

## Parting Words: Trauma, Silence, and Survival

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## INTRODUCTION

Freud begins his groundbreaking work *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, with his astonished encounter with the veterans of World War I, whose dreams of the battlefield bring them back, repeatedly, to the horrifying scenes of death that they have witnessed. Like the victims of accident neuroses, these dreams seem to bring the soldiers back to a moment of fright or surprise that constituted their original encounter with death:

Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little. (Freud, *Beyond* 13)<sup>2</sup>

The repetition of battlefield horrors in the dreams astonishes Freud, because dreams, in psychoanalytic theory, had always served the function of fulfilling wishes: of allowing the unconscious, conflictual desires of childhood to find expression through the symbolic world of the dream. In the dreams of the returning veterans, however, encounter with death and horror cannot be assimilated to the fulfillment of desire: rather than turning death into a symbol or vehicle of psychic meaning, these traumatic dreams seem to turn the psyche itself into the vehicle for expressing the terrifying literality of a history it does not completely own. But the peculiarity of this returning, literal history also strikes Freud because it does not only bring back the reality of death, but the fright or unpreparedness for it: the dreams not only show the scenes of battle but wake the dreamer up in another fright. Freud's surprised encounter with the repetitive dreams of the war – the beginning of the theory of trauma, and of history, that has become so central to our contemporary thinking about history and memory – thus raises the urgent and unavoidable questions: *What does it mean for the reality of war to appear in the fiction of the dream? What does it mean for life to bear witness to death? And what is the surprise that is encountered in this witness?*

Immediately after discussing the disturbing dreams of the war, however, Freud proposes to “leave the dark and dismal subject of the traumatic neurosis” and to pass on to the “normal” activity of child's play. Freud embarks here upon a story of his encounter with another repetitive behavior, the “puzzling activity” of a “good little boy” of one and a half, just beginning to speak. Freud says he observed the strange game of this child who repeatedly threw a wooden spool on a string into his cot, uttering the sound “o-o-o-o,” then retrieved it, uttering “a-a-a-a.” With the help of the mother, Freud first interprets these sounds as meaning *fort*, gone, and *da*, here, and ultimately suggests that the child is reenacting the departure and return of his mother, which he had just recently been forced to confront. The repetitive game, as a story, thus seems to represent the inner symbolic world of the child: as a story of departure and return, the game seems not only symbolically to fulfill a wish by telling the story of the mother's departure as the story of her return, but also to substitute, for the pain of loss, the very pleasure of creation itself.<sup>3</sup> But Freud himself unexpectedly proceeds to challenge his own first interpretation:

Our interest is directed to another point. The child cannot possibly have felt his mother's departure as something agreeable or even indifferent [...] It may perhaps be said in reply that her departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending. (*Beyond* 15-16)

The creative activity of the child's game, Freud recognizes with surprise, does not ultimately involve a symbolic representation of the mother's pleasurable return, but repeats, in a kind of stammer that interrupts its story, the painful memory of her departure. Like the soldiers' dreams, the game thus reenacts the very memory of a painful reality. What is most surprising in the child's game, however, is that this reenactment of reality in the game places repetition at the very

heart of childhood, and links the repetition to a creative act of invention. In the introduction of the child's game Freud's original question- *how does life bear witness to death?* – is linked to another question: *What kind of witness is a creative act?*

I will propose in what follows that Freud's insight into trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, its new understanding of personal act and of collective history in the face of war, lies precisely in the striking and enigmatic leap that juxtaposes the nightmares of war to the child's game. This juxtaposition is not ordinarily taken into account in the critical reception of Freud's text- the study of trauma in contemporary fields tends to focus on a theory of history and memory derived ultimately from the example of the nightmare and the theory that grows out of it, and the writing on the child game is not part of the tradition of trauma theory<sup>4</sup> -but it is crucial, I will suggest, for understanding the insight of Freud. My own understanding of this insight did not emerge, however, simply through a reading of Freud's text but began, in fact, in my encounter with a real child in Atlanta, a child whose best friend was murdered in the street and who is interviewed by the friend's mother. By reading together the language of the nightmare and the language of the child in Freud's text – two very distinct kinds of language whose intertwining strands are at the heart of Freud's theory – and in then understanding how Freud's text and the language of the real child shed light upon each other, we can begin to understand Freud's enigmatic move in the theory of trauma from the drive for death to the drive for life, from the reformulating of life around the witness to death, to the possibility of witnessing and making history in creative acts of life.

