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Author(s): Geoffrey H. Hartman

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On Traumatic Knowledge and Literary Studies

Geoffrey H. Hartman

I

BOTH PHILOSOPHICAL and linguistic skepticism, whether of the anarchic or the methodical kind, have challenged the possibility of certain knowledge. Trauma theory introduces a psychoanalytic skepticism as well, which does not give up on knowledge but suggests the existence of a *traumatic* kind, one that cannot be made entirely conscious, in the sense of being fully retrieved or communicated without distortion. Can we bear, Adam Phillips asks, “our inevitable ignorance?” Is the contemporary psychoanalyst a paradox, that is, “an expert on the truths of uncertainty”?¹ A theory emerges focusing on the relationship of words and trauma, and helping us to “read the wound” with the aid of literature.

My account of what is perking in literary studies must remain tentative. We have only a beginning, something like a virtual community of explorers. The theory derives mainly from psychoanalytic sources, though it is strongly affected by literary practice. It recasts, in effect, an older question: what kind of knowledge is art, or what kind of knowledge does it foster?

The theory holds that the knowledge of trauma, or the knowledge which comes from that source, is composed of two contradictory elements. One is the traumatic event, registered rather than experienced. It seems to have bypassed perception and consciousness, and falls directly into the psyche. The other is a kind of memory of the event, in the form of a perpetual troping of it by the bypassed or severely split (dissociated) psyche. On the level of poetics, literal and figurative may correspond to these two types of cognition.

Traumatic knowledge, then, would seem to be a contradiction in terms. It is as close to nescience as to knowledge. Any general description or modeling of trauma, therefore, risks being figurative itself, to the point of mythic fantasmagoria. Something “falls” into the psyche, or causes it to “split.” There is an original inner catastrophe whereby/in which an experience that is not experienced (and so, apparently, not “real”) has an exceptional presence—is inscribed with a force proportional to the mediations punctured or evaded. Reading such accounts,

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that try to be clinical and rational yet are as highly imaginative as Lacan's mathemes, I am put in mind of William Blake's revision of the "primal scene" of Genesis, with its cosmogonic chaos or *tohu-va-bohu*.

Blake depicts a mysterious turbulence in the heavens that expels or segregates a god (Urizen). The fall is thus a divine sickness, a disorder in the heavens; and it does not happen after the Creation, as in Christian interpretations of the Book of Genesis; rather Creation is itself the catastrophe, at once shock, splitting off and the reification of a mysterious diminishment. We fall into Creation, or rather into a parody-world made in the image of Urizen, its tyrant-demiurge, and confirmed by mankind's complicitous and terror-stricken imagination.²

Blake sometimes reveals that his titanomachia is a psychomachia: the imaginings of an ideal human being seeking to reverse a mysterious loss. An ancestor-figure he names Albion tries to recover—to dream himself back to—a state of unity and self-integration. But Albion's dream cannot easily escape history, or a constricted imagination: it is therefore mostly a repetitious nightmare purging itself of internalized or institutionalized superstitions. Albion works them through, we would now be tempted to say.

The hyperbolic picture of trauma we find in Blake is justified when we recall a child's impressionability and vulnerability, qualities that constitute, as Winnicott and others have observed, a necessary, even creative part of development. Despite the miracle of maturation, adults do not overcome that childhood phase. If the infant imagination projects itself onto what appears to be a giant, that is, a grown human being, and if it had the capacity to articulate its moment to moment fears and fantasies, might we not approach a cartoon of Blake's fantasmagoria? And might not the ironies and ambiguities in the poet's mature vision, or the vacillating and often confusing sequences of enchantment and disenchantment, reflect a very early developmental ambivalence or even dualism?

