CATHY
CARUTH

UNCLAIMED EXPERIENCE

Trauma, Narrative, and History

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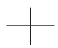
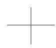

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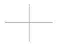
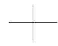

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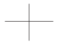
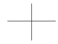

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INTRODUCTION: THE WOUND AND THE VOICE

Though chilled with horror,
with a second blow
He struck it, and decided then to look.

Torquato Tasso, *Jerusalem Liberated*

In the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes a pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals. Perplexed by the terrifyingly literal nightmares of battlefield survivors and the repetitive reenactments of people who have experienced painful events, Freud wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them. In some cases, Freud points out,

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these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control. "The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this," Freud writes, "can be found in the story told by Tasso in his romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*":

> Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.[1]

The actions of Tancred, wounding his beloved in a battle and then, unknowingly, seemingly by chance, wounding her again, evocatively represent in Freud's text the way that the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will. As Tasso's story dramatizes it, the repetition at the heart of catastrophe—the experience that Freud will call "traumatic neurosis"—emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind.

I would like to suggest here, however, that the literary resonance of Freud's example goes beyond this dramatic illustration of repetition compulsion and exceeds, perhaps, the limits of Freud's conceptual or conscious theory of trauma. For what seems to me particularly striking in the example of Tasso is not just the unconscious act of the infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound.* Tancred does not only repeat his act but, in repeating it, he for the first time hears a voice that cries

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out to him to see what he has done. The voice of his beloved addresses him and, in this address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated. Tancred's story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts but also as the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know.

It is the moving quality of this literary story, I would suggest—its striking juxtaposition of the unknowing, injurious repetition and the witness of the crying voice—that best represents Freud's intuition of, and his passionate fascination with, traumatic experiences. If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. The example offered by the poetry of Tasso is indeed, in my interpretation, more than a literary example of a vaster psychoanalytic, or experiential, truth; the poetic story can be read, I will suggest, as a larger parable, both of the unarticulated implications of the theory of trauma in Freud's writings and, beyond that, of the crucial link between literature and theory that the following pages set out to explore.

A DOUBLE WOUND

As the repeated infliction of a wound, the act of Tancred calls up the originary meaning of trauma itself (in both English and German), the Greek *trauma*, or "wound," originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body.[2] In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the

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wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred's first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.[3] Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.[4]

What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud's writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.

In this book I explore the ways in which texts of a certain period—the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature, and of literary theory—both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience. Rather than straightforwardly describing actual case studies of trauma survivors, or attempting to elucidate directly the psychiatry of trauma, the chapters that follow explore the complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it. Whether the texts I read concern, as in Freud, the theory of trauma in individual or collective history or, as in Duras and Resnais, the story of two people bonded in and

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around their respective catastrophic experiences, each one of these texts engages, in its own specific way, a central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis. If traumatic experience, as Freud indicates suggestively, is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs, then these texts, each in its turn, asks what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. Such a question, I will argue, whether it occurs within a strictly literary text or in a more deliberately theoretical one, can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.

In my own endeavor at interpretation, likewise, in the chapters on psychoanalytic writing and in the chapters on literature and literary theory, I attempt not just to follow each author's argument in its explicit reference to traumatic experience (Freud's theory of trauma as outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, the notion of reference and the figure of the falling body in de Man, Kleist, and Kant, the mutual narratives of personal catastrophe in Duras and Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*; Lacan's rethinking of trauma in his interpretation of Freud's texts). My main endeavor is, rather, to trace in each of these texts a different story, the story or the textual itinerary of insistently recurring words or figures. The key figures my analysis uncovers and highlights—the figures of "departure," "falling," "burning," or "awakening"—in their insistence, here engender stories that in fact emerge out of the rhetorical potential and the literary resonance of these figures, a literary dimension that cannot be reduced to the thematic content of the text or to what the theory encodes, and that, beyond what we can know or theorize about it, stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound.

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THE STORY OF AN ACCIDENT

At the heart of these stories is thus an enigmatic testimony not only to the nature of violent events but to what, in trauma, resists simple comprehension. And it is in way that we can also read one of the central lessons in Freud's recurrent attempts to grapple with the description and conceptualization of trauma. For what returns to haunt the trauma victim in Freud's primary example of trauma, as I emphasize in my readings of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, is not just any event but, significantly, the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident. The example of the train accident—the accident from which a person walks away apparently unharmed, only to suffer symptoms of the shock weeks later—most obviously illustrates, for Freud, the traumatizing shock of a commonly occurring violence. Yet the recurring image of the accident in Freud, as the illustration of the unexpected or the accidental, seems to be especially compelling, and indeed becomes the exemplary scene of trauma *par excellence*, not only because it depicts what we can know about traumatizing events, but also, and more profoundly, because it tells of what it is, in traumatic events, that is *not* precisely grasped. The accident, that is, as it emerges in Freud and is passed on through other trauma narratives, does not simply represent the violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility. What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.