## DEATH AND AWAKENING

Freud's analysis of repetition compulsion in the origins of consciousness indeed attempts to explain the significance and surprise of the traumatic encounter with death in terms of a new relation between consciousness and life.<sup>5</sup> Consciousness first arose, Freud speculates, as an attempt to protect the life of the organism from the imposing stimuli of a hostile world, by bringing to its attention the nature and direction of external stimuli. The protective function of consciousness as taken in bits of the world, however, was less important, Freud suggests, than its more profound function of keeping the world out, a function it accomplished by placing stimuli in an ordered experience of time. What causes trauma, then, is an encounter that is not directly perceived as a threat to the life of the organism but that occurs, rather, as a break in the mind's experience of time:

We may, I think, tentatively venture to regard the common traumatic neurosis as a consequence of an extensive breach being made in the protective shield against stimuli [...] We still attribute importance to the element of fright. It is caused by lack of any preparedness for anxiety. (31)

The breach in the mind – the psyche's awareness of the threat to life – is not caused by a direct threat or injury, but by fright, the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not the direct perception of danger, that is, that constitutes the threat for the psyche, but the fact that the danger is recognized as such one moment too late. It is this lack of direct experience that thus becomes the basis of the repetition of the traumatic nightmare: “These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (32). The return of the traumatic experience is not the direct witness to a threat to life but rather the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to master what was never fully grasped in the first place. And since consciousness cannot bear witness to death, the life of the survivor becomes the repetition of the reality that consciousness cannot grasp. In the traumatic encounter with death, life itself attempts to serve as the witness that consciousness cannot provide.

The repetition exemplified by the nightmare, indeed, does not only concern the repetition of the image in the dream, but the repetition of waking from it (Caruth 64): “Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright” (Freud, *Beyond* 13). If “fright” is the term by which Freud defines the traumatic effect of not having been prepared in time, then the trauma of the nightmare does not simply consist in the experience within the dream, but in the experience of waking from it. It is the surprise of waking that repeats the unexpectedness of the trauma. And as such the trauma is not only the repetition of the missed encounter with death, but the missed encounter with one’s own survival. It is the incomprehensible act of surviving—waking into life—that repeats and bears witness to what remains un-grasped within the encounter with death. The repetition of trauma therefore, is not only an attempt of an imperative to know what cannot be grasped that is repeated unconsciously in the survivor’s life: it is also an imperative to life that still remains not fully understood. And it is this incomprehensible imperative to life that Freud ultimately places at the very origin of life, when he suggests that life itself began as the drive to death:

The attributes of life were at some time awoken in inanimate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception [. . .] The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavored to cancel itself out. In this way the first drive came into being: the drive to return to the inanimate state. (38, translation modified)

Life itself originates, Freud suggests here, as an awakening from 'death' for which there was no preparation. Life itself, that is, is an imperative to awaken that precedes any understanding or consciousness and any possible desire or wish.<sup>6</sup> The witness of survival itself – the awakening that constitutes life – lies not only in the incomprehensible repetition of the past, that is, but in the incomprehensibility of a future that is not yet owned. Freud's central question raised by the war nightmare, *what does it mean for life to bear witness to death?* thus ultimately leads to another, more urgent and enigmatic question: *in what way is the experience of trauma also the experience of an imperative to live? What is the nature of a life that continues beyond trauma?*

## THE CHILD'S GAME

It might appear that with this analysis Freud had replaced the notion of the child, and its central place in psychoanalytic theory, with the theory of trauma. The child's repetition of its mother's departure could be explained as the unknowing reliving of its mother's (anticipated) death, and the child's life as the unconscious reliving of what is not yet grasped within the mother's departure. From the perspective of Freud's rethinking of life around its traumatic significance, the child's game thus peculiarly re-enacts the incomprehensible moment of the mother's act of leaving and reshapes the very life of the child as the unconscious witness to the death he has survived. Repeating the *fort* that is not his own, but his mother's act of leaving, the child's own life story – his departure into life – becomes inextricable from his mother's silent departure into death. In this incomprehensible departure, the child's life – like the origin of the drive – thus silently enacts a larger history he does not completely own.<sup>7</sup>

Freud's analysis indeed suggests that the encounter with traumatic repetition requires a rethinking of psychoanalysis itself, which had previously focused its model of the mind on the notion of childhood as the site of the pleasure principle. By modelling the mind on the encounter with war trauma, Freud thus appears to shift the center of psychoanalytic thinking from the individual struggle with internal Oedipal conflicts of childhood to the external, collective activities of history, and to make of childhood itself a reflection of a more obscure painful encounter. Thus Robert Jay Lifton writes that the reversal of adult and child trauma as a model for the human mind was at the center of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, and produced the

“image-model of the human being as a perpetual survivor” (164). The questions raised by war trauma concerning the nature of life thus require a new model for psychoanalytic thinking and, in particular, for the relation between psychoanalysis and history.

## BEGINNING AGAIN

Yet the game of the child playing *fort* and *da*, there and here, with his spool, seems to become not less, but more enigmatic when it is understood in relation to traumatic repetition. If the child's re-enactment of his mother's departure repeats, ultimately, her loss and her death, the game remains, still, an act of creation that, unlike the dream of the war veterans, does not simply compulsively repeat a history it doesn't own but creates, in its repetition, something new.<sup>8</sup> This very movement from the example of traumatic repetition in the war nightmare to the example of the child will, moreover, reappear surprisingly in Freud's text, and will reappear precisely at the moment that Freud has explained the notion of trauma in the very origins of life. For shortly after introducing the origin of life as an awakening out of death, Freud pauses abruptly and starts again:

But let us pause for a moment and reflect. It cannot be so. The sexual instincts, to which the theory of the neuroses gives a quite special place, appear under a very different aspect [...] The whole path of development to natural death is not trodden by all the elementary entities which compose the complicated body of one of the higher organisms. Some of them, the germ cells, probably retain the original structure of living matter and, after a certain time [...] separate themselves from the organism as a whole. Under favourable conditions, they begin to develop — that is, to repeat the performance [*das Spiel wiederholen*] to which they owe their existence; and in the end once again one portion of their substance pursues its development to a finish, while another portion harks back once again as a fresh residual germ to the beginning of the process of development [...] They are the true life drives. (39-40, translation modified)

The origin of life as the death drive — as the beginning of the repetition compulsion, and as an awakening — is itself repeated, Freud audaciously suggests, and is repeated, moreover, precisely in the form of a game (*Spiel*). After disappearing for most of his text since his original introduction of the child — and disappearing in particular from the theory of trauma, which is entirely governed by the language of consciousness and awakening<sup>9</sup> — the language of the game reappears, and reappears to describe a different form of repetition: a repeating of the origin of life in another kind of beginning.<sup>10</sup> This repetition brings back, moreover, for the very first time, the explicit language of the child's game, the language Freud uses at the moment he recognizes the game as a game of departure:

But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending [*daß der erste Akt, das Fortgehen, für sich allein als Spiel inszeniert wurde, und zwar ungleich häufiger als das zum lustvollen Ende fortgeführte Ganze*]. (16)

This game and the event of departure that it re-enacts is now repeated as the very action of the life drive:

Under favourable conditions, they begin to develop — that is, to repeat the performance to which they owe their existence; and in the end once again one portion of their substance pursues its development to a finish [*Unter günstige Bedingungen gebracht, beginnen sie sich zu entwickeln, daß berst das Spiel, dem sie ihre Entstehung verdanken, zu wiederholen, und dies endet mit, daß wieder em Anted threr Substanz die Entwicklung bis zum Ende fortfabrt*]. (40)

Freud thus reintroduces the language of departure not as the origin of the death drive, but as the way it repeats itself, differently, as the drive for life.<sup>11</sup> The departure into life is not simply the

awakening that repeats an original death, but an act of parting that distinguishes, precisely, between death and life.<sup>12</sup> The repetition of this game, then, as an origin, is the beginning of life as a surprising repetition that both bears witness to and breaks from the death drive, that bears witness and repeats by precisely breaking away. It is a language of departure, that is, that does not repeat the unconscious origin of life as death, but creates a history by precisely departing toward survival.

This creative act takes place, moreover, not only in the child's game, but in Freud's own text, as well, through the very transformation undergone by the language of trauma: from the departure – the *fort* – that appears to be the repetition of the mother's anticipated death in the child's game, to the *fortführen* of the drive that is the pressure toward life.<sup>13</sup> This transformation also differentiates or parts the traumatized subject, the soldiers of war repeating death, from the individual testimony of Freud's own text, the creative act of language that becomes not only the story of departures but also the language of play, a language that would, in fact, become a new language for psychoanalysis in the future. In the life drive, then, life itself, and the language of creativity, begin as an act that bears witness to the past even by turning from it that bears witness to death by bearing witness to the possibility of origination in life. History, here, is reclaimed and generated not in reliving unconsciously the death of the past but by an act that bears witness by parting from it. The language of the life drive does not simply point backward, that is, but bears witness to the past by pointing to the future. The return of the child's language in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* thus transforms the original questions of trauma – *what does it mean for life to bear witness to death? and what is the nature of a life that continues beyond trauma?* – into an ultimately more fundamental and elusive concern: *what is the language of the life drive?*

## MEMENTOS

The significance of this question arose, for me, not from within Freud's theoretical text, nor in the history of World War I, but in my own encounter with a child in Atlanta, within the contemporary history of urban violence in North America. I encountered this child shortly after leaving New Haven and arriving in Atlanta, when I became familiar with a group established in Atlanta to help traumatized children who had witnessed violence, a group called “Kids Alive and Loved”. This group was established by a woman named Bernadette Leite, whose oldest son, Khalil, was shot in the back one night when he was out with friends, shortly before graduating from high school. The impulse for the group came specifically, as she tells us, not only from witnessing the symptoms of anger and the violent re-enactment of trauma in the kids' responses to the death at the funeral and afterward, but when the mother of the dead boy, Bernadette, overheard the peculiar language of children:

After his death I noticed that his friends were coming over every afternoon and hanging out in his room. And I began to listen, and I heard them speaking to him. They would come over every afternoon and hang out in his room and speak to him. And I realized that they needed someone to talk to.<sup>14</sup>

Hearing the language of the children addressed only to her dead son, Bernadette recognized the unresolved trauma of many of his friends in their inability to speak about their feelings to the living. She thus decided to found a group to allow the children to talk about their feelings to each other concerning the violence they had experienced, in weekly Wednesday night meetings and through video-taped interviews she has made for the 'Kids Alive and Loved' Oral History Archive. Giving the group the name 'Kids Alive and Loved', whose initials – KAL – reproduce the initials of her child, Khalil Asem Leite, Bernadette hoped to make the group not only a way of both helping the living children to get over their trauma by talking about Khalil (as well as other murders they had experienced), but also of providing a kind of living memorial to her dead son through the living children's words and lives.