We too ask, like Blake's dreaming giant (though *his* brooding is immediately translated into images with a life of their own): what happened? Where did the trouble begin? Why is my fantasy-life murky and fearful: why can't I be rational *and* imaginative? We try to get back to a genesis-moment that seems to have started a fatal chain reaction and manacled both body and mind. According to Lacan, the question motivating Freud's analysis of the Wolf Man, as well as the father's dream about his burning child in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (chapter 7), was: "What is the first encounter, the real, that lies behind the fantasy [*fantasme*]?"³

II

When we substitute “trauma” or “hysteria” for “fantasy,” this question is answered by Freud’s *The Aetiology of Hysteria* (1896) with the thesis that “at the bottom of every case of hysteria there are one or more occurrences of premature sexual experience, occurrences which belong to the earliest years of childhood.” But Freud soon decided that the scenes of seduction reported by his patients were fantasies—and that it was the fantasies which had to be treated. It has been claimed that this was a wrong turning. Instead of acknowledging social, and particularly women’s, reality, “Psychoanalysis became a study of the internal vicissitudes of fantasy and desire, dissociated from the reality of experience.”⁴

Lacan suggests, however, that the question of the real never weakened in Freud. Instead, it became a feverish quest because of a theoretical or scientific mistake in identifying that “first encounter.” The real is not the real, in the sense of a specific, identifiable thing or cause; however specific it may be, it is also a burning idea, or its own “wake” of desire. The encounter with the real takes place, on the part of both analyst and analysand, within a world of death-feelings, lost objects, and drives.⁵ It might be described, in fact, as a “missing encounter” (the *troumatique*, Lacan puns) or an unmediated shock, like William James’s “buzzing booming confusion.” “In the real. . . . [o]ne is either swallowed up or persecuted by gazes or voices everywhere. The relief so commonly expressed on awakening from a dream comes from the realization that (unlike the psychotic) one has not after all fallen into the chaos of the real. To live as a piece of the real is to live beyond the limits of the law of the signifier that enables one to re-present oneself *as if* one were unified.”⁶ The symbolic realm of (verbal) signification limits that chaos, just as the Creation in Blake is an act of divine mercy that limits an endless loss: a fall into disunity, diminishment (of *jouissance*) and reactive self-assertion.

It is hard to think of the real (in Lacan’s sense) as being consciously experienced: its locus of apperception is somewhere else, in another place than consciousness. But it can be inferred from certain effects or symptoms, including a repetitious imagery that veils, without effacing, object-loss. The real always comes amiss, Lacan says.⁷ It has the force of a reversal or interruption, of a peripety displacing one meaning by another, or which undoes the knot of signifier and signified that establishes signification. It may displace the mind itself—as Juliana does in Marvell’s “The Mower’s Song”: “For *Juliana* comes, and She / What I do to the Grass, does to my Thoughts and Me.” The question of the real, then, cannot be answered in terms of the real, only in terms of a

traumatizing *realissimum*, for which a more common name is “the Other.”⁸

Indeed, what identity can we give to Juliana? An event is evoked whose meaning cedes to its repeated singularity. Whatever we do, or speak, or plead, it returns like Marvell’s refrain. It is impossible to tell whether this rhythmic return is on the side of memory or against it. Something is lodged too deeply in the psyche as epiphanic word or image.⁹ “Burnt into the brain” it becomes an unforgettable if not always remembered reference-point.

Literary knowledge, I will suggest, finds this “real,” identifies with it, and can even bring it back, as in Marvell’s poem with its strangely formal, complicit or self-mocking exuberance.¹⁰ Yet, as in the Orpheus myth, there is a limit to recovery, or a limit to the effort at visualization. Every time we are tempted to say “I see” when “I understand” is meant, we do not see, or else do not understand.

III

This leads toward literary theory, because the disjunction between experiencing (phenomenal or empirical) and understanding (thoughtful naming, in which words replace things, or their images), is what figurative language expresses and explores.¹¹ The literary construction of memory is obviously not a literal retrieval but a statement of a different sort. It relates to the negative moment in experience, to what in experience has not been, or cannot be, adequately experienced. That moment is now expressed, or made known, in its negativity; the artistic representation modifies that part of our desire for knowledge (epistemophilia) which is driven by images (scopophilia). Trauma theory throws a light on figurative or poetic language, and perhaps symbolic process in general, as something other than an enhanced imaging or vicarious repetition of a prior (non)experience.