The story of the accident thus refers us, indirectly, to the unexpected reality—the locus of referentiality—of the traumatic story. It is this link between narrative and reality that I explore in my chapter on Paul de Man's notion of referentiality, a notion that indeed associates reference with an impact, and

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specifically the impact of a fall. In my analysis of de Man's work, through his readings, in particular, of the philosophical texts of Immanuel Kant and the literary texts of Heinrich von Kleist, I attempt to show how de Man's critical theory of reference ultimately becomes a narrative, and a narrative inextricably bound up with the problem of what it means to fall (which is, perhaps, de Man's own translation of the concept—of the experience—of trauma). The story of the falling body—which I read through de Man's texts as the story of the impact of reference—thus encounters, unexpectedly, the story of a trauma, and the story of trauma is inescapably bound to a referential return.[5] This interpretation of reference through trauma, therefore, this understanding of trauma in terms of its indirect relation to reference, does not deny or eliminate the possibility of reference but insists, precisely, on the inescapability of its belated impact.[6]

TRAUMA AND HISTORY

The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life. In Tasso's story, indeed, as we read it in Freud, Tancred does not escape the reality of death's impact—of the wounding accident and of Clorinda's death—but rather has to live it twice. The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives—as I show concretely in my readings of Freud, Duras, and Lacan—often emerges, indeed, as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life:* between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. These two stories, both incompatible and absolutely inextricable, ultimately define the complexity of what I refer to as *history* in the texts that I read: in

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Moses and Monotheism, the intricate relation between the story of the Jews and the story of the Christians; in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the intertwining of the confrontation with death and the confrontation with life; in *Hiroshima mon amour* and in Lacan's interpretation of the dream of the burning child, the profound link between the death of the loved one and the ongoing life of the survivor. In these texts, as I suggest, it is the inextricability of the story of one's life from the story of a death, an impossible and necessary double telling, that constitutes their historical witness.[7]

THE VOICE OF THE OTHER

The theoretical and literary thrust of the present book can thus be illustrated in another way as well through Tasso's story—and through Freud's example—of the crying wound. For while the story of Tancred, the repeated thrusts of his unwitting sword and the suffering he recognizes through the voice he hears, represents the experience of an individual traumatized by his own past—the repetition of his own trauma as it shapes his life—the wound that speaks is not precisely Tancred's own but the wound, the trauma, of another. It is possible, of course, to understand that other voice, the voice of Clorinda, within the parable of the example, to represent the other within the self that retains the memory of the "unwitting" traumatic events of one's past. But we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound.

I would suggest that such a listening to the voice and to the speech delivered by the other's wound is what takes place, indeed, in Freud's own text, whose theory of trauma is written not only about but in the midst of trauma. The story of Tancred

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is thus equally, I would suggest, the story of psychoanalytic writing itself. The figure of Tancred addressed by the speaking wound constitutes, in other words, not only a parable of trauma and of its uncanny repetition but, more generally, a parable of psychoanalytic theory itself as it listens to a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nonetheless bears witness.[8]

This listening to the address of another, an address that remains enigmatic yet demands a listening and a response, is what, in other ways, is also at the heart of the texts of Duras and of Lacan. In *Hiroshima mon amour* it is at the heart of the encounter between the woman and the man, between the French woman who has watched her German lover die in the war and the Japanese man whose family has been decimated by the bomb at Hiroshima and who turns out, profoundly and significantly, to be the only one able to hear and to receive, across the distance of their cultures and through the impact of their very different traumas, the woman's address. Likewise, this listening to another who addresses us forms the center of Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's narrative of the dream of the burning child, through the emphasis it lays on the encounter between father and child: between a child who has died from a fever and whose corpse catches fire from an accidentally overturned candle; and a sleeping father, unconscious of this burning in the next room, who hears in his dream the voice of his dead child pleading for him to see the fire by whispering the words, "Father, don't you see I'm burning?" It is this plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard, this call by which the other commands us to awaken (to awaken, indeed, to a burning), that resonates in different ways throughout the texts this book attempts to read, and which, in this book's understanding, constitutes the new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand.