The complexity of this process was most movingly portrayed for me, however, through the words of a single child, in the recorded interview of Bernadette with Gregory, Khalil's best friend. Gregory was 17 at the time of his friend's death. He had received a call from Khalil that morning to go out that evening, but argued about being called so early, and then was not at home when he was called again.<sup>15</sup> Gregory speaks, throughout the interview, in a language that tries to convey the difficulty of grasping Khalil's death: when asked to say something about Khalil's life he answers, 'He lived for everything. He died for nothing'. This inability to grasp the meaning of his friend's death resonates in his own difficulty in extricating a description of Khalil's life from his own survival of Khalil's death:

B: What do you want people to know about his life?

G: He had a good heart.

B: What does [the experience of Khalil's death] feel like?

G: It's like when somebody is actually pulling your heart out, or just repeatedly stabbing it.

The dead Khalil's life and Greg's survival of it are tied around a heart that they share and that has now been removed. Greg's heart, it would appear, being removed and stabbed, tells the story of Khalil's death. In the exchange between Bernadette and Greg, we see Bernadette's attempt to help Greg memorialize Khalil in a kind of language of memory, and we witness Greg's own transformation of her language of memory into a parting that allows for both a memorialization of his friend and a recognition of his own life.

## PARTING WORDS

This possibility opens up, strikingly, in a moment of surprise, in a remarkable moment of his interview with her, just at the place, moreover, *when* the interview turns to the topic of memorialization. Bernadette has been asking about Gregory's feelings concerning Khalil's death, and the interview has become very sombre and at times filled with sorrow. Then Greg makes the interview take a sudden turn:

B: Do you have any mementos of Khalil?

G: Let's see.

B: Do you have personal belongings of his?

G: (suddenly smiling): He has something of mine!

B (laughing): I know he has something of yours ... a couple of things!

G: He had... That's what also made me feel good, because he was buried in my shirt that I loved, and my watch. At first that shirt bothered me because I loved that shirt -

B: And I didn't know at the time ... Mark picked it out and I only found out later. It's too bad - I wanted to get him a Tommy Hilfiger shirt he'd seen downtown but I didn't have time to get it and get to the funeral parlor. Its too bad - but then maybe he wouldn't have been buried in your favorite shirt.

G: That's O.K., because it was my favorite shirt and my favorite friend.

Greg's first response to Bernadette's question – “do you have any personal belongings of his?” – comes as a surprise because it reverses the order by which the living Greg would memorialize his dead friend and suggests that it is the dead friend that is keeping mementos of him: “He has something of mine!” Greg says. This is also, in its irony and humor, a kind of maintenance of the playful relationship that Greg had with the living Khalil: the implicit joke that Khalil got away with his favorite shirt seems to recreate the very humorous relationship they had when Khalil was alive. Greg thus, in effect, says “gone!” to his shirt and, in so doing, establishes a relationship with Khalil that recognizes, even within the fiction of personification, the ineradicable difference between his life and Khalil's death.

Bernadette's response, likewise, turns both to the dead and to the living at once, although in a somewhat different fashion. On the one hand she tells, very movingly, of a mother who wants to get one last gift for her dead son, to buy him the shirt that he had seen and wanted. But the telling of this story is simultaneously, and equally movingly, a kind of playful mothering of the living boy in front of her, because she empathises with him that it is too bad that he could not have had his favorite shirt back. To Gregory's "*fort!*" or "gone!" Bernadette thus says, in effect, "*da!*" or "here!" and, in this way, makes her act of mothering the living boy a continuation of her mothering of the dead one, and makes of Greg the living memory of the dead Khalil.

It is thus particularly striking that Greg's final words, which are the true climax of the exchange for me, once again give up the shirt to Khalil: "That's O.K. It was my favorite shirt and my favorite friend". If his first response brought Khalil to life as a youthful friend - and reanimated Greg too as he was before he had the horrible knowledge of Khalil's death - this final response, in giving the gift to Khalil, gives up that former innocence and recreates Greg through his ability to give to and thus memorialize his dead friend. By once again saying 'gone!', Greg indeed departs from his former self and turns the memento - and the language of the memento - into an act, not of a symbolic return or wish for possession, but of an ability to give to the dead something that can never, now, be returned.

This double act is repeated, a few minutes later, in the next exchange, an exchange that now, significantly, concerns a game:

B: So it made you feel good that your favorite friend was buried in your favorite shirt and your watch.

G: (smiling again): And he has my — it's not really a hat, it's a cap. It's a little like a stocking cap, that colorful thing on his wall. Yeah, him and me and Maurice would play this game, 'left hand,' where you call out what's in the person's left hand and you get to keep it. And he called that and he got it.

B: I should give that back to you, you could take it with you as a memento.

G: Uhuh, I would feel better if it would stay in his household. Because it's a memento of him but it's a memento of me too.