Periphrasis, for example, as it moves toward the riddle—and, to an extent, this movement is characteristic of all verbal figuration—indicates a real whose indeterminacy creates a tension between signified (the solution to the riddle) and signifier (the riddle form). Since every object can be riddled this way (as Ponge and children’s conundrums attest) this tension is constitutive rather than provisional and opens a creative play-space, the possibility of singing “in the face of the object” (Wallace Stevens).¹²

The nature of the negative that provokes symbolic language and its surplus of signifiers cannot fully be determined: Lacan talks of a *trou réel*, a reality hole, and Proust mourned “l’imperfection incurable dans

l'essence même du présent." Obversely, the "pointing" or "bullseye" pretension of language—our wish to achieve a perfect marker by way of language, a successful verbal fixative of the real, even a magical and animating vocative—this orphic quest or communication-compulsion (which raises voice to the luminosity and immediacy of sight) is always disappointed, always revived. The night's residue of such a hope leads us, during the day, toward basic literary questions that follow from the strong obliquity of words: "Why is interpretation necessary?" or, "Why are there texts?" or, "Why literature, story, and not just events, history?"

In addition, both in literary studies and in the field of public health a new awareness arises which is ethical as well as clinical. There is more *listening*, more *hearing* of words within words, and a greater openness to *testimony*. (While the status of such testimony in formal legal hearings should be and does remain subject to questioning and challenge, it is not as often ruled out of court because of its personal, emotional, and overdetermined or multivocal nature. In nonlegal situations, the psychoanalytic dialogue had already encouraged a greater measure of supportive listening; this is now reinforced, even as the problem of the "real" cause of trauma deepens, especially in the matter of recovered memories.¹³) As in literature, we find a way of *receiving* the story, of listening to it, of drawing it into an interpretive conversation. Medical or political reductionism is avoided. The experts are not given the last word. The story, Kathryn Hunter says, "must be returned to the patient."¹⁴

IV

Let me focus, then, on audience as well as art, an audience that includes the artist as initial recipient. The post-traumatic story often needs a "suspension of disbelief." The phrase is Coleridge's, and his famous poem, "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner," requires just that kind of empathy. Even if the poem is, in part, opium induced, or, as Kenneth Burke said elegantly, a "redemption of the drug," it is a remarkable externalization of an internal state. Imagination pursues a body—the body and atmosphere of fact. It tries to make us believe the unbelievable; it demands the acknowledgement of being real, not only imagined. The means for doing so include somatic feelings. We are drawn into a species of belief by the recovery of certain visceral sensations: extremes of heat, cold and thirst, glare of color, horror of the void, loss of speech. Perhaps the only way to overcome a traumatic severance of body and mind is to come back to mind through the body. We recall how voice dries up, and chokes its way out again.¹⁵

Every powerfully imagined scene, of course, is coercive and puts us

into a bind. We resist believing it; we feel compelled to believe it; at least, we feel it speaks to us, to an evaded self-knowledge, whether profound or base. "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" points to something more real than the reality we ordinarily inhabit; and this can strike home as an accusation. Coleridge coined a memorable phrase for a conscience that has become both oppressive and exalted: "The dread watchtower of man's absolute self."

Accused, in this poem, or despaired of, is speech itself—rather, the possibility of poetry as a more absolute speech, one which could animate, mediate, create belief, redeem. Speech is strangely automatic here: the poem is written in an exaggerated ballad rhythm, unmeditative when compared to Wordsworth's new style, or Coleridge's own in "Frost at Midnight." The meditating, *viva voce* self is also overshadowed by the fact that Coleridge does not introspect the Mariner: psychology as the seat of motivations is elided. We do not get to know why he shot the albatross; the poem yields only the consequences, scenes of wonder and terror that move toward a purging of the crime by a precarious and prolonged process of catharsis. The very absence of an intuitable psyche, or the speechless deed itself, sets up the possibility that here there is no motive based on selfhood. At most the act of killing, like kids stoning a dog or hanging a cat, is provocative of what is missing: it challenges a conscience or a moral design to appear.

If that is the case, the Mariner's conduct is actually self-defeating. While the universe of creatures now indeed zeroes in on the killer, making him its center, creating a self through accusation, that same universe also excommunicates him so radically that his gratuitous act leads not to being but to nothingness—to a *trou réel*, a solitude so vast that God Himself seems to be absent.

