helps us to understand what is at stake in Pynchon's placement of the reader in the aftermath of traumatic belatedness.¹⁷ Of particular interest to us here is Caruth's reading of Marguerite Duras's and Alain Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*. For Caruth, *Hiroshima mon amour* is the story of two lovers implicated in each others' trauma: the French woman who missed the moment of her German lover's death on the day of liberation; the Japanese man who missed the moment of Hiroshima's destruction and his family's death while

away fighting the war. Caruth suggests that this implication—this “knotting into”—is not one within the structure of sense or understanding. And yet, Caruth insists, such an implication establishes each individual’s respective history. By “history” here, Caruth means something other than the history any individual could “claim” or that we as readers of *Gravity’s Rainbow* could say the novel is “about.” What sort of *history* is portrayed in or by the narrative text, portrayed, we might say, so that we may ourselves be implicated in it?

Caruth rehearses Freud’s argument that trauma, like the silent arrival of the V-2 rocket, is an encounter with death for which the psyche is unprepared. Due to its nature, trauma is both the missed encounter with death and, more significantly, *the enigma of the survival* with the missed encounter. Traumatic repetition becomes an attempt not only to comprehend that one has almost died, to bear witness to what cannot be given witness (the direct confrontation with death), but more importantly to “claim one’s own survival” (64). This structure of survival, the “endless survival of what has not been understood” (72) is the very structure of a different history, a history understood as arising precisely where (at the site of trauma) immediate understanding may not (11). Thus, history would not be a strictly or directly referential economy in which the historical trauma is named as such but would be “read” in figures of departure, falling, awakening, flight (or, for our purposes, of a screaming). For example, Caruth suggests that the trauma of Freud’s departure from Vienna for London in 1938 is not located in direct reference to the event, but in its figurations of departure, which in their repetition “convey the impact of a history precisely as what *cannot be grasped* about leaving” (21; Caruth’s emphasis).

Trauma literature would necessitate not only a new thinking of but as well a new readerly experience with and in time, a transference experience of reading that disrupts historical continuity and disturbs the distance between past and present. The spectator of the film or the reader of the novel does not witness a retelling or fictional account of the factual events of Hiroshima or the Occupation, or the V-2 campaign or Dora (of the death of the Japanese man's family and devastation of his city or the murder of the French woman's SS lover on the day of the liberations of Nevers, or the devastating event of a rocket strike or the liquidation of Dora), which would be to give a direct or directly diegetic reference to the events. Instead, the spectator/reader witnesses the characters in their traumatic relation to each other, a relation in which their respective traumatic histories can emerge as a series of interrupted understandings.

In *Gravity's Rainbow*, for example, we witness Slothrop's traumatic entanglement with Brigadier Pudding, a traumatized combat veteran of the Great War who now works for the "White Visitation," the psychological research division of SHAEF. Pudding has difficulty remembering and articulating a narrative memory of witnessing the death of a fellow soldier to whom he was especially close. He can recall "that mud, that terrible smell, in, yes Polygon Wood," but only barely, or not at all, for the moment he places a memory, it is displaced:

. . . or was that—who *was* that ginger-haired chap who slept with his hat on? ahhh, come back. Now Polygon Wood . . . but it's fluttering away. Fallen trees, dead, smooth, gray, swirling grain of tree like frozen smoke . . . ginger . . . thunder . . . no use, no bleeding use, it's gone, another gone, another, oh dear . . . (GR 76)

We first witness Pudding attempting to fill in the elliptical absences with those missing memories that would give to his past experiences a narrative structure as part of

Pynchon's description of the various characters of the *White Visitation*. We later witness again Pudding's attempt, this time with even less success, to recount the events for Slothrop, who in turn attempts to explain to Pudding his conditioned response to the rocket. Slothrop's pathology (which we learn is another *hysteron proteron*, for his conditioned response to the rocket occurs *in advance* of the presence of the stimulus) cannot be integrated into a narrative explanation of etiology, of cause and effect.

The reader of these exchanges becomes, like the spectators of the film, "those who not only watch but listen, and whose understanding of Hiroshima [or the Holocaust] must pass through the fiction of the film and through the multiplicity of languages" (*UE* 45). That is to say, our understanding does not move parabolically into the past, but instead passes into a heavily mediated multiplicity of languages spoken by those who try, belatedly, to recount their traumatic experiences. The act of seeing and listening—of viewing the film, of reading the novel—is an act of translation among these traumatized languages and the events they seek to recount so as to remember. This layering of translations becomes a different kind of history, one wherein past is not prelude to present and future, experience is not attached to event, event is not attached to place and time, symptom is not fixed to cause.

Now, what we may draw from Caruth's reading is that the narrative text (Duras's screenplay, Resnais's film, Pynchon's novel) is the site of an encounter with a history necessarily told differently from that of archival footage, the enumeration of historical evidence ("typical" historical accounts), the details and facts that Lang supposes speak for themselves. This is a history that is not compelled to locate the reader before and in the event in the ways historical footage may (localizing the trauma in its historical

immediacy of 9:15 a. m. 6 August 1945, documenting its historical facts, etc.), for what is required of our reading is not to relive the experience so that we may understand it. What is *first* required is our understanding that we do not yet understand, that we are in the aporetic space of belatedness.

The trauma narrative supplements the reality of the past with a fictional telling that orients the reader's understanding in the future. With Caruth, we can say that the *film* set in rebuilt Hiroshima or the novel set in post-rocket London—the site of an historical trauma—becomes the site of a certain intimacy, an implication in the traumatic belatedness of the historical event, an entanglement or “a progressive knotting into.”

Here, in the event of reading or viewing:

A new mode of seeing and of listening—a seeing and listening from the site of trauma—is opened up to us [. . .], and offered as the very possibility of, in a catastrophic era, the link between cultures. What we see and hear [. . .] resonates beyond what we can know and understand; but it is the event of this incomprehension and in our departure from sense and understanding that our own witnessing may indeed begin to take place.
(*UE* 56)

The narrative—literature (Caruth has titled this chapter on *Hiroshima mon amour* “Literature and the Enactment of Memory”)—stages an encounter, an event of incomprehension, in which the reader is deprived of sense and understanding and opened up onto a seeing of the trauma from within the site of trauma itself, as both the depicted site of Hiroshima but more importantly as the narrative text itself, from which—site and seeing—an empathically unsettling engagement between multiple “witnessings” can take place. This intimacy becomes a traumatic entanglement between reader and text, what we should, after chapter three, call a fascination.

Pynchon's use of the *hysteron proteron* to open his novel destabilizes the reader's received understanding of both the historical matter (the V-2 campaign, Dora, the Holocaust) and what it means to read a novel "about" these events. The chronological reversal of the rocket's screaming reveals the possibility of a traumatic truth outside of extant historical narrative, but also reveals that those narratives are always fictional constructs that stand to be revised so as to accommodate this traumatic truth.¹⁸ In doing so, *Gravity's Rainbow* begins by staging a fascinating empathic unsettlement in its reader that makes possible an engagement with the endless survival of what has not been understood. This engagement, though grounded in the facts and details of Pynchon's research, will develop as a series of interrupted understandings (that are themselves a form of witnessing) that entangle the reader in a traumatic reality that resonates beyond what he can know and understand.

Dora, After

Nowhere in the novel is this engagement called forth more compellingly than in Pynchon's depiction of the concentration, labor, and extermination complex called Dora.¹⁹ Pynchon's Dora is no less meticulously researched than the novel's other historical material, its fictional presentation no less filled out with authentic and often microscopic details. The space into which Slothrop and the reader enter, however, is a haunted one wherein the prevalent mood is melancholic rather than mournful, where "in the sheet metal ducting that snakes like a spine along the overhead, plan ventilation moans. Now and then it sounds like voices. Traffic from somewhere remote. It's not as if

they were discussing Slothrop *directly*, understand. But he wishes he could hear it better. . . .” (GR 302-303). The murmuring Slothrop hears but does not understand mingles with the noises of the ventilation of the rocket works above, which though inoperative continue to speak in the haunted register of sighs and moans (a multiplicity of languages, a space of translation). All of it an aural evidence of “traffic from somewhere remote:” the past that, while recent, has already receded into a distance that Slothrop cannot traverse but that still takes place in the present.

As he moves into a description of Dora, Pynchon’s narrative perspective shifts from a third-person observation of Slothrop’s movement through the Mittelwerke and toward Dora into a direct address to the reader, so that Slothrop’s position becomes, for this extended paragraph, the same as the reader’s. Through this shift, the narrative places the reader as a belated witness to an event he can know only by what remains, by what haunts. Like the *hysteron proteron* of the screaming with which the novel began, Pynchon’s depiction of Dora will focus our attention on a past that indeed happened in the past but that, traumatically, continues to take place in a space and time that is elsewhere, as a history that is otherwise. I offer Pynchon’s passage in full as an illustration of the fascinating, haunting writing appropriate to the trauma. For reasons I will make apparent momentarily, I should point out that all ellipses are Pynchon’s:

Lakes of light, portages of darkness. The concrete facing of the tunnel has given way to whitewash over chunky fault-surfaces, phony-looking as the inside of an amusement-park cave. Entrances to cross-tunnels slip by like tuned pipes with an airflow at their mouths . . . once upon a time lathes did screech, playful machinists had shootouts with little brass squirt cans of cutting oil . . . knuckles were bloodied against grinding wheels, pores, creases, and quicks were stabbed by the fine splinters of steel . . . tubeworks of alloy and glass contracted tinkling in air that felt like the dead of winter, and amber light raced in phalanx among the small neon bulbs. Once, all this did happen. It is hard down here in the Mittelwerke to

live in the present for very long. The nostalgia you feel is not your own, but it's potent. All the objects have grown still, drowned, enfeebled with evening, terminal evening. Tough skins of oxides, some only a molecule thick, shroud the metal surfaces, fade out human reflection. Straw-colored drive belts of polyvinyl alcohol sag and release their last traces of industrial odor. Though found adrift and haunted, full of signs of recent human tenancy, this is not the legendary ship *Marie-Celeste*—it isn't bounded so neatly, these tracks underfoot run away fore and aft into all stilled Europe, and our flesh doesn't sweat and pimple here for the domestic mysteries, the attic horror of What Might Have Happened so much for our knowledge of what likely *did happen* . . . it was always easy, in open and lonely places, to be visited by Panic wilderness fear, but these are the urban fantods here, that come to get you when you are lost or isolate inside the way time is passing, when there is no more History, no time-traveling capsule to find your way back to, only the lateness and the absence that fill a great railway shed after the capital has been evacuated, and the goat-god's city cousins wait for you at the edges of light, playing the tunes they always played, but more audible now, because everything else has gone away or fallen silent . . . barn-swallow souls, fashioned out of brown twilight, rise toward the white ceilings . . . they are unique to the Zone, they answer to the new Uncertainty. Ghosts used to be either likenesses of the dead or wraiths of the living. But here in the Zone categories have been blurred badly. The status of the name you miss, love, and search for has now grown ambiguous and remote, but this is even more than the bureaucracy of mass absence—some still live, some have died, but many, many have forgotten which they are. Their likenesses will not serve. Down here are only wrapping left in the light, in the dark: images of the Uncertainty. . . . (GR 303)

Pynchon uses historical detail to point the reader to Dora as a place where a traumatic event most certainly took place: “all this did happen,” he informs us plainly. The language emphasizes the “pastness” of the event and reminds the reader of his and the narrative's position as a witness to the aftermath, to the event's belatedness. Moving from the playful to the painful, the narrative voice insists that “lathes *did* screech,” that “playful machinists *had* shootouts with brass squirt cans,” and that “knuckles *were* bloodied” and quicks *were*, to be certain, “stabbed by the fine splinters of steel.” Pynchon gleans these details from research of the Mittelwerke and Dora that is no less meticulous than that into the other historical material of the novel. Among his many sources,

Pynchon draws on survivor testimony; German documents; biographical accounts of the camp's architects and engineers; American military intelligence; transcriptions of trial testimony from prosecutions of Dora guards and officers; and a number of respected histories of the camp by scholars such as James McGovern.²⁰ References to the material objects left behind (the drive belts and metal surfaces of lathes, for example) are derived from photographs of the site. The effect is a remarkably vivid fictive recreation of the actual Dora, a descriptive effect we have seen in Pynchon's renderings of London and other sites.

But unlike the haunted ship of the *Marie Celeste*, Dora is not "bounded so neatly." What these historical facts conjure is not a knowledge of what happened, but rather a ghostly, speculative (so provisional) sense of "what likely *did happen*." To what extent the past is in fact the past is further compromised, for though all evidence is of an event that took place, much of that event continues to transpire in and through the material evidence: drive belts continue to give off their final traces of industrial odor and metal surfaces are just beginning to acquire an oxide shroud of rust. The material objects littering the site are not objects of mourning, but rather melancholic, stranded objects, not dead but in the process of dying. As such, they resist receding fully into the past and instead haunt with the same fascinating force as the "barn-swallow souls" lofting toward the ceiling.

I would argue that Pynchon's use of the ellipsis in this passage, like the *hysteron proteron* of the screaming, allows the writing to "bear the imprint" of the trauma, thereby unsettling the reader in a fascinating engagement with what exceeds the descriptive and representational capacities of the passage. It is a trauma-writing that is not, like the

history it invokes and like the understanding it attempts to create, “bounded so neatly.” Like the use of ellipses to suggest the traumatic lapses in Pudding’s attempt to bear witness to his own past, the ellipses here fragment Pynchon’s description of Dora, drawing our attention to what is there without being there, what of the past continues on into the future. A saying within what is said.