The game with his friend, Greg tells us, had been a game of naming and possessing; by calling out the other's clothing it could become yours, just as the friendship was perhaps a kind of reciprocal possession of each boy by the other. But when Bernadette offers, once again, to give the possession back — "I should give it back to you, you could take it with you as a memento" — Greg once again repeats his *fort*: "I would feel better if it would stay in his household. Because it is a memento of him but it's a memento of me too". Naming the cap as a memento not only of Khalil but of himself, Greg not only gives up the part of himself that existed before Khalil's death, he also ties his life with Khalil's death: the cap is not only a memento of him for me, he says, but of me for him. This bond, however, does not confuse the living child with the dead one, nor does it symbolize the dead one in the living one, but precisely separates Greg, whose younger self is buried in the coffin, from the dead child who will not grow past this moment. Indeed, this refusal of Bernadette's offer to give the cap back is also (as my own mother pointed out to me), a way of saying "I will not be your dead child." In giving up the language of memorialization offered by Bernadette, however, he creatively transforms the language of the memento and achieves another language and another memorialization: a memorialization that takes place precisely through his separation and his own act of creation.<sup>16</sup> It is in this reclaiming of the meaning of the memento, even while giving it up, that Greg's *fort*, I would suggest, does not simply re-enact his friend's departure or attempt to return to his life, but bears witness, creatively, in the very act of parting from his dead friend.

This language, I would suggest, is the language of the life drive. It is this drive for life that is at work in Greg's description of how the death of his friend is also motivating him to achieve goals in his life, achievements that will also incorporate Khalil's name:



B: How has his death changed your life?

G: I am more determined to make it in the music business somehow and I know it will be because of him. We used to talk about it all the time. He did rap... [W]e were to go to Clark Atlanta, him for business management and me for communication, music, and combine our talents. But now he can't do that ... But that's O.K., because when I do it I'll bring all the people jobs, Mike, Maurice ... When we get that studio [Khalil's] name is going to be the name of it. And I have to have a son and his name will be in there.

In this language we can see the drive for life, a language of parting that itself moves the speaker forward to a life that is not simply possessed, but given, in some sense, and received, as a gift from the dead. In the memento, as Greg teaches us, the two children take leave from each other: as Greg gives Khalil back to death, Khalil, in a sense, gives Greg back to life. This is a creative act, an act that bears witness to the dead precisely in the process of turning away. It is indeed a new language of departure, parting words<sup>17</sup> that bind the living child to the dead one even as he takes leave from him, binds him to his dead friend even in the very act of letting go.

## FREUD'S GAME

In Greg's words, we see the insight of Freud's text as it touches on and resonates with our contemporary crises and with the actual struggles of children in contemporary culture. But Greg's words also shed light on the way in which the language of the child itself re-emerges at the very heart of Freud's own theoretical writing.<sup>18</sup> For Freud's elaborate staging of the game of the *fort/ da* can be understood not only as a description of the puzzling game of the child staging the departure and return of the mother, but as Freud's own oscillation in his understanding of the child's game. This oscillation takes the form, moreover, of the alternation between a *fort* and a *da*:

I eventually realized that it was a game and that the only use he made of any of his toys was to play 'gone' with them. (15)

This, then, was the complete game - disappearance and return. As a rule one witnessed only its first act, which was repeated untiringly as a game in itself, though there is no doubt that the greater pleasure was attached to the second act. (15)

It may perhaps be said ... that [the mother's] departure had to be enacted as a necessary preliminary to her joyful return, and that it was in the latter that lay the true purpose of the game. But against this must be counted the observed fact that the first act, that of departure, was staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety, with its pleasurable ending. (15-16)

As Freud's interpretation passes from the *fort* to the narrative of *fort and da*, and back again to the *fort*, Freud shows himself as struggling in the face of a child whose language, in its shifting meaning for Freud, first brings him nearer and then distances him in Freud's understanding.<sup>19</sup> What is striking in Freud's example is not simply the child's struggle and re-enactment of the distance of its mother, but Freud's struggle with and re-enactment of the distance of the child. Freud's text, it would appear, repeats the story of the child he has encountered, and does so, moreover, in the very act of distancing. Paradoxically, then, it will be in his repetition of the child's distance, in his own distancing of the child at the moment of his failed comprehension of the game, that Freud's own text will connect with, and transmit, the story the child cannot quite tell. Freud's text thus itself repeats the child's traumatized *fort* – the stammering word that marks the very loss of the child's own story – but does so as the very creation of its own new language,

a language that does not return to the pleasurable compensations of the narrative but speaks, precisely, from *beyond the story*. It is not necessarily on the level of the child's own game, but on the level of Freud's repetition of it that the creative act of the game, the new conceptual language of the life drive, will take place.<sup>20</sup>

We could, moreover, understand the entire theory of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* not simply as an explanation of trauma from the distance of theoretical speculation, but as the very passage of the story of the child in a theoretical act of transformation.<sup>21</sup> For what is the story of the mind's attempt to master the event retrospectively if not the story of a failed return: the attempt, and failure, of the mind to return to the moment of the event? The theory of repetition compulsion as the unexpected encounter with an event that the mind misses and then repeatedly attempts to grasp is the story of a failure of the mind to return to an experience it has never quite grasped, the repetition of an ordinary departure from the moment that constitutes the very experience of trauma. And this story appears again as the beginning of life in the death drive, as life's attempt to return to inanimate matter that ultimately fails and departs into a human history!<sup>22</sup> Freud's own theory, then, does not simply describe the death drive and its enigmatic move to the drive for life, but enacts this drive for life as the very language of the child that encounters, and attempts to grasp, the catastrophes of a traumatic history.