In such a world mediation through speech has become impossible. What Lacan calls the symbolic order (as distinct from both the real and the narcissistic-imaginary) presents itself only as an impossible desire, because of its violation. The killer is left without prayer or blessing or community: creatures, spirits, saints, and other advocates cannot speak for him, guide him, or even be the object of address. Eventually, of course, speech returns; but Coleridge makes it clear that the Mariner's narrative is compulsive as well as compelling. There is a mocking counterpoint between the archaizing style of the poem, with its plethora of middle-spirits, of daemons, and the Mariner's radical isolation in their midst.

He is also isolated within the human world. The Mariner remains an outsider to the marriage feast; marriage too will not redeem his loneliness. His spiritual progress remains limited to discovering a *telling link*—a type of speech, call it poetry or prayer, that might relieve a

solitude it cannot end. Trauma is suggested by the ominous repetition of images of arrest and *isolation* that enter the poem even before the crime. Lacan says that a repetition of this kind is founded “in the very split which is produced in the subject at the place of encounter.”

The interpreter’s task is always to sort out the relations between split or rupture (*schize*), place of [first] encounter, repetition and subject. The *schize*, in Coleridge’s poem, is inscribed as both the hypnotic pause in which the story unfolds and an actual cut in time expressed by sudden moments of stasis and confirmed by a major caesura: the shooting of the albatross, which divides time into before and after. The schism can even be thought to found the “nonsense” of this poem, its dissociation of referentiality and phenomenality. For the fantastic incidents it presents are invested with a phenomenality meaningful in itself.¹⁶ The poem is like a picture that gazes at us.¹⁷

One reason why the real does not appear directly, or why it is not expressed in a realistic mode, is that trauma can include a rupture of the symbolic order. That order is not destroyed by the *schize*; here, in fact, it is magnified, and stands threatening and magnificent over against the violator. Fantasy has entered to repair a breach—not so much a breach of the symbolic as *between* the symbolic and the individual. (In Blake, however, the breach is also in the symbolic as such.) Coleridge suggests the creation of a new, communalized self, much wiser about its relation to symbols.

There is no happy ending, however. Repairing the breach between the symbolic order and the individual seems to be an endless task. The story-telling momentum that makes the Mariner its medium at unpredictable times is as disruptive as the journey itself; we are astonished by it, medusaed like the wedding-guest. The repetitions, too, though cathartic, suggest an unresolved shock: a rhythmic or temporal stutter, they leave the storyteller in purgatory, awaiting the next assault, the next instance of hyperarousal. Concerning such repetitions Yeats said that a personal demon always brings us back to the place of encounter—to make it final.

V

For a generation now, literature has been increasingly looked at from a political angle. Many in the profession are desperate to redeem their drug, that is, to make the literary object of study more transitive, more connected with what goes on in a blatantly political world. Trauma studies provide a more natural transition to a “real” world often falsely split off from that of the university, as if the one were activist and

engaged and the other self-absorbed and detached. There is an opening that leads from trauma studies to public, especially mental health issues, an opening with ethical, cultural, and religious implications.¹⁸

The result is not moral criticism exactly, because this newest perspective does not attempt a definitive judgment or evaluation of the individual work. The change introduced operates at the level of theory, and of exegesis in the service of insights about human functioning. The focus is on disclosing an unconscious or not-knowing knowledge—a potentially literary way of knowing, if you wish—combining insight and blindness, play and earnest (or an adult management of transitional objects¹⁹), and linking inspiration to sound as well as sense. Emphasis falls on the imaginative use of language rather than on an ideal transparency of meaning. The real—the empirical or historical origin—cannot be known as such because it presents itself always within the resonances or “field” of the traumatic.²⁰

Consider John Avnet’s film *The War*, whose main character is a Vietnam veteran suffering from post-traumatic stress. Having deserted his family because he could not find or hold a job, and having spent time in a mental hospital, he returns home once more, determined to support his family as father and provider. The movie has him undergo an encounter which confronts him with the original trauma of having left his army buddy to die on the battlefield, though after a heroic rescue attempt. This time the place of encounter is the mines. He succeeds in saving his partner by extricating him from a fallen rock but is himself mortally wounded by a second cave-in. A final act comes after the veteran’s death, when his young son undergoes an experience that mirrors his father’s, an initiation equivalent to both war and self-sacrifice.