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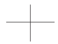
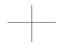

NOTES

INTRODUCTION: THE WOUND AND THE VOICE

1. Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, translated from the German under the general editorship of James Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, assisted by Alix Strachey and Alan Tyson, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth, 1953–74), vol. 18, ch. 3 (hereafter cited as *SE*).

2. In the three original languages of the various literary and psychoanalytic texts analyzed in this book the terms are, respectively, *trauma* (English), *Trauma* (German), and *traumatisme* and *trauma* (French).

3. Jean Laplanche describes the temporal structure of trauma in the early texts of Freud in his classic book *Vie et mort en psychanalyse* (Paris: Flammarion, 1970), published in English as *Life and Death in Psycho-*

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analysis, trans. Jeffrey Mehlman (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). A more general view of the problem can be found in his "Notes on Afterwardsness," in *Jean Laplanche: Seduction, Translation, Drives*, a dossier edited by John Fletcher and Martin Stanton (London: Institute of Contemporary Arts, 1992). In his other writings on trauma in Freud, Laplanche underscores the way in which Freud places the temporal story alongside a spatial one that is not spatial in the physical sense but rather about "extension" (see his *Problématiques I, L'angoisse* [Paris: PUF, 1980], 216–29, and "Traumatisme, traduction, transfert et autres trans(es)," in *La révolution copernicienne inachevée: Travaux, 1967–1992* [Paris: Aubier, 1992]). It is this double structure that also seems to be linked to the possibility of memorialization; Jacques Derrida suggests that in Freud a topographical structure is essential to the possibility of an archive (as the possibility of memory) (see Jacques Derrida, *Mal d'archive: Une impression freudienne* [Paris: Galilée, 1995]). The example of Tasso's story seems to demonstrate both the temporal and the spatial aspects of the notion of trauma.

4. It is instructive to recall, in this connection, the beautifully articulated notion of a temporal crisis in the introduction to Carol Jacobs's *Telling Time: Lévi-Strauss, Ford, Lessing, Benjamin, de Man, Wordsworth, Rilke* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994): "Time is what their narratives are about—not necessarily as subject matter but as the condition of the possibility of telling and as the crisis that it endures." For an important rethinking of temporality and experience in relation to catastrophe, see Maurice Blanchot, *L'écriture du désastre* (Paris: Gallimard, 1980), published in English as *The Writing of Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

5. It is through this recurrence of the example of the accident and the irreducibility of the literary story attached to it that I would also attempt to address the problem, central to the study of trauma, of its specificity or uniqueness. For on the one hand, the very notion of trauma as what comes unexpectedly suggests that traumatic stories convey the event that exceeds or is an exception to experience as such. Yet on the other hand, the notion of trauma as that which most clearly marks the past, and its structural description as a delayed experience, may lead to a seemingly universalizing description in which experience itself becomes tied up with trauma. In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, indeed, Freud begins with the example of a battle and a life-threatening accident, which are exceptions to ordinary experience, but ends up by

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describing the origins of consciousness and of life and the drive in terms structurally parallel to those he has used to describe traumatic experience. And in my own studies in chapters 2, 3, and 4, I link the notion of trauma to a larger conception of the very "possibility of history." Yet the movement to origins in Freud or my own language of possibility is not, I would argue, an attempt to identify experience with trauma but rather an attempt to allow, within experience, for the very unexpected interruption of experience constituted by the traumatic accident. For to define trauma as simply that which comes from outside, rather than as a possibility inscribed within experience, would be, essentially, to make a claim for the possibility of defining, and thus anticipating, the difference between experience and trauma: to be able to categorize, to name, and thus, theoretically, to anticipate the accident. It is rather the notion of the traumatic possibility inscribed in human experience, a possibility always there but never certain, that transmits what is most accidental in, and hence unique to, its actual occurrence. The question concerning the specificity of trauma can be observed in the debates about the definition of trauma in the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, which defines trauma both in terms of the specific types of events that cause it (the controversial "category a") and in terms of symptomatic responses, which are not explicitly tied to specific kinds of events. On this problem see my introduction to part 1 of *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), as well as Laura Brown's essay in that volume, "Not Outside the Range: One Feminist Perspective on Psychic Trauma."