## A FINAL PARTING

The most striking appearance of Freud's own speaking as the child will occur, however, not within the theoretical language of the text, but in a footnote that refers, in fact, to the entrance of a real death into the life of the child as well as into his own life: "When this child was five and three-quarters, his mother died. Now that she was really 'gone' ('o-o-o-o'), the child showed no signs of grief." In noting the real death of the child's mother, Freud first explicitly links the child to himself, since the child's mother was also, in reality, Freud's daughter Sophie, who died toward the end of the writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. But whereas the (already traumatized) child shows no signs of grief, Freud himself begins to repeat, not simply the language of the *fort*, but the inarticulate sounds of the "o-o-o-o" that constituted the very origin of the game (and the only moment in which the living mother had appeared in the example, when she agreed with Freud as to the meaning of the "o-o-o-o" as indicating the word *fort*). By reintroducing the lost "o-o-o-o" of the original child's game in his words, and in this footnote that announces his daughter's and the mother's real death, Freud implicitly connects the origin of the child's game with the very significance of his own theoretical text, a significance that now, in its very inarticulate stammer, serves as a kind of memory of and parting from Freud's own dead child.<sup>23</sup> The language of the theory, much like the child's stammering language, articulates the very notions of the trauma and of the death drive as a creative act of parting: a parting from the real child, and a parting from the psychoanalytic child – or from the mere psychoanalysis of childhood – toward an analysis of the collective catastrophes of death encountered in war, and toward the pressing cultural imperative for a new kind of survival.<sup>24</sup>

I would propose that it is through the child's words – through this literary, not fully articulated language of theory – that Freud's text speaks, moreover, most powerfully, in its full historical relevance, to us. For it is through the child's own stammer – the stammer of Freud as he faces the encounter with World War I, the reduction of the theoretical mind to the stammering struggle of the child – that Freud will first tell us about the necessity of witnessing the effects of death in the century of trauma. But it is also through the creative transformation of this stammer into a new language of psychoanalysis – not only the language of departure, which will be his language of history in *Moses and Monotheism*, but the very future language of psychoanalysis itself, in the rethinking of psychoanalysis, for example, around the individual's capacity for play – that the possibilities of Freud's not yet articulated insight are handed over to

us.<sup>25</sup> I would suggest that it is only in listening to this second and literarily creative element in Freud's own writing, that the theory of trauma, now so prevalent in numerous disciplines, can extend itself beyond the theory of repetition and catastrophe, beyond the insight of the death drive, into the insight enigmatically passed on in the new notion of the drive to life. As such the theory of trauma does not limit itself to a theoretical formulation of the centrality of death in culture, but constitutes – in Freud's, and our own, historical experience of modernity – an act of parting that itself creates and passes on a different history of survival.

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<sup>1</sup> My mother was a psychoanalyst who worked for many years with children and adolescents and later with adults. She had discussed an earlier version of this text with me a number of times before her death in March 1998.

<sup>2</sup> German quotations will be from *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* (*Studienausgabe*, vol. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Freud describes the game as the child's "first great cultural achievement," and suggests that the child rewarded himself for not expressing his distress by creating a game instead. Thus the game not only represents the mother's wished-for return, but by substituting itself for the mother the game becomes, itself, a kind of symbolic return.

<sup>4</sup> The game has been read, for instance, as a game of mourning. Within the literary critical tradition see for example Santner, 1990. The received understanding of the game is that it represents a form of mastery and is thus, not strictly speaking, purely traumatic repetition – unless traumatic repetition is understood as already itself a form of mastering. Freud does suggest at one point in his analysis that the game may express a principle of mastery 'Beyond the Pleasure Principle' but the peculiarity of such repetition is rarely explored within traditional analyses. Exceptions to this line of thought can be found in Derrida, 1987. Jacques Lacan, (1978) analyzes the game in the context of a reading of traumatic repetition. See also Gasché, 1997. On the crucial structure of the game in relation to the speculative structure of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* see Weber, *The Legend of Freud, and his Return to Freud*.

<sup>5</sup> For related analysis of this aspect of Freud's text with a slightly different emphasis see my *Unclaimed Experience*.

<sup>6</sup> Life is thereby separated from the desire to live; survival is no longer linked to the wish to live but to another imperative that appears to have ethical force (thus the survivor mission to tell) as well as a relation to knowing or witnessing (as an "awakening").

<sup>7</sup> Thus the theory of individual trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* will lead to the theory of historical (and collective) trauma in *Moses and Monotheism*. I have analyzed this in terms of the story of departure in *Unclaimed Experiences*, chs. 1 and 3. The notion of an attempt to return that becomes a departure is a pattern that originates in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* in the description of individual trauma and ultimately the foundation of life; in *Moses and Monotheism*, Jewish history is itself structured by a trauma that turns Moses's attempt to return the Hebrews to Canaan into an endless departure into a Jewish history of survival.