First, the ellipses slow the reader down as he moves through the passage, forcing a recurrent pause or interruption in the his forward progress. Second, their recurrence renders Pynchon’s descriptive language languid, seeming to strip it of its referential and representational force. The ellipses (which is of course a grammatical figure of what is left out, of what is present by virtue of its absence) compromise the coherence of the passage, destabilizing the writing and calling into question the passage’s integrity as a unit of meaning. They have the effect of nullifying the writing’s ability to lay claim to what it describes or represents, thereby holding in abeyance the reader’s capacity to do the same. The ellipses are, like the barn-swallow souls or the stranded material objects, fascinating ghostly figures that haunt Pynchon’s writing.

The ellipses refer to that history which cannot be contained in or as the writing but that is, again through the ellipses, nonetheless present. The way Pynchon draws our attention to that history is strategic, for the ellipses take place at critical points in the Dora passage. Early in the passage, the ellipses suspend the reading just after references to what happened “once upon a time” (a phrase that reinforces our sense of being told belatedly a fable of the past): the reading pauses after references to screeching lathes and playful machinists, to bloodied knuckles and stabbed quicks of nails. Though the references are to what happened, the sentences abandon any use of the period, a mark of

punctuation that would indicate conclusion and closure or that would enclose “what happened” within a sealed unit of meaning. Instead, the ellipses suspend the reading and hold the sentences open, the effect of which is an opening of the past onto the present, a rupturing of the present by what has not yet passed. This is reinforced by the following ellipse, which occurs after the phrase “what likely *did happen*.” The italics in Pynchon’s phrasing emphasize both the certainty of the past events but also their “pastness,” while the use of “likely” reminds the reader that what we know of what did happen is only ever conditional, speculative. Again, however, what *did happen* is not punctuated by the mark of closure and consigned to the past, but is instead opened onto the present through the use of the ellipsis. It is hard “down here,” the reader is told, “to live in the present for very long.”

There is in Dora no “History, no time-traveling capsule to find your way back to.” The parabolic path back to the catastrophic past fails for here there is no past, no grand-narrative of History, no sealed capsule containing a time to travel back to. Instead there is the “lateness and absence” of evacuated and liquidated spaces and “barn-swallow souls” that rise toward the “white ceilings.”²¹ These ghosts are, Pynchon writes, unique to the traumatic temporality of the Zone, and his use of another ellipsis draws our attention to these ghosts as they rise upward and away from our position as witnesses. We might say that Pynchon’s use of the ellipsis here allows the reader to follow the movement of the ghost as it traverses past and present and migrates toward the future. Like the screaming with which the novel began, these ghosts are “images of the Uncertainty,” elliptically pointing toward a future in which we might have discovered a way of hearing and speaking to them.

Pynchon's description of Dora is the site of a witnessing of the traumatic event that is, I would argue, at the core of *Gravity's Rainbow*. Pynchon is not content, however, to have the reader linger at the site of Dora, lest we allow our observations to settle into an understanding. Having brought us "here" to what is the literal and figurative "center" of the novel, Pynchon's use of ellipses in the passage directs us elsewhere, to what cannot be contained in the description of the traumatic site, to what cannot be represented in the novel's belated depiction of the disaster, to what cannot be narrativized in a reconstruction of facts and details about the past. They point to a history that runs, fore and aft, "into all of stilled Europe" and beyond, into the present and toward the future. The ellipses allow the writing to "bear the imprint" of the trauma, registering the belatedness that consistently interrupts the narrative's forward movement and its capacity to describe the site of the trauma. In doing so, the ellipses paradoxically refer, within the narrative space, to what cannot be contained by the narrative.

The same elliptical economy of reference is at work in a later scene, as Slothrop wanders through the empty village of Peenemünde still haunted by his experience at Dora. He comes across a scrap of newspaper from August 7, 1945 reading "MB DRO/ROSHI." The headline, were the newspaper intact, would read "ATOM BOMB DROPPED ON HIROSHIMA," but Slothrop fails to decode the cryptic reference. For the reader, the headline points away from Peenemunde and toward a traumatic event that Pynchon refuses to represent but is compelled to reference. The missing letters form a sort of ellipsis within the statement, rendering it initially unintelligible but nonetheless full of meaning and significance. The paper's date of August 7 reminds us of the belatedness with which Slothrop and the reader learn of the event, and while the past

tense phrasing points back to the past in which the bombing happened, the paper's "return" as an elliptically coded sign gestures toward a future in which we will have interpreted the headline and its significance.

A final point regarding the ellipsis is necessary here. By suggesting that the ellipsis point us away from a "here" and toward a "there," they imply the instability of any definitive end point to historical understanding or to a narrative of history. Having arrived at the point promised by the parabolic arc, the reader is always directed to another point that is not plotted on the trajectory we have determined to follow. Unlike the parabola, which means, we recall, a throwing alongside, nearby, or into the past, the etymological origin of ellipse is in a word that means "a falling short:" a figure of incompleteness, of the inconclusive. The ellipse is one more reminder that we have always arrived one moment too late, bound by our position not only to what happened in the past, but to what belatedly repeats, promises to come again. The persistent unsettling of the reader's position entangles him in the traumatic history of another place, another time, another individual by opening up historical understanding to an experience that he cannot claim, but by which he is obligated.

Conclusion

Pynchon's novel concludes (though this will prove to be an inapposite term) with one final reminder of the parabolic arc of the rocket, of the perverse rationalization of time, of the arrogating trajectory of traditional historical "understandings." The reader has not seen Slothrop since the post-Dora scattering of his parts across Europe and

America. Parts of him appear, here and there, as for example when he may or may not be seen in the background of a band photograph included in the liner notes for an album by “The Fool.” A clumsily assembled “Counterforce” has gathered in his memory to compose a new mythology around the figures of Slothrop and the rocket, and with the exception of Slothrop the plot lines of most major characters reach resolution.

The final episode of the novel is arranged by heading into a series of short mini-episodes. In the penultimate mini-episode titled “ASCENT,” Pynchon describes the launch of Rocket 00001, the fuselage of which carries within it Nazi Rocket commandant Blicero’s enslaved boy Gottfried (“God speed”), whose experience inside the ascending rocket we follow: “Moving now toward the kind of light where at last the apple is apple-colored. The knife cuts through the apple like a knife cutting an apple. Everything is where it is, no clearer than usual, but certainly more present” (GR 758). All is in place, a clarity and precision achieved only by the law and logic of the rocket, whose trajectory depends on the perfect balancing of parts. A harmony of movement toward an ineluctable end, a reminder of the narrative promise of the parabola and the divine promise of God’s Rainbow.

The final section of the final episode is titled, fittingly, “DESCENT,” though we are no longer following the experiences of Gottfried, whose sacrifice to the rocket was completed when the novel achieved *Brennschluss* and began its downward trajectory. As the rocket enters into the descending phase of its parabolic arc, the narrative focus moves out to reveal that the ascent and descent of the rocket are the final moments of a film on the screen at the Orpheus Theatre in Los Angeles. We realize that as readers, we are spectators who have been watching a film called *Gravity’s Rainbow*, at the end of which

a final rocket is launched from Luneberg Heath and on its way not to London or Paris, but (having erupted out of the cinematic/literary structure of the novel without ever leaving that structure) to the Orpheus Theatre, where we are now assembled watching the film and awaiting, finally, its (the film's, the novel's, our historical investigation into the past's) conclusion. The final rocket thus promises that the disastrous experience and the apocalyptic revelation for which we have been waiting, toward which we have been reading, is imminent. A conclusion, then, in the fullest sense of the term: the logical result derived from a set of premises, the outcome of a set of causal factors, a judgment made after careful deliberation, and a closure ("conclusion" from *conclus*, closed). The key point on the parabolic arc.

Pynchon of course resists an ending to his narrative that would fall into the parabolic trap of rationalized, linear temporality, for the rocket that threatens is both within the fictional/historical space of the novel and in the present, in the moment of our reading of the novel. What's more, this final rocket is named Rocket 00001, the first rocket, which for the reader is that rocket the screaming of which we hear at the beginning of the novel only after it has made impact. We are thus reinserted into Pynchon's narrative, and thus into the historical time of its plot, having once again missed the event for which we are waiting, of which we have been warned. And so, following the last line of *Gravity's Rainbow*, one more time, "now everybody—:" "A screaming comes across the sky. It has happened before, but there is nothing to compare it to now. It is too late."

This final line of the novel concludes with another grammatical figure of incompleteness and the inconclusive, the dash. Like the ellipsis, Pynchon's use of the dash

as the novel's final mark of punctuation suggests not an end, but an opening onto what continues, for one of the dashes most prominent uses is in the designation of a date that has not yet arrived. As in the dates of the trauma of World War Two and the Holocaust, which may read something like, "1938--." Pynchon's novel refuses resolution at its end, suggesting that the events it depicts, though decidedly of the past, are nonetheless ongoing.

Another way to read the concluding use of the dash is as a directional, pointing the reader back (and forward) to the beginning of the novel, where we hear once again the screaming of the rocket, though now it is also the one that threatens us at the novel's end but that we have, somehow, missed. The concluding dash displaces a period that would mark the key point of the parabolic arc and instead opens the novel's narrative shape into a circle or, perhaps more accurately, an ellipse, bringing us back to the beginning, which we of course know to be after the end. Pynchon's narrative insists, at its end, that we begin again, for "in the darkening and awful expanse of screen" on which we watch the past, "something has kept on, a film we have not learned to see . . ." (*GR* 760). Again, the line's ellipsis occurs at a crucial moment, opening up our reading of the novel to another, necessary reading, for the past is as of yet a film—a narrative, always belated, always arriving after the end but within which something keeps on—we have not yet learned to see. The deferred, non-ending of Pynchon's novel reinforces our sense of the secondary, belated context in which we attempt to attribute meaning to traumatic events. At the end of *Gravity's Rainbow*, the reader departs (once again) in the effort to compose a narrative that would, "little by little," borrowing from Blanchot, allow us to speak of the

events in a translating language that is never commensurate to them, but is ethically in memory of them.

NOTES

¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993).

² Thomas Pynchon. *Gravity's Rainbow*. (New York: Penguin, 1995). Hereafter cited as *GR*. All references follow the pagination of the original 1973 edition of the novel.

³ The reference to rampaging prisoners is a historically accurate one. According to historian James McGovern, former prisoners returned to the camp and rocket works to recover, among other items, light bulbs. See McGovern, 155-160.

⁴ Lyotard argues that to learn any lesson from Auschwitz is a perverse enterprise and claim. I would agree with Lyotard to the extent that to claim lessons derived from the Shoah risk overwriting the suffering of individuals into narratives of redemption and edification. At the same time, however, we must adhere to the imperative Adorno insists is ours "after Auschwitz:" to arrange our thinking so that nothing like Auschwitz can ever happen again. To my thinking, the question is not whether there should be lessons learned from the past, but rather what sort of lessons we should learn and to what end should we put them. See Jean-Francois Lyotard. *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988).

⁵ The term "commensurate" suggests having the same measure or being equivalent to. I would argue that the compensatory narratives we critiqued in chapter two make claims for commensurability, elevating the aesthetic capacity of art to the same standing as other forms of testimony and eyewitnessing. The risk here is in suggesting that a narrative *about* the past can substitute for other forms of evidence about that past,

at once flattening distinctions between various forms of historiographic inquiry and representation *and* elevating art to a standing it perhaps should not achieve. At the same time, to argue that a narrative about the past can be commensurate with it forecloses on conversations about what art may do in a generative or ethical way to bring us into an encounter with other forms of history.

⁶ Daniel Schwarz. *Imagining the Holocaust*. (New York: St. Martin's P, 1999): 03.

⁷ As Giorgio Agamben and others have argued, and as I demonstrated in chapter one, to refer to the events as “the Holocaust” is to give them a particular narrative form with a determined interpretative shape. To refer to the events as “the Shoah” is to give the events another shape, another end. My point here is that even the act of naming the events of the past requires a narrowing of the parameters by which we describe and understand them. For more on the implications of the term “Holocaust,” see Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans; Daniel Heller Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

⁸ Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. (New York: Routledge, 1992): 212.

⁹ Steven Weisenburger. *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*. (Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988).

¹⁰ Weisenburger, 09.

¹¹ Berel Lang. *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2003).

¹² I am indebted to Florin Simion for lending his mathematical expertise to my understanding of the parabola.

¹³ Martin Amis's *Times Arrow* is an attempt to construct a backwards-running narrative that begins in the present of Tod Friendly's death, which is to say his "birth," as the narrative moves backwards from the moment just after he is declared dead, and "ends" with Tod Friendly's, whose name we now know is Unverdorben, life as a German doctor just before he is assigned to Auschwitz. Most critics have missed the point of Amis's backwards narrative, citing it as historically irresponsible and eliding the possibility of a clear ethical position in relation to the Holocaust, when in fact Amis's point is to demonstrate the historical irresponsibility of claiming such a clear ethical position. He does this by taking what would be otherwise an unexceptional narrative and turning it backwards to double and transcode the terms with which we typically speak the Holocaust. The novel's success is the way in which it forces readers into an awkward temporal situation--at a certain point we come to know how the novel will "end," but our desire for origins and causal explanation has been contaminated by a sustained ironizing of the latter's mechanisms. There is something of Benjamin's reading of Klee's *Angelus Novuus* in the structural innovation of Amis's novel and its relation to time "after Auschwitz." Amis's aim in the novel is, like Pynchon, to reveal the perverse rationalization of time in parabolic and linear notions of history. See Amis, *Time's Arrow* (New York: Harmony Books, 1991).