6. The return of the flashback as an interruption—as something with a disrupting force or impact—suggests that it cannot be thought simply as a representation. The rethinking of reference in nonrepresentational terms (or more accurately in terms of an interruption of a representational mode) in de Man, which I examine in chapter 4, is thus closely linked to my study, in chapter 5, of Lacan's speculation on trauma as a "waking" rather than a "seeing," a theory that I connect implicitly to the notion of the performative.

7. Saul Friedlander, in a chapter called "Trauma and Transference" in *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), raises the question, in part in relation to my work on *Moses and Monotheism*, whether traumatic repetition allows for more positive ways of thinking through the possibil-

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ity of history. This touches on the difficult question whether the flashback or repetition, as long as it remains unassimilable to consciousness, can be considered truly historical. I would suggest that it might be possible to distinguish between the notion of referentiality and historicity in this case; the return of the event could then be considered referential but not historically experienced. The historical experience, which would involve the story of survival and thus the possibility of passing on to another (or memorializing), would perhaps have to engage, then, in addition, some notion of address or of the possibility of address. Thus the chapters on *Hiroshima mon amour* and Lacan's reading of the dream of the burning child try to grapple with what it means for a traumatic return not only to remain a flashback but to awaken the survivor and to awaken the survivor to an address.

The question of memorializing through one's death or one's life, or memorializing an event through the relation between death and life, is perhaps linked to another question, the question of what it is that one means to recall (a life or a death). On this question, see James Young, *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning* (New Haven; Yale University Press, 1993); Geoffrey Hartman, "Learning from Survivors: The Yale Testimony Project," *Holocaust and Genocide Studies* 9, no. 2 (1995); and Nadine Fresco, "Remembering the Unknown," *International Review of Psychoanalysis* 11 (1984).

8. The impact of trauma, the Tasso example thus suggests, is transmitted in psychoanalytic theory not only because traumatic experience has there been explained or fully understood but also because the encounter with trauma has transformed and estranged the very language of psychoanalytic writing. Indeed, as I suggest, if the story of the wound offers a parable of traumatic experience, it also serves, in its staging of the figure of the wound, as a parable of the very term *trauma*, of the complexity of the very discourse, that is, of Freud's theoretical (or speculative) language. For the story of the movement from the original wounding of Clorinda to the wounding of the tree can also be read as the story of the emergence of the meaning of trauma from its bodily referent to its psychic extension (see n. 3 above, and Laplanche's work cited there). And as such, the Tasso example suggests that the language of trauma does not simply originate in a theoretical knowledge that stands outside of trauma but may emerge equally from within its very experience. Yet this inner link between the experience of trauma and its theory, or between the language of survivors and the language of

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theoretical description, need not imply a lack of objectivity or truth, but the very possibility of speaking from within a crisis that cannot simply be known or assimilated.

The relation between language and trauma is examined from a clinical perspective in numerous discussions of language and trauma that struggle with the role of language in the therapeutic treatment of trauma. Most of these discussions suggest that the treatment of trauma requires the incorporation of trauma into a meaningful (and thus sensible) story. This would presumably extend to the theorization of trauma stemming from the therapeutic work (see, for example, Jodie Wigren, "Narrative Completion in the Treatment of Trauma," *Psychotherapy* 31, no. 3 [1994]). I am suggesting here, and throughout this book, the possibility of another way of thinking, or rethinking, this relation between trauma and language.

An interesting perspective on the examination of the impact of trauma on language was offered at the Wellfleet seminar in 1993 (lead by Robert Jay Lifton), where it was suggested by the scholar Ashis Nandy that the problem of witnessing trauma as a professional is learning the difficult task of speaking of trauma in the terms offered by the survivor.

The implication of the theory of trauma in its own object, or the inextricability of the theory from what it describes, could be indirectly linked to the insistence of some writers on the fact that the history of trauma theory—its repeated emergences and disappearances—looks a lot like the phenomenon of traumatic recall itself. See, for example, Elizabeth A. Brett and Robert Ostroff, "Imagery and Posttraumatic Stress Disorder: An Overview," *American Journal of Psychiatry* 142 (1985); and Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

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CHAPTER 1 UNCLAIMED EXPERIENCE

1. For a recent expression of this opinion, see S. P. Mohanty, "Us and Them," *Yale Journal of Criticism* 2, no. 2 (1989).

2. There is no firm definition for *trauma*, which has been given various descriptions at various times and under different names. For a good discussion of the history of the notion and for recent attempts to define it, see Charles R. Figley, ed., *Trauma and Its Wake*, 2 vols. (New York: Brunner-Mazel, 1985–86).

3. Freud to Zweig, 30 May 1934, in *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and*

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