<sup>8</sup> Freud emphasizes the creative element of the game by remarking that it is the "first self-inverted game" of the child (das erste selbst-erschaffene Spiel), an emphasis we see again in his letter to Wilhelm Zweig concerning his insight behind *Moses and Monotheism*, that "Moses created the Jews," which uses a related although slightly different verb form (hat geschaffen). Freud's use of the word "create" in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, which I am echoing in my own use of the word "creative," thus has a specific, foundational meaning and is also, in both *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, ultimately linked to a traumatic history. The creative element in the *fort/da* game appears, moreover, to be associated specifically with the origins of language; Freud notes that the game begins when the child is just beginning to make articulate sounds. Jacques Lacan thus suggests that this game represents the origin of symbolic language as such in the differentiation of the phonemes *o* and *a* ("Function and Field"). The game is not, that is, about symbolizing the literal but about moving from silence to speech. The foundational nature of the game- or of the scene as Freud presents it- points toward its link to the foundational moment that traumatic repetition repeats, which is the ultimate concern of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.

<sup>9</sup> One line of theoretical (or in Freud's terms, 'speculative') elaboration of the notion of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* begins in Chapter II with the example of the nightmares of battle — which are compared to the nightmares of an accident that wake the patient up from his sleep — continues with the explanation of trauma in Chapter IV, which speculates on the origins of consciousness and proposes that trauma is a break in the stimulus barrier that consciousness provides for the living organism, and culminates in Chapter V, in which Freud suggests that life itself was an awakening from inanimate matter for which there was no preparation. This line of speculation appears to have an independent logic and does not completely align itself with the language of play that accompanies it in an



apparently separate line of argument. The *Spiel* appears first in the example of the child, is repeated in Chapter III in regard to the re-enactment behavior in transference, and thenceforth is mentioned only in regard to children's play and theater, until the introduction of the notion of the life drive. (Interestingly, the discussion of analysis in Chapter III suggests that the entire theory of the Oedipal origins of unconscious conflict in childhood needs to be rethought after the encounter with trauma; at this point in his argument, then, Freud appears to be incorporating the earlier theory of neurosis into a larger speculation concerning traumatic neurosis.) It is notable that the distinction between terminology of the nightmare- a terminology of seeing and awakening- and the terminology of the game- a language of play and speech- also appears in contemporary discussions of the problem of traumatic imagery as opposed to the resolution of trauma in (symbolic) language. See for example can der Kolk.

<sup>10</sup> The movement from the death drive to the life drive seems, in fact, to carry out a possibility contained in Freud's double denomination of trauma in Chapter II, as both fright (*Schreck*) and surprise (*Überraschung*): "Dass das Hauptgewicht der Verursachung auf das Moment der Überraschung, auf den Schreck, zu fallen schien, 'Schreck aber benannt den Zustand, in den man gerat, wenn man in Gefahr kommt, ohne auf sie vorbereitet zu sein, betont das Moment der Überraschung."

<sup>11</sup> Interestingly, it is not until the introduction of the life drive that the *fort* makes its appearance again literally in the language of Freud's text. Here we might see a possibility of bringing together Laplanche's insight into the shared single energy of the life drive and death drive and Bloom's insistence, in "Freud's Concept of Defense and the Poetic Will" (*Agon* 119-44) that Freud is a dualist.

<sup>12</sup> The repetition of the origin as the new beginning of the life drive thus distinguishes itself from the confusion between death and life enacted in the death drive. One might say that the event of the trauma is repeated, in the moment of parting in the life drive, as the act of survival, an act that, in a sense, fulfills the imperative to live that begins life, but fulfills it differently (the imperative and its fulfillment are not continuous). This is not just an act; since it repeats the "awakening" of the life drive, it is inextricable from questions of witnessing of knowing that govern traumatic repetition (which is life and is also awakening) and thus can be understood as a different form of witnessing. To this extent, the question of creativity- as a creativity arising in the context of trauma- is bound up with the question of truth. Rather than providing an affective response to trauma, the life drive can be understood as providing another means of bearing witness. In other words, the life drive (unlike, say, the pleasure principle) cannot be understood within the economy of pleasure (which is also the economy of symbolization, as we see in the *fort/da* game) but must engage the problems of truth and knowing introduced by the trauma.

<sup>13</sup> It should be noted that the passage from Chapter two is already fairly complex and appears to be somewhat playful in its own use of *fort* and *da*, in naming the never- achieved pleasurable end of the game (the hoped-for *da*) as "*das zum lustvollen Ende fortgeführte Ganze*" – i.e., in naming the longed- for *da* by means of a *fort*. The question of departure could also be thought as a meditation on the nature of the return (Derrida suggest something of the sort in "To Speculate- on Freud"); here it would be interesting to examine the shift from the *da* of the child- seen as the marker of the pleasure principle- to the *zurück* of the drives beyond the pleasure principle. The new meaning of *fortführen*, moreover, brings out a remarkable reversal that occurs in the movement from Chapters II and IV (where trauma is an exception to ordinary experience, an encounter with death that disturbs consciousness) to Chapter V (where the traumatic delay defines the very origin of life itself, and ultimately, in its repetition in the life drive, the possibility of a new beginning). For whereas consciousness was understood, originally, to protect life against death (Chapter IV), we can see (from Chapter V) that, since trauma ultimately reenacts an origin not from death but from life- or more accurately, from the surprise of new beginnings.