This bare summary makes the design of the story more obvious than it is; but at some point the question must arise as to what kind of consciousness art fosters. How are we to understand the repetitions I have described? Are they intensifying and incremental, or are they meant to soothe like rhythms do, preventing in this way a renewed traumatization—the transmission of trauma from author to movie-goer?

The movie suggests, by its double plot, that trauma is an inevitable part of life, of growing-up. But it is careful in merging the traumatic events with a local setting (Juliette, a dirt-poor Mississippi farming area, in 1970), so that we can regard the film as realistic rather than allegorical. It heightens knowledge by symbolic means, but its realism and its symbolic pattern are kept in a tension that is not entirely on the side of disclosure.

There is a well-known saying: It is art when it hides the art. Critics, of course, in their role as official readers, uncover the art once more; but if

this is done for the purpose of exposure, or in a purely demystifying way, we become too conscious of the design—of plotting, somewhere—and the balance of knowing and not knowing, necessary to psychic development, is disturbed. Today, moreover, such heavy concepts as providence or fate have lost their artistic as well as occult potential, and yield to more secular ideas of traumatic stress and repetition-compulsion. Even these concepts, however, remain enigmatic enough, so that insight, particularly the viewer's spectatorial consciousness, can still be made to sense its limit. *Avnet's* film suggests that we mature, like the children portrayed in it, by a mystical or quasi-physiological participation in parental experience.

The formulation I favor is that at all levels—plot, actors, characters, author, audience—the action is “daemonic” in Yeats’s sense (see above, p. 543), rather than “conscious” or “unconscious.” Even within the local detail that serves to characterize Juliette (an “unincorporated” town), we find place-bound events such as tree house, water tower (inverse images of each other), firestorm, whirlpool (also inverse images) that bring each of the two main characters, father and son, back for a final encounter. Traumatic and artistic kinds of knowledge conspire to produce their own mode of recognition.

VI

You may have sensed my literary turn, as the question of how knowledge of extreme experiences is possible moves from epistemological baffles to an underconsciousness deeply involved in story, speech act, and symbolic process. This shift does not leave the cognitive behind but puts us in a different relation to it. It leads to an unsentimental acknowledgment of the human condition, and a view of art as at once testimony and representation. The force of that acknowledgment tempers our tendency to find an *ultimate* explanation for trauma, that is, to “see through” to its biological or metapsychological base. Indeed, this temptation to explain, even to demystify, as it becomes a “fever,” may itself be an effect of traumatic dissociation, a compulsive, belated effort to master the split between experience and knowledge by asserting *in theory* the convergence of a phenomenal cause (see-able) and a trauma (not see-able, or else “piercing” the eyes).²¹

The predicament is how to acknowledge the passionate, suffering, affectional side of human nature without sympathy turning into over-identification. Too often scholarship defends itself against the very emotion being analyzed by seeking a definitive recognition of it in terms of childhood trauma or “first encounter”—even when that “encounter”

is “missing,” in the sense that it has displaced itself from memory and becomes, therefore, the subject of an imaginary reconstruction.²²

This does not deny the history of the individual or the need for social remediation. In fact, Hegel’s “the (historical) real is the rational” seems now like a rationalization of “the real is the traumatic.”²³ Trauma study’s radical aspect comes to the fore less in its emphasis on acts of violence like war and genocide than when it draws attention to “familiar” violence such as rape, and the abuse of women and children. Above all, it does not neglect the explosive nature of emotion and daily hurt.