¹⁴ One of the crucial claims of theoretical and philosophical discussions of the Nazi genocide is its fundamental relation to Western modes of knowing and relating. Lyotard, Derrida, and others have linked the camps to a elementally perverse logic of

use-value that , in a hyperbolic and devastating way, realized itself in the concentration camps. Pynchon's point is similar, though he focuses more on the thorough corporatization of all elements of life, what Marcuse might call the "administered world." Pynchon emphasizes that many Nazi criminals were allowed their freedom because their knowledge of the rockets, of medical experimentations, of agricultural innovations were useful to Western powers. The fact that Werner Von Braun became an American citizen and head of NASA is but one illustration of how the logic that led to the camps continued in a muted form after their liberation.

¹⁵ For an illustration of the way narratives about the past commit acts of erasure in the Nazi occupation of France, see Henri Rousso, *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*. (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991). For an excellent analysis of this erasure at work in Civil War commemorative culture, see Kirk Savage, "The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument." John R. Gillis, ed. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994): 127-149.

¹⁶ Michael Berubé argues that Pynchon's novel censures a "pornographic" narrativizing of the past. By pornography, Berubé means a narrative that satisfies fantasmatic desires for a return to the maternal integrity of the wound. Berubé's "pornography" bears a resemblance to Eric Santner's notions of narrative fetishism that we have discussed elsewhere in the dissertation. The parabolic containment of the past could be said to be pornographic inasmuch as it provides the fantasmatic illusion of a totalized narrative in which all aspects of the past satisfy the desires of those in the

present who seek a certain identificatory pleasure in historical narrative. See Berubé, *Marginal Forces, Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992).

¹⁷ Cathy Caruth. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996).

¹⁸ Though not writing about narrative representation of trauma, Robert Scholes's formulation of narrative "fabulators" offers us a way of further framing the present conversation. Scholes's *Fabulation and Metafiction* is concerned with the ethical relationship between emergent postmodern forms of fiction and historical reality. Scholes recuperates the term "fabulator," which suggests both the "fabulist" as a teller of make-belief tales and "fabulous" as beyond belief, to characterize anti-realist novelists whose work evinces a certain joy and play in narrative innovation but nonetheless insists on an "ethically controlled" fantastic approach to reality. Fabulators maintain a didactic desire to convey a moral or ethical lesson that, despite their sometimes radical breaks from realistic representational modes, succeeds in the epistemological vocation typically associated with realism. The fabulative impulse can be seen in the fiction of what Scholes calls "comedy of extremity," in which suffering is confronted with a mode of black humor that humanizes the inhuman (Vonnegut is his object of study here).

More importantly, the fabulative (which traverses what Linda Hutcheon will later theorize as "historiographic metafiction") functions as a means of fabulating history itself, revealing its fictive status. Scholes argues that,

Fabulation is not simply something that happens after events, distorting the truth of the historical record. Fabulation is there before, making and shaping not merely the record but also the events themselves. So how can any historian hope to record events that are themselves 'preposterous' or interpret a trial which is a drama based on fabulation? (208)

The novel as fabulative fiction stands to reveal the ways history—both product and process, the objective engagement with the facts of the historical event that, accumulated and ordered, allow us to affirm the truth of “that which happened”—is itself first a fiction that is retroactively “hardened” into historical “truth” (the “application” implied by the parabola). Fabulative fiction is the most ethical mode of historical inquiry, Scholes suggests, because it acknowledges that it is the lie positioned as the condition of possibility of truth. Their metafictional manipulations—the tendency of the authors of fabulative metafiction to burst through the narrative veil and “set back the narrative clock” or demand a certain attention of the reader (as when someone by the name of Thomas Pynchon interrupts *Gravity’s Rainbow’s* narrative to suggest that Ishmael Reed is better qualified than himself to say something about race in narrative fiction)—instructs the reader in a seeking of truth beyond the (fiction) of historical fact and documentary. See Scholes, *Fabulation and Metafiction*. (Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1979).

¹⁹ Of the 70,000 prisoners kept in Dora, approximately 20,000 perished. Most of their deaths were from exhaustion, while a number were hanged or shot. Dora contained no gas chamber, so prisoners who were too weak to work were sent to other camps for extermination. By drawing our attention to Dora rather than Auschwitz, Pynchon wants to resist the tendency to metonymize Auschwitz as illustrative of the entire concentrationary universe and, at the same time, highlight an aspect of the Holocaust that is lesser known because of that tendency. By focusing on a camp designated for the production of the rocket, Pynchon offers Dora as evidence of the corporate structuration of the genocide and the broader Western tendency mentioned above.

²⁰ Pynchon derives much of his historical detail on Dora from James McGovern's study of the Allied efforts against the V-1 and V-2 campaigns and the subsequent efforts to acquire information on the rockets. See McGovern, *Crossbow and Overcast*. (New York: Morrow, 1964).

²¹ I take the term "evacuated spaces" from Gilles Deleuze, who argues in *Cinema 2* that film after the Second World War and the Holocaust shifts its focus to a cinema of "evacuated spaces" that maintain a unique affective force. See Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989).

CONCLUSION

TOWARD AN ETHICS OF FASCINATION

For me, a good portrait conveys a point where attraction and alienation meet.

(Marlene Dumas¹)

--Because the only fitting approach to morals cannot but be abrupt. Is the general name "ethics" in keeping with the impossible relation that is revealed in the revelation of *autrui*, which, far from being a particular case, precedes any relation of knowledge? [. . . .] What to my mind remains decisive is that the manner by which *autrui* presents himself in the experience of the visage, this presence of the outside itself (of exteriority, says Lévinas), is not the presence of a form appearing in light or its simple retreat in the absence of light; neither veiled nor unveiled.

Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*²)

Introduction

At the conclusion of part two of *L'espace littéraire*, Maurice Blanchot describes an experience of viewing the sculptures of Alberto Giacometti.³ Blanchot writes that there is a crucial "point" from which the viewer experiences the sculptures as no longer subject to "*fluctuations de l'apparence*" or the "*mouvement de la perspective*." By

"fluctuations" and "movements," Blanchot means the various critical and interpretative modes the viewer might employ to animate the sculptures and invest them with value and meaning. More importantly, he also means the categories from which such critical and interpretative modes are derived: history, subjective experience, and even time. Refusing the reduction of such fluctuation and movement, the sculptures no longer belong to the viewer in any sense. Instead they are "withdrawn from reduction, irreducible, and, in space, masters of space through their power to substitute for space the unmalleable, lifeless profundity of the imaginary" (*EL* 52; *SL* 48). In their withdrawal, they "provoke" the viewer into a "contact" with this lifeless profundity of the imaginary.

There is something of what Blanchot describes here in my recent experience of an exhibition of paintings by Marlene Dumas.⁴ Dumas, a painter born to a Dutch family in South Africa and now living in Amsterdam, has established a reputation in Europe as a starkly literalist painter of traumatized individuals. Her technical proficiency—expressive lines and lively brushwork combined with a masterful manipulation of oils, which she dilutes to the quality of a wash or watercolor and applies in thin layers or sometimes a single layer to often unprimed canvases—is in service to the depiction of the way catastrophe registers in the faces and bodies of its victims. In each of four visits to the exhibition, I arrived armed with an interpretative "equipment" that might help arrest and understand what I would inevitably experience as an overwhelming and estranging alterity. Reducing the work to voyeuristic exploitation, situationally-dependent political art, the logical extension of the painterly examinations of Lucien Freud and Francis Bacon, or an ironic technical intervention in the Dutch tradition of the pictorial depiction

of light, in each instance the application of a frame of reference was not enough to hold the strangeness I was bound to encounter.

Working almost exclusively from photographic images drawn from newspapers and other media sources, including images taken from the concentration camps of the Nazi genocide, Dumas's work functions according to an inversion of Platonic law, drawing closer to a truth of material reality the further it moves along the representational chain away from the actual subject on which it is based. In its movement from the subject to the photograph to the painting, the work begins to body forth something for which there are only failed words and vain attempts at description. In one particular work called "The Painter," a girl of perhaps six stares directly at the viewer. Her countenance is at first stern, as though she expects to be admonished for whatever impish deed she has just committed, at second glance playful, as though I am implicated in the impish deed. Evidence for the deed, for whatever she or we have done, is found on her two hands, which are covered in what could be paint or just as easily blood, and the her distended belly, which is of a darkening bruise-blue. Whether her belly is covered in this color by paint or her skin is slowly taking on a morbid hue is left to the viewer to decide, just as the viewer must decide if the child's hands are dripping paint or blood, just as the viewer must finally decide if the child is alive or dead.

It is not, however, this potent ambiguity by which my gaze is taken in and arrested. It is, rather, the way this ambiguity (which is, after all, the vacillation of an interpretative play) recedes so that what appears in the child's face is an overwhelming strangeness. This strangeness is like that described by Husserl in his list of phenomenological "games," where he contends that what appears in the face of the most

familiar if you gaze at it long enough, or in the deep structure of the name if you repeat it often enough, is the “thoroughly strange,” the ruination of the familiar. Or, to draw closer to the subject of this writing, what emerges in the Dumas work is that irreducible alterity that Emmanuel Lévinas contends is the ethical “object” of the face-to-face encounter with another: the strangeness for which I can make no claim, but by which I am called to justice.

Blanchot’s example of the Giacometti sculpture and mine of the Dumas painting illustrate what Blanchot argues is at the ethical impulse at the heart of the “work” of art, which he describes as a revelation of the structural “worklessness” (*désœuvrement*) that conditions and limits any attempt at representation or any attempt at articulating an interpretation. To experience this worklessness is to discover “*le point central*” where a language of description and comprehension, of meaning and sense, undergoes “*un renversement radical*”

Where nothing reveals itself, where, at the heart of dissimulation, speaking is still but the shadow of speech, a language which is still only its image, an imaginary language and a language of the imaginary, the one nobody speaks, the murmur of the incessant and interminable which one has to *silence* if one wants, at last, to be heard. (*EL 52; SL 48*)

This “radical reversal” wherein language withdraws into its own image and nothing reveals itself, Blanchot goes on to say, “puts us at the vanishing point ourselves” for it is the point where “here coincides with nowhere” (*EL 52; SL 48*). Described in this manner, the work of art for Blanchot appears to be not only a place or space (*le point central*), but is equally an event, an experience that happens to or befalls the spectator or reader (*un renversement radical*). Such an event is according to Blanchot catastrophic, a turning over by which language becomes its own image, the “I” that reads or writes or views is

replaced by an anonymous "he," and the reader, writer, or viewer is therein made to see and hear what language and representation must negate in order to communicate and bear meaning, represent or signify: the nothingness that reveals itself, the interminable and incessant "murmur" of what comes before and of what remains.

Like the murmuring of the ghosts of Dora in *Gravity's Rainbow*, the murmuring Blanchot describes here fascinates. In the last two chapters I argued that the object of our fascination is perhaps not so much an "object" in that it cannot be delimited, cannot be named or claimed as such, but all the more so demands our obligation precisely for being without name, without delimitation, unclaimed. With this provisional understanding in place, I would like to conclude this dissertation by reading closely the work of a thinker whose body of writing has cleared the space in which it has developed. Given this indebtedness, and as someone whose graduate study of literature has taken place at the intersection of Nazism and the Holocaust with a specific 20th century tradition in literary theory and with trends in post-war narrative representation, it behooves me to read closely Maurice Blanchot's writing on fascination.

"Fascination" recurs consistently in Blanchot's later work, particularly 1980's *The Writing of the Disaster* and 1983's *Après Coup*, both of which are grave meditations on the Shoah and the challenges it issues to narrative (be it historical, philosophical, or literary) representation. In those works, Blanchot offers explicitly fascination as the proper orientation toward an alterity that emerges from the Second World War and the Shoah the attendance to which, from then on, will be the categorical imperative of any ethical framework. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, for example, Blanchot enjoins the reader to be fascinated by the figure of the *Musselmänner*, an understanding of which

Blanchot derives from his readings of Primo Levi and Robert Antelme. In the title essay from *Après Coup*, Blanchot suggests that the only ethical mode of reading “after Auschwitz” is a fascinated mode that refuses the completion of any story.

The term first takes its place in Blanchot’s work, however, in a 1953 collection of essays called *The Space of Literature (L'espace littéraire)*. There we find the discussion of Giacometti with which this conclusion began but no mention of the Shoah or its attendant historical occurrences like the Occupation, Vichy, and the deportations. It is to that text that I would nevertheless like to draw our attention, for it is there that Blanchot begins to develop the thinking of fascination that will inform his later, more direct, engagements with the Shoah. My reading of Blanchot here supposes that the fascination he describes, unique to the work of art in general and literary art in particular, establishes the ethical patterns by which his later work takes shape. To understand what Blanchot means when he writes in *The Writing of the Disaster* that the ethical imperative after the Shoah is to “keep watch over absent meaning,” we must understand what he means when in *The Space of Literature* he characterizes fascination as a “passion for the image.”

By way of a thesis, then, allow me to propose that one way to understand what it is to “keep watch over absent meaning” is fascination. In what follows I read closely Blanchot’s *The Space of Literature* along with a key early essay, “Literature and the Right To Death.” To gain purchase on a fuller understanding of Blanchot’s writing, I will attend to his theoretical and philosophical sources and interlocutors where necessary. My intention here is not to critique Blanchot, though there is certainly room and cause for a critique of his work, nor is it to exploit Blanchot in order to prove an original thetic claim for his writing. My intention is the more modest one of following Blanchot’s thinking in

order to arrive at a better understanding of his use of fascination and a better sense of what is at stake in such an understanding.