<sup>14</sup> Bernadette Leite, personal communication. She has spoken of this (and reiterated the importance of speaking) in *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution* (7/ 24/99, 8/15/99, among other dates) and is honored in the November 1999 edition of *Redbook*. She worked for several years in association with the Minority Health Institute at the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University.

<sup>15</sup> As Greg says, "He called early, like 10 or 11 [...] But again, that was the night I went to my cousin's home, he called again, but I wasn't there". It should be noted that the use of the word 'child' to describe Greg is based on my sense that Greg "grows up" in the encounter with Bernadette, in the moments of the interview in which he takes leave of his friend and of his former self. In this sense his encounter with Bernadette and the child's game in Freud's text circle around the beginning of a new identity founded in the confrontation with loss.

<sup>16</sup> The tone of Greg's language here might be understood as being achieved through a giving up a certain kind of pathos, although, even in its humor, it attains a different pathos, perhaps the pathos of giving up pathos. I would like to thank Elizabeth Rottenberg for her insights into questions of humor and tone in the exchange between Greg and Bernadette Leite.

<sup>17</sup> It is interesting to note that the question of departure and parting arises at the end of the interview between Bernadette Leite and Greg: "B: Any parting words? G: Departing words? B: Parting words [...] Words to say to others" (KAL Oral History Archive).

<sup>18</sup> Thus the future of Freud's text could be understood as "beyond" in the strict sense, both inside and outside of Freud's text in the language of a child both inside (in the game) and outside (in the experience of the real child), already there but not yet there, just as, perhaps, the life drive is beyond the death drive.



<sup>19</sup> On the self-reflexive dimension of the scene see for example Derrida; on the self-reflexivity of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* see Bloom, "Freud and the Sublime" (Agon 91-118), where he suggests that Freud's citation of Tasso in Chapter Three is "an allegory of Freud's own passage into the Sublime," (106) and Meisel. Freud's argument, as we have outlined, thus first appears to replace the notion of childhood Oedipal conflict with a kind of trauma modelled on the adult (war trauma), but the self-reflexive level of Freud's writing re-introduces the child's centrality or priority not as a concept but as a kind of language. Likewise, the notion of beginning wrapped up in the awakening at the origin of life becomes associated with a kind of origination in language.

<sup>20</sup> Thus Freud's own creative act could be said to arise (as in the interview of Greg and Bernadette) out of an encounter: his encounter with the child. The shift from death drive to life drive, which remains fairly enigmatic in its original speculative introduction in Chapter V - Freud just stops with the description of the death drive and starts again with the life drive - could be said to take place on the level of the encounter rather than as something that could simply be an object of speculation or knowledge within the theory. In other words, if one were to ask, pragmatically or clinically, what would make possible the move from death drive to life drive in an individual- what makes possible, for example, the language of the life drive for Greg- the answer would have to be found, in the particular text by Freud, on the level of the encounter, that is, as taking place in the context of another encounter.

<sup>21</sup> Not the distance of theoretical knowing, then, but the distance of the child's game.

<sup>22</sup> On the *fort* at the origin see Weber (*Legend*) and my *Unclaimed Experience*

<sup>23</sup> As Freud insists in his own letters, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* was mostly written before the death of Sophie and thus does not (in the strictest sense) refer directly to her death; by introducing her death in a footnote, however, Freud allows the resonances to take place and also sets up another parallel with the child, for whom the mother died after the game just as Sophie died after the writing of Freud's text. On the death of Sophie, see for example Derrida and Bronfen. Anne Whitehead also remarks on the important contribution of Luce Irigaray to the unread position of the mother in the *fort/ da* game.

<sup>24</sup> The interweaving of language and history, once again, emerges in Freud's peculiar association of the death drive with something 'unobtrusive' and, in later texts, 'dumb,' and the life drive with noise or 'clamour'. This distinction occurs first in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and is reiterated in *The Ego and the Id* and *Civilization and Its Discontents*. Reading the death drive in terms of its historical shape in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, we could say that what the language of the life drive bears witness to is, perhaps, the silence of history (or, in the child's game, the silence of the mother's departure).

<sup>25</sup> To the extent that the life drive moves us away from the direct line of argument that leads from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* to *Moses and Monotheism*, or from individual to collective history, the imperative for survival could be understood here as taking place within acts (or within a language of the life drive) that is neither simply individual nor simply collective in the sense of those terms that preceded the death drive/life drive analysis. In a sense, the introduction of the life drive in my argument is also the reintroduction of the notion of the individual acts on the other side of the collective analysis of historical catastrophe implied in the death drive argument that leads to *Moses and Monotheism*. Here, the "individual" act (or the language of the life drive) might itself carry with it the force of a larger history. On psychoanalysis and play see Winnicott. Here we might recall the notion of living creatively. It is also interesting to note that this later thinking of play was also interested, in this context, in the notion of surprise.