For it is clear that accidents too—that is, apparently simple, daily events—uncover, or are drawn into, an atmosphere of trauma. I doubt that modern fiction would be possible without this “assault” of ordinary things: from the strange look of ancestral portraits in gothic stories to hermetic encounters in Mann’s *Death in Venice*, the crazyquilt of Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, the disintegration or rebellion of sense-percepts in Rilke’s *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, or innocent but (for the detective) revealing accidents in the mystery novel or any “realistic” piece of fiction.²⁴

In literature especially, shock and dreaminess collude. Where there is dream there is (was) trauma. Winnicott’s observation that the “mother is always ‘traumatizing’” is fundamental here: he means that within the child’s framework of basic trust, or idealization of a nurturing presence, there are infinite chances to be hurt, and the greater the idealization the greater the vulnerability.²⁵ Since being integrated (in the psychoanalytic sense) remains a type of idealization, it cannot totally defend against this daily hurt, which can go very deep, as deep as childhood.

Lacan, too, stresses an unlucky streak that cannot be entirely prevented: he characterizes this accidental traumatizing as a *malencontre*. We never seem prepared for what befalls; it strikes the child in the adult as untimely, premature. Life seems always to be a matter of catching up, often unconsciously—whether with life or (through mourning) with death. Something in the present, therefore, may resemble (or reassemble) something forgotten, as if there were channels along which memory returns like a flood that hides its source. This is where uncanny sensations of repetition or correspondence make themselves felt.²⁶

From what I have said, a cautionary lesson must be drawn about the relation of trauma to recovered or dream-knowledge. There is, at present, a temptation to politicize the fact of trauma and to broaden, even universalize, the perspective of victimhood. But any equation of biography and trauma must be pursued with care: human life itself is an endless adaptation to the “traumatizing” Winnicott has described, and which persists from birth to death.²⁷

VII

What is the relevance of trauma theory for reading, or practical criticism? This much is known: in literature, as in life, the simplest event can resonate mysteriously, be invested with aura, and tend toward the symbolic. The symbolic, in this sense, is not a denial of literal or referential but its uncanny intensification. The reason for this convertibility of literal and symbolic is the “traumatizing” already mentioned, which constantly shatters basic trust yet always, in a symbolic mode, picks up the pieces.²⁸ The theory, moreover, does contribute very specifically to an analysis of human time, clarifying its repetitious structure as a mode of negative narratability that alternates with highly charged moments, such as Wordsworth’s “spots of time.” These may return as flashbacks, but are also, at least in Wordsworth’s description (and later in Proust’s), revivifying beacons from a period of greater intensity, which had seemed lost.

In short, we gain a clearer view of the relation of literature to mental functioning in several key areas, including reference, subjectivity, and narration. I would have said “disturbed mental functioning” but that would give rise to a misunderstanding. For the disturbance in question is not an unfortunate departure from normalcy, though it may involve anguish and ask for relief; it is, rather, a very human though compulsive doubt, an obstinate questioning that cannot be methodized or reduced to an affirmative structure like the Cartesian *cogito*. Instead, spurred by a residual idealism, it grapples, again and again, with issues of *reality*, *bodily integrity*, and *identity*. It is a doubt (sometimes a brooding ecstasy) which afflicts reference (is this the real or at least a sign of the real?), subjectivity (saying “I” and the possibility of meaning it), and memory or story (being in control of the “plot” of one’s life rather than part of some other, unknown but fatal, narrative.)²⁹

I have mentioned these factors because they play a specific role in the study of imaginative literature. What reality-reference do poems or novels have; who is the “I” that tells the story or claims authorial privilege; and why should we believe so fantastic a tale or mode of telling, one that, even when it respects criteria of realism, is marked by coincidences and a just-under-the-surface fabulous structure—which is precisely what appeals?

Not that trauma theory, at least when it works within the orbit of literary studies, has definitive answers. But instead of seeking premature knowledge, it stays longer in the negative and allows disturbances of language and mind the quality of time we give to literature. The questioning of reference, or more positively our ability to constitute referentiality of a literary kind (with a symbolic or polysemic dimen-

sion), indicates the nearness of dream or trauma; negative narrativity defines a temporal structure that tends to collapse, to implode into a charged traumatic core, so that the fable is reduced to a repetition-compulsion not authentically “in time”;³⁰ and the subjection of the subject, when it is not given an exclusively political or erotic explanation, evokes what Lacan defines as the “fading” of the I before the Other. This fading always indicates a disturbance vis-à-vis the symbolic order.³¹