Following the format of previous chapters, the conclusion is divided into sections. In a departure from the earlier writing, though, I have attempted to compose my reading in a more interlocutory fashion that is meant to highlight the push and pull, the struggle, and indeed the fascination that attends any reading of Blanchot's work. While I am not attempting to mimic Blanchot's fragmentary work in *The Step Not Beyond*, *The Writing of the Disaster*, or parts of *The Infinite Conversation*, I have tried to honor the "fragmentary imperative" Blanchot issues, arranging the writing in a series of exchanges, questions, and responses, moving in and out of Blanchot's texts as their own interlocutory dynamic and my own intervention dictate. It is my hope that this demonstrates the ongoing, difficult process of reading a thinker whose work provides the intellectual framework within which I have—within which I will have—struggled to find my own scholarly voice. That this format takes its place as the conclusion of a dissertation, which is of course a demonstration of one's scholarly credibility, is not intended to undermine the work in the previous chapters or to call into question the scholarly credibility of the project as a whole, but is instead meant to emphasize the challenges of arriving at points of closure or resolution in any writing on fascination, the trauma of the Shoah, and its narrative representation.

Work

In *The Space of Literature's* opening essay titled "The Essential Solitude," Blanchot distinguishes between a literature of the book and a literature of the work. What

structures this distinction is a crucial difference in temporal modality and destiny. The defining feature of the book, Blanchot argues, is the fact that it may be finished. As a completed object, the book may belong to the writer or reader. In this regard the book belongs to a proper place and time and has its proper place *in* time, whether that time is understood as the context of its publication or the time in which it is read. This temporal determination allows the book to become "an enduring reality, containing many realities which it acquires from the movement of time or which are perceived variously according to culture's forms and the exigencies of history" (*EL* 274; *SL* 206). One could read the book as a moment in the progression of a literary tradition, as representative of an epoch in literary history, or as a document of a specific moment or event in the past. As time progresses, the book gains or loses value, depending upon its capacity to acquire these manifold realities, that is, its manifold interpretative opportunities.

As for the work, Blanchot specifies that the it's "care" is for what belongs to no criteria and no one, for the work is "neither finished nor unfinished." Where the book may serve as an artifact and transmit knowledge of a specific historico-cultural moment, the work is instead preoccupied with what Blanchot calls *l'interminable, l'incessant* (*EL* 20; *SL* 26). If the book, in its completion, will have said something about historical time and one's place in it, Blanchot writes of the work that

What it says is exclusively this: that it is—and nothing more. Beyond that it is nothing. Whoever wants to make it express more finds nothing, finds that it expresses nothing. He whose life depends upon the work, either because he is a writer or because he is a reader, belongs to the solitude of that which expresses nothing except the word *being*, the word which language shelters by hiding it, or causes to appear when language itself disappears into the silent void of the work. (*EL* 14-15; *SL* 22)

The work is preoccupied with the *being* that must be negated in order for language to communicate, for history to proceed, for time to function as time and for subjects to define themselves according to time. The work belongs to what language can bear only by sheltering and hiding. Because it is neither finished nor unfinished but only is, the work's criteria are not time and history.

This is not to suggest, however, that the work's orientation is a regressive one toward the past. The work is concerned with what comes before and falls after the temporal structure of past-present-future. In terms that situate the work in sharp contrast to the historically determined place of the book and that resonate with our earlier discussion of trauma, Blanchot writes that the work's concern is with the "irremediable character of what has no present, of what is not ever there as having been there," and which says "it never happened, never for a first time, and yet it starts over again, again, infinitely. It is without end, without beginning, without future" (*EL* 26; *SL* 30).

If the book can only be approached through and in time as what belongs to it, the work is inclined toward what is outside of history and time. This distinction between the book and the work corresponds to one made earlier in Blanchot's "Literature and the Right to Death" (1949).⁵ In that essay, Blanchot demonstrates that literature is divided into "two slopes." The two slopes again refer to a difference in temporal modality, though in "Literature and the Right to Death" the distinction evinces a more explicit engagement with literature's place in and relation to the Hegelian historical dialectic. Here Blanchot reads Hegel in an attempt to argue for a literature that cannot be conceived of in exclusively historical terms and consequently sublated into the historical dialectic.⁶

The book is essentially Hegelian, and the slope on which the book does its work is bound to the historical dialectic. Blanchot writes that on this first slope

The book, the written thing, enters the world and carries out its work of transformation and negation. It, too, is the future of many other things, and not only books: by the projects which it can give rise to, by the undertakings it encourages, by the totality of the world of which it is a modified reflection, it is an infinite source of new realities, and because of these new realities existence will be something it was not before. (*SHBR* 372)

Carrying out the work of transformation and negation, the book serves the becoming of Absolute Idea and the realization of the end of history at which nothing remains to be negated.⁷ The book (as a written and therefore finished thing), positively effects what it encounters: the book encourages undertakings and motivates action; it yields new realities; it makes possible its own future and the future of many other things. In its capacity to serve these ends, the book is “transformative” in the most generative sense: it transforms reality into something it was not before. Perhaps it is fair to say that a book about what LaCapra calls the historical trauma of the Shoah has the potential to transform the political, ideological, and cultural realities that come after the traumatic events.

As subject to this transformation, however, the book's destiny is to disappear into its service to the dialectic and the many realities it makes possible, to be, that is, sublated. Hence the book's ability to be finished, to reach completion. If the book is bound to the historical dialectic, the second slope, the slope of the work, falls toward the dialectic's hither side, toward a negativity beyond the dialectic's powers of negation. Bataille might call this negativity a *negativité sans emploi*—a negativity beyond sublation, beyond the use- and value-measurements of the historical dialectic.⁸ This non-negatable negativity is what Blanchot calls in *The Space of Literature* the interminable and incessant murmur of

being. In "Literature and the Right to Death" he describes this being as an anonymous, neutral "existence deprived of a world," the "process through which whatever ceases to be continues to be, whatever is forgotten is always answerable to memory, whatever dies encounters only the impossibility of dying" (*SHBR* 389).

The slope of the work draws toward what cannot be completed (is neither finished nor unfinished), even by the supposed completion of death. Hegel's dialectical thought holds that death and its mastery—the fully self-reflective subject's complete understanding of death—is the ultimate possibility of the world. Contra both Hegel and Heidegger (who will, staying too close to Hegel for Blanchot's comfort, call death the possibility of impossibility), Blanchot argues that the work's orientation is toward what is outside even the end that is death, which he characterizes as the impossibility of possibility. Death is only possible, even as the possibility of impossibility, in the world of historical time. In the anonymous existence deprived of this world, death as possibility disappears into the impossibility of dying.⁹

In *The Space of Literature* Blanchot describes this radical exteriority to which the work is drawn as the "time of time's absence" and "the other of all worlds" (later, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, he will call it the "night of all nights," a phrase echoed in *Gravity's Rainbow* when Pynchon writes that the rocket rips open the sky to reveal the "other of all nights"). Blanchot notes the work belongs to an "absolute milieu" that exists "when there is no more world, when there is no world yet" (*EL* 31; *SL* 33). Thus the work of literature is oriented toward what opens and conditions the Hegelian dialectic but always exceeds it at its putative end. At the end of the dialectic, we might say, the work

demands a return to the beginning, for the work is concerned with what takes place before there is a world and continues to take place after the world reaches completion.

Now, it follows from these distinctions that Blanchot offers two possibilities for approaching literature, and we could perhaps map these onto distinctions we have worked with in earlier chapters: on the one hand, literature understood as the book serves the processes of the historical dialectic, transmits knowledge, makes meaning, and reflects the totality of the world of which it is a part. As that which serves history, literature must be approached as belonging to history, and therefore read according to "culture's forms and historical exigencies." This corresponds with LaCapra's historical trauma. On the other hand, the work of literature privileges what takes place outside of the historical dialectic, in the time of time's absence before the world and after its end. The *work* attempts an approach to what survives the end of history and completion of the world as an ineliminable surplus, in excess of dialectical sublation. This is what LaCapra calls the structural trauma. Gerald Bruns understand the distinction this way: the Book is Hegelian; the Work is Mallarméan.¹⁰ We could add to the latter category those writers Blanchot encounters in *The Space of Literature*: Sade, Kafka, Rilke, and Holderlin. Thus two possibilities for literature. But how is it that literature can claim these two possibilities for itself?

We can say that literature's dual possibilities open up from the fundamental ambiguity with which language is invested. This ambiguity is derived, Blanchot argues, from the fact that "negation is tied to language" (*SHBR* 381). In "Literature and the Right to Death" Blanchot references a pre-*Phenomenology of Spirit* text in which Hegel describes Adam's first act, what Hegel calls an act of annihilation: Adam names the

animals.¹¹ In the act of naming them, Hegel says, the animals cease to be in and of themselves and become ideas. The idea of the animal is what allows Adam to comprehend and thus gain mastery over it (*SHBR* 379). Reading Hegel, Blanchot contends that the word, linked to the power of naming, makes possible *a* being (the “substantive” that has a place in the world, that has and produces meaning, that acts and is acted upon) only by depriving it of its existence, distancing it from what it is in and of itself by making it an idea and opening it up to conceptualization and comprehension. Another way of putting this would be to say that a being is a product of language (of the act of naming) and as such ceases to be what it was in its being before language intervened. By dint of its power of negation, language opens the world as idea and makes possible history, time, subject, consciousness. The toll paid for this is that what is named, in a word, ceases to exist.

Blanchot goes on to say that the word now conditions the life of what it names. The existence of the cat, to use Blanchot's example, passes into the idea of the cat, giving the cat an essence and opening it to the possibility of signifying in any number of contexts. The idea thus animates the thing in its nonexistence. Blanchot writes that “the ‘existant’ [a term taken from Levinas, as we shall see] was called out of its existence by the word and became a being. This *Lazare, veni foras* summoned the dark cadaverous reality from its primordial depths and in exchange gave it only the life of the mind” (*SHBR* 382). In naming the thing and making it an idea, language extracts the thing from the void of its existence and resurrects it, restores life to it. Language and what it makes possible—idea, meaning, comprehension, signification—are here linked to both an originary act of murder and the powers of resurrection and animation. This is why

Blanchot writes that behind language is a "sort of immense hecatomb," a slaughter in which things are destroyed so that they may be resurrected in the service of idea and human comprehension (*SHBR* 379). In its entanglement with negation, what dies is what gives life to language. Language opens up from the void but can only *begin* by extracting itself and what it names from this void.

So, Blanchot notes, in beginning with and from this annihilation, language is "tormented" by and "obsessed" with "what it lacks because of the necessity that it be the lack of precisely this:" the "dark cadaverous reality" that precedes it (*SHBR* 383). Language bears within it the constitutive absence of the nonexistence it has wrought, determining that it also, against its compensatory labor for idea and comprehension, turn back toward what precedes it. Put simply, language wants what it has to negate in order for it to exist and for the world to open from it. Hence the ambiguity of language, its at once "reassuring and disquieting" nature: as it is tormented by and obsessed with what comes before it but cannot be contained by or within it, language ceaselessly interrupts its own reassuring labor of idea and comprehension in a disquieting search for that dark cadaverous reality that precedes it.

This movement in which language turns back toward what it necessarily lacks is what Blanchot calls literature. He writes that:

The language of literature is a search for this moment which precedes literature. Literature usually calls it existence; it wants the cat as it exists, the pebble taking the side of things, not man, but the pebble, and in this pebble what man rejects by saying it, what is the foundation of speech and what speech excludes in speaking, the abyss, Lazarus in the tomb and not Lazarus brought back into the daylight, the one who already smells bad, who is Evil, Lazarus lost and not Lazarus saved and brought back to life. (*SHBR* 383)

This figure of Lazarus as corpse will return to us momentarily, but for now it is sufficient to note that what Blanchot calls literature is the movement in which language gives in to its obsession with what makes it possible. Language interrupts its progressive, amelioristic labor in service to the historical dialectic and turns back toward what it must exclude in order for that progressive labor to take place. The first slope of literature, which is allied with the book, is interrupted by literature's second slope, that of the work, which is inclined toward anonymity, timelessness, and the interminable being that precedes the world.

Following this, we can now say that the distinction between the book and the work and the two slopes is equally a *relation*. Put somewhat differently, there is the book and the work, there are two slopes, and these indeed represent contradictory and irreconcilable exigencies. There is literature, however, only in the *coincidence* of the two as contradictory, irreconcilable demands whereby the movement of the book is arrested by the movement of the work.¹² For this reason Blanchot will gradually replace *The Space of Literature's* distinction between the book and the work with an ambiguity in the term work: *oeuvre* is always contaminated by *désœuvrement*. The work in the world is put out of work, rendered workless, by an emergence of what is outside the world.¹³ Put differently, there is literature only in the taking place of what is outside of language *within* the structure that is language. Literature thus becomes, in Blanchot's words, the "movement through which whatever disappears keeps appearing" (*SHBR* 385).

If literature is the movement through which what has disappeared appears, then in order for what has disappeared—anonymous, impersonal being—to appear, it must do so *in* the structure of meaning that makes appearance possible: language as communicative,

historically situated and historically bound. In other words, literature for Blanchot has to be understood as the taking place within communicative, signifying language and the structure of history of what is inassimilable to language and history. Borrowing from *L'écriture du désastre*, we might say that literature is the taking place of absent meaning within the structure of meaning itself. The question that must now be put to Blanchot is: How is being, as the other of all worlds and the time of time's absence, made manifest, given to be read, in the world and in time? How does literature take place in such a way that what cannot be arraigned by language is nonetheless given to be read in language?

In no small respect Blanchot's concern with this void that precedes language is derived from his engagement with the philosophy of Emmanuel Lévinas. While Hegel is the object of Blanchot's reading in "Literature and the Right to Death," his chief interlocutor in the essay is Lévinas. Lévinas's 1947 *De l'existence a l'existent* is among his earliest efforts to sketch out the possibility of a post-Heideggerian ethics.¹⁴ This work traces the trajectory from anonymous, impersonal existence (his revision of Heidegger's Being) to the individuated subject, the existent (or being), and its world of action, intentionality, and comprehension. Most importantly for our purposes, it is in *De l'existence a l'existent* that Lévinas gives a name to the "dark, cadaverous reality" with which literary language is obsessed: the *il y a*.

The French title of Lévinas's work is suggestive: he is concerned with the processes and events by which an *existent* emerges from the interminable flow of *existing*. The process by which the existent is contracted from existence is one of nominalization, a becoming noun of the pure and unnameable verb *to be* (*a* being is a nominalized substantive of the verb form *being*, a suspension of being's incessant taking

place through the intervention of the name). The first moment in this process of nominalization is the event of what Lévinas calls the hypostasis. The hypostasis is the substrate or fundamental ground on which the existent lives, constructs an abode, acts ethically. Hypostasis comprises consciousness, present, position, the "I," and time (*EE* 83). The hypostasis is thus the event of the appropriation of existence in which the "apparition of a substantive," the "apparition of a private domain, of a noun" open up the space of the existent and its world (*EE* 83).

Lévinas describes this world as an "essentially lit up space," "in all its dimensions accessible, explorable," and he notes that, "illuminated space all collects about a mind which possesses it. In this sense [the world] is already like the product of a synthesis" (*EE* 41). Given this emphasis on light and illumination, the synthesizing power of perception, and the explorable nature of the world's dimension, it follows that Lévinas privileges sight and touch as the preeminent senses in the world. Sight and touch apprehend and situate: sight from a distance; touch in a safe, mastered proximity (the distance of sight allows the approach and contact of touch, we might say). The combined functioning of these two senses in the world is the grasping we call comprehension: sight, predicated on a distance between the subject and its objects, allows the object to be arraigned and placed within the existent's structure of knowledge and allows the world to be synthesized into a totality. Comprehension is thus an "enveloping of the exterior by the inward:" the opaque material surface of an object becomes transparent as it is subordinated to comprehension, that is, as it undergoes its movement from object in itself through language into idea (*EE* 41). In other words, the existent's power of comprehension is to give the object use and value and meaning, to make the object as it is

disappear into the closure of conceptualization. Sight and touch thus exceed their sensory origins and limitations to become the principle means by which the world is given sense and ordered into concept, the predicates of history, discourse, et cetera.

What is of immediate importance to our understanding of Blanchot's thinking of literature is not (only) the world in which subjects comprehend, communicate, and make meaning, but the name given to the return of what must be negated in order for comprehension, building, and meaning to become possible. Levinas calls this the *il y a* (there is), the pre-conceptual, pre-linguistic, pre-hypostasis "thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness" of existence without existent or world (*EE* 51). He writes:

Let us imagine all beings, things and persons, reverting to nothingness. But what of this nothingness itself? Something would happen, if only night and the silence of nothingness. The indeterminateness of this "something is happening" is not the indeterminateness of a subject and does not refer to a substantive. Like the third person pronoun in the impersonal form of a verb, it designates not the uncertainly known author of the action, but the characteristic of this action itself which somehow has no author. This impersonal, anonymous, yet inextinguishable "consummation" of being, which murmurs in the depths of nothingness itself we shall designate the term *il y a*. The *il y a*, inasmuch as it resists a personal form, is "being in general." (*EE* 51-52)

As "being in general," the *il y a* is "horrifying," "suffocating," "riveting," "invading," and "enthraling" to the existent. This is so because the *il y a* in its return is anti-hypostatic: it is always in excess of the hypostatic suspension and thus dispossesses the subject of its position, drawing it into its anonymous space through the force of its "exoticism" (*EE* 46). Though negated by the process of nominalization, the *il y a* returns as what refuses that process, resists the "personal form" of the individuated existent, and dissimulates the "apparition" of all substantives. In doing so, it appears to deprive the existent of its powers of seeing and touching, thus of comprehending and understanding. Instead the

existent is brought to an encounter with what can only be described as an absolute absence that, in the world, maintains all the exotic force of a presence. "This universal absence," Lévinas writes, "is in its turn a presence, an absolutely unavoidable presence. It is not the dialectical counterpart of absence, and we do not grasp it through a thought. It is immediately there. There is no discourse. Nothing responds to us but this silence; the voice of this silence is understood and frightens" (*EE* 53). The existent cannot grasp the *il y a* as a thought and cannot build discourse from it. It is "immediately there" as a presence, an "absolutely unavoidable" one, but the *il y a* demands a different form of relation than the sight and touch of comprehension. The *il y a* is understood, one sees it and hears it, but how? In what form?

Though he will call it by other names (the other night, the neuter, the outside), the *il y a* is constitutive of Blanchot's thought. As such, however, it should not be regarded as simply a borrowing from Lévinas. Rather, the *il y a* emerges as an engagement between Blanchot and Lévinas (which is to say between philosophy and literature) that reveals the *il y a*'s original literary specificity.¹⁵ Following the division of literature into two slopes and a discussion of the second, tormented slope of literature in "Literature and the Right to Death," Blanchot refers to Lévinas's *De l'existence a l'existent* in order to describe the "blind vigilance" the work of literature maintains in relation to its origin in the *il y a*. In a footnote, Blanchot relates that Levinas uses the name *il y a* to "throw some 'light' on this anonymous and impersonal flow of being that precedes all being [. . .], nothingness as existence: when there is nothing, *il y a* being" (*SHBR* 388). Blanchot's footnote directs readers to the fourth chapter of *De l'existence a l'existent* titled "Existence Without a World." In this chapter, Lévinas introduces the *il y a* through a discussion of art in

general and literature in particular. Lévinas opens his discussion by pointing out that things in the world are covered over by their use and status as objects of knowledge. In the world, our capacity to see and touch objects, maintain distance from them, and make them disappear into concepts covers over any strangeness the object may have.

Art, Lévinas suggests, makes the things "stand out from the world and thus extracts them from belonging to the subject." Thus Lévinas is concerned in "Existence Without a World" with how art reveals an alterity inherent in things. This alterity is temporarily nullified in the world by the powers of comprehension, but that same alterity reemerges in the form of art. More specifically, Lévinas is concerned with the *il y a's* relation to "the elementary function of art," which is "to furnish an image of an object in place of the object itself" (EE 45). For Lévinas, the image estranges objects from the world by uncovering them in themselves and marking the distance between the thing in itself from its ideas, which Lévinas refers to as its forms. He writes that the image presents its object "in nakedness, that real nakedness which is not the absence of clothing, but we might say the absence of forms, that is, the nontransmutation of our exteriority into inwardness, which forms realize" (EE 46). The object's nakedness is clothed, Lévinas continues, by its "being destined for a use," and we can say that by "forms" Lévinas means the shape given an object by its assembly of uses, values, multiple contexts of meaning and signification. In other terms, form means the measures by which the object is approached and arraigned as concept, transmuted into "inwardness" and put to work on the slope of the Hegelian dialectic.

In its nakedness, though, the image remains inassimilable to the inward movement effected by forms and realized in concept: nontransmutable. Unclothed, the

object's image reveals an anonymous and brute materiality, formless and incomprehensible. Its presence, then, is a very real absence: the image reveals the radical alterity that precedes the object's becoming idea and exceeds its supposed disappearance into concept. It is the presence of an absence of meaning and comprehension. What thought cannot make sense of in the image is the materiality of the object it reveals, "for here materiality is thickness, coarseness, massivity, wretchedness. It is what has consistency, weight, is absurd, is a brute but impassive presence" (*EE* 51). The thought that typically renders the object intelligible by giving it a use and assigning it a value, as well as those senses of sight and touch linked to comprehension, cannot approach the image. "It is like the density of the void, like the murmur of silence" (*EE* 59), Lévinas writes, adding that this density and this murmur are ultimately unnameable and appear, moreso than in any other place or through any other medium, in poetry.¹⁶

I should stress two points here. First, Lévinas approaches his discussion of the *il y a* via a consideration of art and an engagement with its elemental component, the image. The image is privileged by Lévinas because of its capacity to reveal the base, formless materiality of the world and its objects. Second and following this, the image (as linked to the formless material real of the *il y a*) refuses the inward, grasping movement of conceptualization. Sight and touch, inasmuch as they are linked to comprehension, cannot serve. Instead, the image seems to initiate a counter-movement, drawing the existent toward it and away from the world by the force of what Lévinas calls its "exoticism." More precisely, the image as the presence of absence begins to blur the boundaries between exterior and interior, drawing the existent out of itself, so to speak. Lévinas writes that the:

Il y a transcends inwardness as well as exteriority; it does not even make possible to distinguish these. The anonymous current of being invades, submerges every subject, person, or thing. The subject-object distinction by which we approach existents is not the starting point for a meditation which broaches being in general. (*EE* 52)

In the encounter with the image, then, there is no longer some object to grasp or understand, even through the image's relation to its referent. The image instead draws the subject toward a "universal absence" in which that subject's distinction from any object is called into question. The language Lévinas uses—invasion, submersion—highlights the alluring force of the image and the *il y a*. He goes on to argue that the subject is "riveted" to the image in "the disappearance of all things and of the I" which leaves behind precisely what comes before: "what cannot disappear, the sheer fact of being in which one participates, whether one wants to or not, without having taken the initiative, anonymously" (*EE* 52-53). The subject-object distinction does not serve as a starting point for considering the image and the *il y a* precisely because the image initiates the ruin of that distinction. A different starting point must be taken up, a different relation introduced. Thus Lévinas introduces the *il y a*, as we saw in a previous passage, by saying that we must "imagine" all things returning to nothingness, imagine all things ruined by the return of nothingness. The starting point for considering the *il y a* must be the imagination. More accurately, the starting point must be the imaginary, understood as the relation of a subject to an image.

Blanchot agrees with Lévinas when the latter attributes to the *il y a* and the image the alluring force of pure materiality. Blanchot's focus, however, is how the image emerges as a phenomenon of literary language. He argues that language's link to negation and its capacity, in the first instance, to cloth objects in their conceptual use and value, is

also an annihilation language enacts upon itself. Thus language may also be rendered naked, stripped of its use and value and revealed in its base materiality. This is why Lévinas will say that the *il y a* appears most exotically, most horrifyingly, in poetry.

Blanchot expresses it in this way:

My hope lies in the materiality of language, in the fact that words are things, too, are a kind of nature—this is given to me and gives me more than I can understand. Just now the reality of words was an obstacle. Now, it is my only chance. A name ceases to be the ephemeral passing of nonexistence and becomes a concrete ball, a solid mass of existence; language, abandoning the sense, the meaning which was all it wanted to be; tries to become senseless [. . . .]The word acts not as an ideal force but as an obscure power, as an incantation that coerces things. It is not beyond the world, but neither is it the world itself: it is the presence of things before the world exists. (*SHBR* 383-384)

In the work of literature, language draws attention to itself and reveals itself as a thing, as composed of things. Words in literary language become material objects with weight and density, opaque marks on heavy, thick paper. The word ceases to be a transparent conveyor of meaning, disappeared into its use for communication and the transmission of knowledge, and in literature *appears*. The word becomes its own image: in its materiality the word becomes linked to what precedes it, drawn down by what it must carry within it as an absence: the massivity of being.¹⁷

With these thoughts in mind, I can hopefully qualify this understanding of the work of literature a bit further. Literature is the movement by which what disappears *because of* language is made to appear *in* language. That appearance takes the form of the image, through which concept, use, and value disappear into the void of excessive, suffocating, alluring materiality. At this point, or in this event, language marks the interruption of its labor by its turn back toward the *il y a*. This, then, is what Blanchot has in mind when he writes at the conclusion of "The Essential Solitude" that in literature one

is put "in touch, through language, in language, with the absolute milieu where thing becomes image again, where the image, instead of alluding to some particular feature, becomes an allusion to the featureless" (*EL* 31; *SL* 33).

I must be careful with Blanchot's words here. When he writes that the image alludes to the featureless, Blanchot does not want to suggest that the *il y a* is represented in language by the image. The image does not "represent" the *il y a*. If anything, what we have determined thus far suggests that the discourses charged with representing the world (history, philosophy) are suspended by literature's imaging of the *il y a*. What then does the image do? In terms that I will need to clarify, Blanchot concludes "The Essential Solitude" by arguing that literary language does not build images, does not "cast reality in figures," does not at all represent the world. Instead, literary language is language that has become *its own image*, "an image of language (and not a figurative language), or yet again, an imaginary language, one which no one speaks; a language, that is, which issues from its own absence" (*EL* 31-32; *SL* 34).

Following this statement, we can summarize Blanchot's presentation of the work of literature thus: Literature is not only the appearance of the *il y a* in language in the form of the image; more precisely, literature is language, in its turn toward the *il y a*, become its own image.

Now I have to ask the same question Blanchot poses at the conclusion of "The Essential Solitude:" "But what is the image?" (*EL* 32; *SL* 34).

Image

In *The Space of Literature's* essay titled "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," Blanchot writes that a broken tool has become its own image. This is so because, in Heideggerian terms, when a tool is put to productive ends (when a hammer successfully drives a nail home, for example), it is subordinated to its own use-value, disappearing into what Heidegger calls its equipmentality or utensility.¹⁸ When the tool is damaged, however, and can no longer do the work of labor (can no longer build a shelter, be bought and sold, be used as a weapon, et cetera.), the tool appears *as it is, as its own image*. By this example Blanchot makes the claim that the image of the tool is not a corrupt, secondary copy of the object itself, nor an idealized representation of it that would purge it of its flaws. In a word, the image comes first, maintaining an ontological primacy over the object. The image is the supposed aftermath of the object that precedes it at its origin and exceeds it at its end. For these reasons Blanchot likens the image, in one of *The Space of Literature's* more important moves, to the corpse.¹⁹

When Blanchot uses the term "imaginary," he means the mode of relation maintained between, on one end, the viewer, reader, or writer and, on the other end, the image. His two versions of the imaginary correspond with some precision to what I have explained as literature's two slopes. On the one slope, there is the version of the imaginary held by "ordinary analysis." Blanchot writes that "the image, according to the ordinary analysis, is secondary to the object. It is what follows. We see, then we imagine. After the object comes the image" (*EL* 343; *SL* 255). These comments reiterate and extend Blanchot's point, made earlier in a footnote to "The Essential Solitude," that "after" in the statement "The image comes after the object" implies the image's subordination to the object, as though the former were merely the "continuation" of the

latter (*EL* 32; *SL* 34). Blanchot speaks here in familiar terms: the image is understood as a copy—a representation—of an object in the world. "Ordinary analysis" [*l'analyse commune*] supposes a primary grasping of the object through comprehension, which then allows for the secondary enterprise of image-making. Generalizing from this point, we could say that as the province of the imagination, art, the elemental component of which is the image, is predicated on a comprehensive mastery of the world. As the play (composition, positioning, and manipulation) of images, art indexes the degree to which the subject has achieved an understanding of the world of objects and their meaning. Blanchot describes this use of the image and play of the imagination as the "formidable resource" of "reason's fecund power." He notes that as the object's "aftermath," the image belongs to us and "allows us still to have the object at our command when there is nothing left of it" (*EL* 350; *SL* 260). The stress on the "after" here situates this first version of the imaginary within the causal, chrono-logic of, among other things, the parabolic history we examined in the previous chapter.

The image measures the distance between the subject and object, granting control over the object in its absence. The image thus mediates, marking that distance between the subject and the world of objects necessary to the grasping that is comprehension. Again stressing the typical thinking of the image as what comes "after" the object, Blanchot writes that "'after' means that the thing must first take off a ways in order to be grasped" (*EL* 343; *SL* 255). In other words, the object must be negated as an object in itself so that from a distance it may be given meaning, conceptual parameters, use and value. Hence in its function the image is analogous to the name: through the force of negation it subordinates the object to concept, meaning, and comprehension. Perhaps it is

more accurate to say that the image represents the negating-power of the name: it is the representational evidence of negation's power to arraign objects within the purview of concept. By dint of negation and the construction of its image, the object is "taken off a ways" so that it may be grasped, comprehended. The image in this regard serves the project of "life-giving negation [*la négation vivifiante*], the ideal work by which man, capable of negating nature, raises it to a higher meaning, either in order to know it or to enjoy it admiringly" (*EL* 350; *SL* 260).

This would be one version of the imaginary. Now, it is hopefully evident that this version of the imaginary supposes a relation between a subject engaged in the active comprehension of images representative of original objects themselves possessive of an originary wholeness and integrity. The image in this regard, while secondary, nonetheless signifies plenitude. This plenitude, we could say, is that of the concept, understood as the image's coincidence with what it represents. Blanchot calls this coincidence in which the image makes available to us the wholeness or fullness of the object "reincorporation" (*EL* 350; *SL* 260).

For Blanchot, however, the version of the imaginary privileged by ordinary analysis is secondary, implicated in a recuperative or compensatory movement back (perhaps parabolically?) toward "a domain rich with meaning" (*EL* 354; *SL* 263). Put somewhat differently, the version of the imaginary thus described is a reversal of the relation proper to the image in that the image is never the aftereffect of the object, but its origin (*EL* 350; *SL* 260). In terms that resonate with our earlier discussion of Lévinas and the image, Blanchot writes that "the image can represent the object to us in a luminous *formal* aura; but it is nonetheless with substance that the image is allied—with the

fundamental materiality, the still undetermined absence of form" (*EL* 343; *SL* 255). To say the image is allied with substance (allied with, in other words, the *il y a*) is to say the image is inclined toward the formless prolixity of indetermination (the murmur) that precedes language and its powers of negation. The image is allied with brute materiality, inclined toward it and capable of somehow revealing it. "In the image," Blanchot writes, "the object again grazes something which it had dominated in order to be an object—something counter to which it had defined and built itself up" (*EL* 344; *SL* 256). The image thus designates or marks, in language, something that is outside of language.

This is the second version of the imaginary: a suspension or abeyance of the image's powers of representation and mediation by its inclination toward what exceeds representation and ruins mediation. Looking closely at the language of the passage, Blanchot writes that literary language—the image—"grazes" [*effleure*] the *il y a*, suggesting that the image comes up to or against but does not cross into what is outside of language. Now our question becomes one of how, in language, the image does the work of designating what language cannot? How to think this second version of the imaginary, in which one *relates to*, through and always in language and *via* the image, language's inassimilable outside?

We recall that in "Literature and the Right to Death," Blanchot figures the *il y a* through Lazarus, who language wants to make appear not as the resurrected and restored man, but as the cadaver rotting in its death shroud. In "The Two Versions of the Imaginary" the image is similarly figured, but here the proper name is dropped and the image becomes linked to that which *is*, without the individuation offered by the name or the place in biblical parable: the corpse. It is the strange and estranging presence of the

corpse that will become, in *The Space of Literature*, Blanchot's most compelling presentation of the image and, therefore, the taking place of literature.

By Blanchot's account, the corpse and the image share a strangeness, a capacity to be both here and there, at once in the world and other to it. "What is there," he writes about the corpse, "with the absolute calm of something that has found its place, does not, however, succeed in being convincingly there" (*EL* 344; *SL* 256). By "there," Blanchot means the corpse's place of repose at a funeral or wake, that is, the place at which it is made available to mourners for viewing. The setting, then, is one with which we are more or less familiar: a gathering of mourners brought together by the singular event of some individual's (rigidly demarcated from others') death. What animates such a setting is the familiarity with which mourners approach the corpse; it is still somehow the person who has departed, still in death invested with all the qualities and characteristics which, in life, made the person a person. By focusing attention on the funeral setting Blanchot draws a homology between the image as thought by "ordinary analysis" and the corpse as treated in mourning practices. Just as one is accustomed to thinking of the image as the aftereffect of an original object, so too is it customary to regard the corpse as the remains of the living person. As remains, the corpse has not yet achieved the strangeness Blanchot attributes to it; instead, that strangeness is nullified by grief, mourning, and ritual. We might think of a connection between Lévinas's description of the clothing of objects through use and value and the customary practice of dressing the corpse in clothes familiar to those who mourn him. In each case, the object is humanized by covering over its alterity, made palatable and maintained as that which one can approach, comprehend, see and touch.

The strangeness emerges when, after some time, the corpse ceases to refer to the living person in whose clothes it is dressed. Against the best efforts of those who seek to animate the corpse and preserve some connection between it and the once-living, he who has died will recede and the corpse will take on its singular strangeness. Blanchot characterizes the transition in these terms:

Certainly dying is an incomparable event, and he who dies "in your arms" is in a sense your brother forever. But now, he is dead. And as we know, certain tasks must be performed quickly, not so much because death's rigor will soon make these actions more difficult, but because human action will shortly be "displaced." Presently, there will be--immovable, untouchable, riveted to here by the strangest embrace and yet drifting with it, drawing here under, bearing it lower--from behind there will be no longer an inanimate thing, but Someone: the unbearable image and figure of the unique becoming nothing in particular, no matter what. (*EL* 345; *SL* 257)

There is a subtle revision of Heidegger at work in this passage, one we noted earlier in the section on the work of literature. Heidegger, remaining close to Hegel, retains death as the ultimate possibility for the being in the world: the possibility of impossibility. For Heidegger, only I can die, by which he means that no other can die in my place. I claim my death as the singular event for which no substitute can be made. The language of Blanchot's passage above suggests an inversion of Heidegger's thinking: death for Blanchot is the impossibility of possibility. From behind the unique form of the individual who has died emerges the "figure of the unique becoming nothing in particular, no matter what." The corpse figures the impersonal space in which what is unique becomes the anonymous Someone, in which the "I" becomes some "he." "It is not, though, an inanimate thing, but Someone taking part in the interminable anonymity of dying, which no one experiences because every one undergoes it.

In a word, the corpse ceases to represent anyone or anything at all. No matter how hard one works to maintain the corpse in the individuality and singularity of the departed, the corpse withdraws, to recall terms from this chapter's introduction, from the "fluctuations of appearance" or the "movement of perspective." In place of representation, the corpse can only resemble itself. The corpse entertains no relation with the world in which it appears *except as its own image*. At this point in his discussion Blanchot turns to the Heideggerian illustration of the tool become its own image in order to make the claim that what the corpse and the broken tool demonstrate is that art in general and literature in particular are linked to the capacity for objects to appear in their nakedness. That is to say, art's power is to reduce the object to its purest, simplest resemblance to only itself, behind which there is nothing but being. Thus what the image says is only that *it is*. The image, we now understand, is of the same strangeness Blanchot attributes to the Giacometti statue and that I experienced in the Dumas work: an immobile alterity, divorced from measures of use or value, revealed in its base materiality as that which simply is.²⁰

We can understand this in language specific terms. The word bears some resemblance to the corpse when it becomes its own image. When, that is, the word ceases to serve a purpose, whether that purpose is communication, the transmission of knowledge, the identification we associate with the name, or the signifier of an idea. Poetry makes this possible, drawing attention to the material reality of the word by emphasizing its rhythm, its ability to be moved around like an object, but Blanchot's point is that what happens in poetry is what happens in the novel, in the dramatic text, in all forms of writing that he would call literature. In the event of the word become image,

the murmur, to use Blanchot's term, of materiality is made audible, and the nothing of anonymous being is made visible. We have a sense of why Blanchot, with Lévinas, uses this term murmur (*le murmure*). The murmur is what has to be silenced in order for communication to take place. It is the plural speech that is without discernible origin, without source, directionless. The murmur is what one hears when one stares too long at a word on the printed page; what one takes part in when one speaks his name over and again until it becomes a foreign thing, part of a language no one speaks. The word become image is what takes place when we question how come there is such a thing as a word, and from what does it originate. We could say, in anticipation of our concluding discussion, the word becomes image when it becomes the object of our fascination with it. This is what Blanchot suggests when he writes (perhaps playing those Husserlian games) that "if we fix upon a face, the corner of a wall--does it not also sometimes happen that we abandon ourselves to what we see? Bereft of power before this presence suddenly strangely mute and passive, are we not at its mercy?" (*EL* 343; *SL* 255).

When this happens, the word as its own image becomes something "incredible—something neutral which there is no getting used to" (*EL* 347; *SL* 258) but from which, he emphasizes, "we cannot extricate ourselves" (*EL* 348; *SL* 259). This would be the second version of the imaginary: a relation to the image as a thing we cannot accustom ourselves to (through comprehension, knowledge, communication) but from which we cannot extricate ourselves. This encounter with the image in this version of the imaginary, this condition of being confronted with what we cannot "get used to" (understand or comprehend, approach directly, make sense and meaning of) but from

which we cannot extricate ourselves, is the experience of the Giacometti or the Dumas or, looking back to the previous chapter, of reading trauma in *Gravity's Rainbow*.

In "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," Blanchot puts forth that to live this experience is "to live the event as an image" (*EL* 351; *SL* 261). We have to hear this in two ways. First, to live the event as an image means that the event is experienced as an image of itself, which is to say the event of literature is an experience of that which precedes the category of event (as bound to time, history, causal determination, meaning, et cetera.). It means, in other words, to experience that on which the category of event is predicated but to which it is irreducible. Blanchot writes that "to live the event as an image is not to see an image of this event, nor is it to attribute to the event the gratuitous character of the imaginary. The event really takes place—and yet does it 'really' take place? The occurrence commands us, that is, it releases us, from it and from ourselves" (*EL* 353; *SL* 262). The event is an image of itself, that is, before and after time, history, and conceptual parameters. Another way of saying this is that to live the event as an image is to live the event that does not take place, the event that has always already happened and waits always to begin.

Second, to live the event as an image would be to live the event as an image of oneself: the event as image releases us from ourselves. It would be to live the event that reduces me (as reader, writer, viewer) to an image of myself. It initiates the dispersal or diaspora of the subject. On this score Blanchot writes that:

To live the event as an image is not to remain uninvolved, to regard the event disinterestedly in the way that the esthetic version of the image and the serene ideal of classical art propose. But neither is it to take part freely and decisively. It is to be taken: to pass from the region where we hold ourselves at a distance from things the better to order and use them into that other region where distance holds us--the distance which then is the

lifeless deep, an unmanageable, inappreciable remoteness which has become something like the sovereign power behind all things. (*EL* 251; *SL* 261)

This moment—the passage from the region where things are kept at a distance from us in order to make comprehension possible to that other region, the other of all regions in which distance itself takes hold of us—is the radical reversal, the experience of literature.

Thus there are two possibilities for the image, two versions of the imaginary. These two versions of the imaginary derive, like the double-valenced nature of literature, from language's fundamental ambiguity. Speaking of the image's duplicity, Blanchot writes that it comes from "the initial double meaning which the power of negation brings with it," making possible the two possibilities for literature, the two version of the imaginary. But Blanchot stresses that this ambiguity does not suggest that *sometimes* the image "gives us the power to control things in their absence and through fiction, thus maintaining us in a domain rich with meaning," and that *sometimes* the image "removes us to where things are perhaps present, but in their image, and where the image is passivity, where it has no value" (*EL* 354; *SL* 263). Regarding this ambiguity as such would amount to nothing more than choosing which side one wants to privilege, which literature or which version of the imaginary serves one's purposes best. Against this, Blanchot argues that ambiguity thus outlined reveals an even deeper ambiguity. What we distinguish with this "sometimes this, sometimes that" is revealed in this ambiguity to be an *always*: both are always at once one and the other. The coincidence, that is, of mutually contradictory exigencies that are beyond sublation and unavailable to transcendence. In a word: the event of literature. As Blanchot puts it in "Literature and the Right to Death," "literature is language turning into ambiguity" (*SHBR* 396). In the

event of this ambiguity, Blanchot contends that meaning cannot choose sides, and instead turns into the other of all meaning. Ambiguity makes "meaning immediate, which is also to say incapable of being developed, only immediately void" (*EL* 355; *SL* 263). The question Blanchot now poses, one which I believe hits at the center of his thought, is this: How can thought maintain this ambiguity? How to think art or literature and its experience? What can be done with the emergence, in the ambiguity that is literature, with absent meaning?

Fascination

Another way to ask these questions could be: How to think fascination? Before proceeding, let me pause to summarize what has brought us to this point. Blanchot offers a literature that is not an object bound to historical time but an event in which historical time is suspended by language's obsessive search for what precedes it. This "before" is what Blanchot calls with Lévinas the *il y a*. The *il y a* is the name given to the formless, indeterminate flow of being that must be negated in order for the world to open up to action, intentionality, meaning, concept, et cetera. The *il y a* has a literary specificity: it manifests *as* the image, and because of language's unique role in negating being, the literary image (as language become image of itself) is the image *par excellence*. The image then becomes a limit-point linking the world to what is radically other to it, making here a nowhere. In this respect it shares its strangeness with the corpse: a figure of the after that is also the before, a remainder that has ontological primacy over the object, over the human being. Finally, in its proximity to the *il y a*, the image cannot be mastered but instead draws the subject out of itself, dispossessing it of what makes it a

subject and allows conceptual mastery to be possible. The image as corpse, as a linkage of here to nowhere, makes here a nowhere, makes here and those who occupy it corpses. This is what we have to understand, finally, as literary experience: to live the event as an image.

Blanchot calls this fascination. But why this term? Lévinas describes the response to the *il y a* as a horror, as an enthrallment, as a suffocation. Why for Blanchot fascination?²¹ It appears that fascination is useful in its capacity to register the extent to which the reader or writer of literature is entangled in the event of literature, the extent to which literature *happens* to him. It also appears that the term fascination, as opposed to horror, marks a leave-taking from Lévinas: where Lévinasian philosophy will attempt to overcome the horror of the *il y a* on its way to the ethical encounter and illeity, Blanchot's literature (and by extension, his ethics) must remain with it, make some use of it by constantly returning to it.

Fascination is, in other words, the experience constitutive of an encounter with the outside, and thus must register in any writing or reading about, among other things, literature. Blanchot asks

But what happens when what you see, although at a distance, seems to touch you with a gripping contact, when the manner of seeing is a kind of touch, when seeing is contact at a distance? What happens when what is seen imposes itself upon the gaze, as if the gaze were seized, put in touch with the appearance? What happens is not an active contact, not the initiative and action which there still is in real touching. Rather, the gaze gets taken in, absorbed by an immobile movement and a depthless deep. What is given us by this contact at a distance is the image, and fascination is passion for the image. (*EL* 28; *SL* 32)

Seeing becomes contact at a distance, a taking in and holding of the gaze by the immobile depth of the *il y a*. What Blanchot describes here is not (necessarily) blindness, but seeing

and touching as removed from the grasping powers of comprehension. Seeing becomes a form of contact which collapses the distance between subject and object necessary to comprehension, and yet maintaining that distance by widening it beyond measure. What fascinates is both "terrifying and tantalizing," Blanchot writes, emphasizing that what attracts is also what insists on keeping us at the greatest distance. The image, that is, as what emerges from within the structure of the familiar—the face of the beloved, the name, the historical—as that which, within any structure, de-structures or deconstructs.²²

In this respect, fascination becomes a form of relation to that which, it would otherwise appear, we can maintain no relation. "Fascination is the relation the gaze entertains—a relation which is itself neutral and impersonal—with sightless, shapeless depth, the absence one sees because it is blinding" (*EL* 29; *SL* 33). In fascination, seeing means touching, means contact, but not with any initiative and action, not with *any right to claim*: an abeyance. Fascination means to see in such a way as to be seen, to touch in such a way as to be touched:

Whoever is fascinated doesn't see, properly speaking, what he sees. Rather, it touches him in an immediate proximity; it seizes him and ceaselessly draws him close, even though it leaves him at an absolute distance. Fascination is fundamentally linked to neutral, impersonal presence, to the indeterminate They, the immense, faceless Someone. (*EL* 29; *SL* 33).

This ceaseless drawing close is what Lévinas called the image's exotic lure, the outward movement of the inward space of the existent. Through this contact at a distance that is fascination, then, "I" cease to exist, am drawn out of myself and put in touch with the indeterminate They. This is the point made over and over again by Blanchot in *The Space of Literature*: in the indeterminate milieu of literature where "fascination reigns," "I" am replaced by an anonymous "he." I become, in a word, other to myself. This is what is

most essential about the "essential solitude:" it is never mine, for "I" am not there to claim it, to delimit it as belonging to me. In fascination, then, the "I" undergoes an "intimacy with the outside which has no location and affords no rest. Coming here makes the one who comes belong to dispersal, to the fissure where the exterior is the intrusion that stifles, but is also nakedness, the chill of the enclosure that leaves one utterly exposed" (EL 28; SL 31). This is fascination as *a belonging to dispersal*, as shelter in an enclosure that leaves one altogether exposed. Fascination as an immobilization or paralysis that is, at the same time, diasporic.

Fascination thought in these terms robs us of our ability to say "I am fascinated by or with this or that." There is, properly speaking, no object of fascination or subject in fascination. "Of whoever is fascinated, "Blanchot writes, "it can be said that he doesn't perceive any real object, for what he sees does not belong to the world of reality, but to the indeterminate milieu of fascination" (EL 28; SL 32). The indeterminate milieu of fascination is the space of the image, of literature, and its event is the radical reversal by which "we" are put at the vanishing point ourselves. Fascination establishes a special link between the object and the subject: *both* recede from use and value and become images of themselves. This is what Blanchot means by living the event as an image: fascination is the experience of an event, but not an objective event, and not a subjective experience. Subject and object here are at the very least reversed: I become other to myself and have my gaze turned back on me. The distance between subject and objects collapses and I am given contact with distance itself.

The experience of fascination is always linked to this radical reversal. In "The Two Versions of the Imaginary," Blanchot describes fascination as an experience the

mourner undergoes when the corpse ceases to represent the once-living and begins instead to resemble itself. In language that corresponds to the Freudian notion of melancholia examined in chapter three, Blanchot writes that

When this moment has come, the corpse appears in the strangeness of its solitude as that which has disdainfully withdrawn from us. Then the feeling of a relation between humans is destroyed, and our mourning, the care we take of the dead and all the prerogatives of our former passions, since they no longer no their direction, return toward us. (EL 346; SL 257)

Because one can no longer orient oneself in relation to the object of mourning, the directed passions, all the care for the departed, become directionless and can but turn back upon their origin. Thus one becomes the object of one's own mourning, but such a statement implies that "I" who mourned have now, like the corpse, ceased to exist as an individuated being (the feeling of human relations is destroyed) and become, like the corpse, an image of myself, linked with the corpse for a moment to the incessant murmur of the *il y a*. "I" am put at the vanishing point.

We might say it is an experience I have had but which "I" do not know "I" have had. Thus literature as *un renversement radical* in which things recede into their own image, and "I" become "he" is a turning upside-down of the world that leaves the world, strangely, intact. What fascinates, according to Blanchot,

Isn't, but comes back again. It comes already and forever past, so that my relation to it is not one of cognition, but of re-cognition, and this re-cognition ruins in me the power of knowing, the right to grasp. It makes what is ungraspable inescapable; it never lets me cease reaching what I cannot attain. And that which I cannot take, I must take up again, never to let go. (EL 27; SL 31)

When it returns, it does so to force me to always re-cognize, thus ruining, if for a moment, my power to know, my right to grasp. But in returning, what fascinates bears

with it the ethical exigency of always attempting to grasp what one cannot grasp, to take up and never let go what one cannot yet hold in the comprehending hand.

If it is a form of seeing, an insight, then as such fascination is a blindness which is "vision still, vision which is no longer the possibility of seeing, but the impossibility of not seeing, the impossibility which becomes visible and perseveres—always and always—in a vision that never comes to an end" (*EL* 29; *SL* 32). The vigil Blanchot describes here is not (only) the vigil one keeps over the remains of the departed, nor is it a vigil one maintains over the remains we examined in chapter four. It is a much more difficult, indeed interminable, vigil, for it is the one no one (no individual, no single person, but rather everyone) keeps over consistent return of the taking place of absent meaning.

As an ethical orientation, Blanchot's fascination suggests that what we are obligated to is what cannot be reduced, what cannot be arrested by our necessary arrangement of the world into the familiar or what Levinas calls the self-same. I should state that this is emphatically *not* to suggest that our obligation is toward the image of the past rather than the past itself, or toward art as opposed to individuals (a substitution I argued in the introduction to this dissertation was to be found in the "fascination" at work in our responses to the images of Natzweiler-Struthof). My point is, rather, to suggest that the image makes available to those willing to read it in a certain way an understanding of what in the past, in the face of both the intimate and the stranger, and in the ongoing attempts to understand fully how the past of the Shoah happened, why it happened, and what is at stake in the fact that it happened, returns us to our point of departure. At that point, we acknowledge that we do not yet understand, and it is what we do not yet

understand, what we cannot yet know, by which we are fascinated, and thus toward which we are obligated in our ongoing efforts to understand, to know.

What fascinates, we can say, is what obligates. Perhaps, then: Fascination as a vigil, as a keeping watch over absent meaning. In *The Writing of the Disaster*, Blanchot offers a reading of Robert Antelme's *The Human Race* that harkens back to earlier writings on the *il y a*, the image, and fascination, but now mobilizes those ideas in the context of an endless obligation to the past of the Shoah.²³ For Blanchot, the "vision that never comes to an end" must now orient itself toward suffering in the camps, about which we read, the images of which we view. Antelme's meditation on hunger in the camps compels Blanchot's own meditation—"We must still meditate (but is it possible?) on this," he writes—in which he glimpses a materiality, an "empty absolute," that reminds us of *The Space of Literature's* discussions of Lazarus, of the cat, of the thing in and of itself. In the image of starving prisoner, Blanchot writes, "bread is given us as bread," which is no longer "related in any way to nourishment." This image, Blanchot concludes, "exalts, it glorifies" the need beyond nourishment revealed in the gaze of the dying prisoner, for whom bread is given as bread.

Were Blanchot to end his meditation here, we could say that his reading of Antelme arrogates (exalts, glorifies) the image of the suffering as an illustration of his long-standing theoretical claims. That he finds in the Shoah a useful occasion for his theoretical musings, which would amount to a disturbing elevation of suffering to status of some sublime, "empty absolute" (and it is precisely this for which LaCapra mistakenly censures Blanchot).

"But," Blanchot warns,

The danger (here) of words in their theoretical insignificance is perhaps that they claim to evoke the annihilation where all sinks always, without hearing the “be silent” addressed to those who have known only partially, or from a distance the interruption of history. And yet to watch and to wake, to keep the ceaseless vigil over the immeasurable absence is necessary, for what took up again from this end (Israel, all of us) is marked by this end, from which we cannot come to the end of waking again. (*WD* 84)

From here, Blanchot notes, all words should attempt to evoke the annihilation of the Shoah only by hearing the “be silent” that marks our distance, our inability to lay claim through those words. And yet, our “here” is also “there,” marked by a past from which we cannot and should not break. And so a ceaseless vigil of fascination is necessary, one wherein we interrupt our desire for the full presence of an absolute understanding by hearing the murmuring voices of the past, whose “be silent” enjoins all of us who live after, in the belated time of the disaster (“Now everybody—”) to keep watch over absent meaning.

NOTES

¹ Butler, Cornelia. "Painter as Witness." *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles/ Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2008): 44.

² Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993).

³ Maurice Blanchot, *L'espace littéraire* (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1955). Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982). All references are to Ann Smock's translation unless otherwise indicated, and page numbers are given for both the French and English editions.

⁴ The exhibition I am describing is titled "Measuring Your Own Grave" and is the first retrospective of the artist's work in this country. I first viewed the exhibition in June of 2008 at the Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles, which is the organizing institution, and then again in January of 2009 at the Museum of Modern Art, New York. The exhibition is curated by Cornelia Butler.

⁵ Maurice Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death," trans. Lydia Davis. *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader* (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill P, 1999): 359-400.

⁶ For comprehensive readings of Hegel's influence on Blanchot's thinking, see Rodolphe Gasché, "The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the Null Space of Literature." *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*, ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill (London: Routledge, 1996) 34-69; and Joseph Libertson, *Proximity: Lévinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982).

⁷ G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (London: Oxford UP, 1977).

⁸ See Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (Minnesota: U of Minneapolis P, 1985); and *Inner Experience* (Albany: State U of New York P, 1988).

⁹ See the sections of *The Space of Literature* titled "The Work and Death's Space" 85-160. In these pages Blanchot offers readings of Rilke primarily in order to show a certain dispossession of the writer at work in Rilke's literary experience. This dispossession means losing even the possibility of claiming one's own death in suicide. Blanchot writes of Rilke's work in particular and literature in general that through them, "whoever wants to die does not die, he loses the will to die. He enters the nocturnal realm of fascination wherein he dies in a passion bereft of will" (*EL* 131, *SL* 105). This nocturnal realm of fascination is, as we shall see, the space of literature, and in it the possibility of death is transmuted into the impossibility of dying.

¹⁰ Gerald Bruns, *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997): 323.

¹¹ Blanchot footnotes the reference thus: "From a collection of essays entitled *System of 1803-1804*. A. Kojève, in his *Introduction à la lecture de Hegel*, interpreting a passage from *The Phenomenology*, demonstrates in a remarkable way how for Hegel comprehension was equivalent to murder." Indeed, it is largely Kojève's Hegel that leads Blanchot to read Hegelian philosophy as a philosophy of death. For Blanchot, death, through language's power of negation, lives in life as a disruptive excess, a before and after that cannot be sublated by the dialectic. See "Literature and the Right to Death," p. 379.

¹² I am reminded here of LaCapra's distinction between historical and structural traumas and the need to rethink them in terms of their relation. As we saw in chapter four, the structural is the condition of possibility for the historical, in the same manner that the work is the condition of possibility for the book, but only inasmuch as the former arrests, for a moment, the disruptive return of the latter. Blanchot's sense of the relation between these two components helps us to further understand the relation of a traumatic excess (the structural) that returns to disrupt historical understanding.

¹³ This ambiguity is dramatized in *The Space of Literature* by the figures of Orpheus and Eurydice. Orpheus's work is to restore Eurydice to life, bring her back into the light of day and resurrect her. But he gives in to a greater exigency--to see her as death, in the plenitude of her dying--and his work is sacrificed when he turns to gaze directly upon her, transgressing the law of the Underworld. Upon looking at her, she appears as disappearance, as an image, and thus his work is put out of work by the demand of the outside. See the essay "Orpheus's Gaze" in *The Space of Literature* (EL 225-232; SL 171-176).

¹⁴ Emmanuel Lévinas, *De l'existence a l'existant* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978). Emmanuel Lévinas, *Existence and Existents*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Dusquesne UP, 1988). All references are to the Alphonso Lingis's translation.

¹⁵ In her reading of Lévinas's treatment of literature, Jill Robbins notes that Lévinas can only approach literature through strategies of description and allusion. She draws on Bataille's distinction between Lévinas's description and allusion and Blanchot's cry of the *il y a* to show how Blanchot gives the *il y a* a literary specificity that it lacks in Lévinas. My point here is that as it emerges in the exchange, the *il y a* is of an original

literary specificity. As such, it evinces a much larger structural relation. Because of the literary specificity of the *il y a*, literature becomes the thing that discourses of history, philosophy, or aesthetics cannot arrest and integrate into their structures of meaning. Literature is the excess that makes necessary discourse but ruins its dream of absolute fulfillment. See Jill Robbins, *Altered Readings: Lévinas and Literature* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999).

¹⁶ It is at this point where Lévinas returns Blanchot's reference. Lévinas interrupts his discussion of the *il y a*'s presence in texts by Shakespeare and Huysmans in order to footnote Blanchot, where he writes that in Blanchot's *Thomas l'Obscure* the *il y a* as the presence of absence, the night, the dissolution of the subject in the night is "admirably expressed." See Lévinas, *Existence and Existents* p. 58. This exchange demonstrates, I think, to what extent the *il y a* is a formulation of the exchange between Blanchot and Lévinas, between literature and philosophy.

¹⁷ This is what Blanchot means when he famously declares that literature begins when it becomes a question. Literature is the movement by which language questions itself, in which language loses any presupposition that it exists and asks of itself where it comes from. See the opening pages of Blanchot, "Literature and the Right to Death."

¹⁸ See Martin Heidegger, "Origins of the Work of Art." *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper Collins, 1971).

¹⁹ This reversal bears a striking resemblance to the catastrophic *hysteron proteron* of Pynchon's rocket, wherein a "radical reversal" reveals the estranging cyclical pattern that must be displaced by the parabolic arc in order for a typical or traditional understanding of historical linearity to become possible. In Blanchot, the *hysteron*

proteron of the second version of the imaginary reveals how we retroactively re-situate the relationship of the two so that what actually comes first appears as a secondary, supplementary excess conditioned by what has become, through the application, the primary.

²⁰ Derrida discusses this condition in terms of the other present within any “me” or “I.” He notes the name, which marks the individuality of the person who bears it, bears in it the other in that the name always belongs to someone else, who is both stranger and intimate to us by virtue of the shared name. In speaking our name, we are always speaking in the name of the other, who is both within and without “us.” See Derrida, *Memoires for Paul de Man* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

²¹ For an example of how Blanchot uses “fascination” in a way that links his early work in *The Space of Literature* to the later writings on the Shoah, see “The Effect of Strangeness.” *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993) 360-379.

²² My use of these terms here is intended to show how Blanchot’s thinking on fascination traverses what will come to be called deconstruction. For a more substantial discussion of the relation between Blanchot’s work and Derrida’s, see Leslie Hill, *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary* (New York: Routledge, 1997).

²³ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Agamben, Giorgio. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller Roazen. New York: Zone Books, 1999.
- Amis, Martin. *Time's Arrow*. New York: Harmony Books, 1991.
- Arendt, Hannah. *Totalitarianism: Part Three of The Origins of Totalitarianism*. New York: Harcourt, 1968.
- Bataille, Georges. "The Psychological Structure of Fascism." In *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. 137-160. Trans. Allan Stoekl. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1985
- . *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986.
- . *Inner Experience*. Trans. Leslie Anne Boldt. Albany: State U of New York P, 1988.
- Berger, James. *After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1998.
- Bérubé, Michael. *Marginal Forces, Cultural Centers: Tolson, Pynchon*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1992.
- Blanchot, Maurice. *L'espace littéraire*. Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1955.
- . *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1993.
- . "Literature and the Right to Death." Trans. Lydia Davis. *The Station Hill Blanchot Reader*. 359-400. Barrytown, NY: Station Hill P, 1999.
- . *The Space of Literature*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1982.
- . *The Writing of the Disaster*. Trans. Ann Smock. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1995.
- Bruns, Gerald. *Maurice Blanchot: The Refusal of Philosophy*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1997.
- Butler, Cornelia. "Painter as Witness." *Marlene Dumas: Measuring Your Own Grave*. Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, Los Angeles/ Distributed Art Publishers, Inc., 2008.

- Calinescu, Matei. *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1977.
- Caruth, Cathy. *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1996.
- Dawidowicz, Lucy. *The War Against the Jews, 1933-45*. London: Pelican, 1977.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time Image*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1989.
- Derrida, Jacques. *Memoires for Paul de Man*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Duras, Marguerite. *Practicalities*. Trans., Barbara Bray. New York: Grove Press, 1987.
- Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Freud, Sigmund. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. New York: Norton, 1961.
- . *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. New York: Norton, 1959.
- . "Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood." *The Uncanny and other Essays*. 43-120. Trans. David McLintock. New York: Penguin, 2003.
- . "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*. 246-260. Trans. and Ed. James Strachey. London: Hogarth, 1957.
- Friedlander, Saul. *Reflections of Nazism: An Essay on Kitsch and Death*. New York: Harper & Row, 1982.
- Frost, Laura. *Sex Drives: Fantasies of Fascism in Literary Modernism*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2002.
- Frost, Lee, Dir. *Love Camp 7* (also known as *Nazi Love Camp 7*). DVD distribution by DVD Classics, 1979.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971.
- Gasché, Rodolphe. "The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the Null Space of Literature." *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing*. Ed. Carolyn Bailey Gill. 34-69. London: Routledge, 1996.
- . "Appendix: On the Edges." *The Wild Card of Reading: On Paul de Man*. 235-268. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1998.
- Hamacher, Werner, Neil Hertz, and Thomas Keenan, Eds. *Wartime Journalism, 1939-1943, by Paul de Man*. Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1988.

- Harari, Roberto. *Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety*. New York: The Other Press, 2001.
- Heidegger, Martin. "Origins of the Work of Art." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Trans. Albert Hofstadter. 15-86. New York: Harper Collins, 1971.
- Heilbrunn, Jacob. "Telling the Holocaust Like it Wasn't." *The New York Times*. 10 January 2009.
- Hegel, G. W. F. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. London: Oxford UP, 1977.
- Hill, Leslie. *Blanchot: Extreme Contemporary*. New York: Routledge, 1997.
- Jameson, Frederic. "Marxism and Historicism." *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Volume Two*. 148-177. St. Paul: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- . *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998*. New York: Verso, 1998.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgement*. Translated by James Creed Meredith. London: Oxford UP, 1952.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Black Sun: Melancholia and Depression*. New York: Columbia UP, 1989.
- Lacan, Jacques. *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis, 1959-1960*. Ed. Jacques-Alain Miller. Trans. Dennis Porter. New York: Norton, 1986.
- LaCapra, Dominick. *History and Memory After Auschwitz*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1998.
- . *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994.
- . *Writing History, Writing Trauma*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 2001.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, Philippe. *Poetry as Experience*. Trans. Andrea Tarnowski. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1999.
- Lang, Berel. *Holocaust Representation: Art Within the Limits of History and Ethics*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2003.
- Langer, Lawrence. *Admitting the Holocaust*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1995.
- . *The Holocaust and the Literary Imagination*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1977).
- Laplanche, Jean, and J.-B. Pontalis. *The Language of Psychoanalysis*. New York: Norton, 1973.

- Lévinas, Emmuel. *De l'existence a l'existant*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1978.
- . *Existence and Existents*. Trans. Alphonso Lingis. Pittsburgh: Dusquesne UP, 1988.
- Libertson, Joseph. *Proximity: Lévinas, Blanchot, Bataille and Communication*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff Publishers, 1982.
- Liotard, Jean-Francois. *Heidegger and "the jews."* Trans. Andreas Mitchell and Mark Roberts. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1990.
- . *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1988.
- McGovern, James. *Crossbow and Overcast*. New York: Morrow, 1964.
- Novick, Peter. *The Holocaust in American Life*. New York: Mariner Books, 2000.
- Pannaccio, Angelo, Dir. *Holocaust Two: The Memories, Delirium, and Vengeance*. DVD distribution by Spazmondo, 1982.
- Pynchon, Thomas. *Gravity's Rainbow*. New York: Penguin, 1995.
- Ravetto, Kris. *The Unmaking of Fascist Aesthetics*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2002.
- Reich, Wilhelm. *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*. New York: Noonday, 1970.
- Robbins, Jill. *Altered Readings: Lévinas and Literature*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1999.
- Rouso, Henri. *The Vichy Syndrome: History and Memory in France since 1944*.
Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1991.
- Santner, Eric. *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory and Film in Post-War Germany*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990.
- Savage, Kirk. "The Politics of Memory: Black Emancipation and the Civil War Monument." John R. Gillis, ed. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994.
- Schaefer, Eric. *Bold! Daring! Shocking! True: A History of Exploitation Films, 1919-1959*. Durham: Duke UP, 1999.
- Scholes, Robert. *Fabulation and Metafiction*. Urbana-Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1979.
- Schwarz, Daniel. *Imagining the Holocaust*. New York: St. Martin's P, 1999.

- Sontag, Susan. "Fascinating Fascism." In *Under the Sign of Saturn*. 73-108. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.
- . *Regarding The Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003).
- . "Syberberg's Hitler." In *Under the Sign of Saturn*. 137-168. New York: Anchor Books, 1991.
- Steiner, George. *The Portage to San Cristobal of A. H.* Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1981.
- Strzelczyk, Florentine. "Fascism—Fantasy—Fascination—Film." *Arachne* 7.1/7.2 (2002).
- Taylor, Mark. *Altarity*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1987.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre. *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*. Ed. Froma Zeitlin. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991.
- Weisenburger, Steven. *A Gravity's Rainbow Companion: Sources and Contexts for Pynchon's Novel*. Athens: U of Georgia P, 1988.
- White, Hayden. "Historical Emplotment and the Problem of Truth." *Probing the Limits of Representation: Nazism and the Final Solution*. 37-53 Ed. Saul Friedlander. Harvard UP, 1992.
- . *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Truth*. Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1987.
- Williams, Linda. *Hardcore: Power, Pleasure, and the Frenzy of the Visible*. Berkeley: U of California P, 1989.
- Wordsworth, William. *The Prelude: 1799, 1805, 1850*. Ed. M. H. Abrams. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978.