VIII

In one basic area the yield for literary theory is already substantial. The epistemological bias—which not only favors a progressive view of knowledge and the effects of knowledge, but sees the complex structure of our coming-to-know mainly as the clearing away of subjectivity—this bias is shown to have distorted the reader/text relationship. We habitually view literary interpretation as a binary process, one that takes place between object-like texts and subject-like readers. We try to call this process a dialogue, or claim, using a conventional prosopopeia, that texts “speak” to us. But the animating metaphor in this is all too obvious. It betrays the fact that while we feel that books are alive, we cannot find a good model, a way to picture that. The more we try to animate books, the more they reveal their resemblance to the dead—who are made to address us in epitaphs or whom we address in thought or dream. Every time we read we are in danger of waking the dead, whose return can be ghoulish as well as comforting. It is, in any case, always the reader who is alive and the book that is dead, and must be resurrected by the reader. The reader’s forceful exegesis, however, does not remain at the conversational level but becomes a text which must itself be revived at a later point. The exegetical conversation is unable to maintain itself as oral tradition. It finds a different, a *literary* mode of transmission.

Ambitious thinkers, of course, not only want their work to stay alive but wish to supervise the future meaning of their teachings. This is the most obvious reason for Plato’s devaluation of the medium of writing, which takes authority away from the author and places it in unknown hands—at best in those of a particular tradition or school. At worst, of course, in the hands of the State: this is what Nietzsche saw happening, and he fought as vigorously as he could against that. Nietzsche’s critique of the university and its claim of academic freedom depicts a perversion of the ear through the lecture system: “One speaking mouth, with many ears, and half as many writing hands—there you have, to all appearances, the external academic apparatus; there you have the University culture machine [*Bildungsmaschine*] in action.” Behind this machine at a

“careful, calculated distance” stands the State: Derrida points out that this picture of an educational State Apparatus, “which dictates to you the very thing that passes through your ear and travels the length of the cord all the way down to your stenography” tends to conflate umbilical and ear. Uncannily “an umbilical cord . . . create[s] this cold monster that is a dead father or the State.”³²

Leaning on Nietzsche and Derrida, but also on insights culled from such different writers as Bataille, Bourdieu, Lacan, and Levinas, the new ethical theory tries to break down the reproductive tyranny of the educational system, its creation of a pseudo-ear that fosters the mere illusion of democracy and objectivity.³³ It acknowledges the problem of transferring to books, to writing as an institution, the pedagogical vitality of the teaching relation and orally transmitted knowledge. Texts are not simply the objects of a cognitive process; their “moment” includes teaching as well as teachings.³⁴ Teaching is here understood in a broad sense as a performative activity, as interpretation that wishes to change the person, and so a world. The reader, similarly, is not simply a subject who reads, but a teacher or a student; something of both, perhaps. If we superimpose the interactive relation of teacher and student on that of reader and text, literary study loses some of the chill which cognitive or constative theories have cast on it, and reading is restored as ethical (or metaepistemological). Ethical, because the readings are *addressed*, and not only formally (through an explicit or implicit dedication, or an analogy of literature and letters) but to the other as a responsive, vulnerable, even unpredictable being. Through a criticism that “reads the wound” and does not deny it (Paul Celan’s phrase is *wundgelesenes*), the original text, itself vulnerable, addresses us, reveals itself as a participant in a collective life, or life-in-death; one sign of which is tradition or intertextuality.³⁵

IX

I have some questions about this revival of a notion of *paidea*, which today includes, and often focuses on, women’s experience. But it does invite us to rethink our relation to literature without superseding it in the fervor of our commitment to social justice. One reservation I have is that what is called the ethical may turn out to be, once again, a displaced evangelical intensity. The “memento trauma” aspect is not all that far from a “memento mori.” Is this conception of criticism as a secondary testifying a religious phenomenon, though one that has renounced the totality claim of religion? Does it seek a hermeneutics of modern, fragmented being? Susan Handelman writes explicitly that “hermeneutics

and homiletics cannot be separated and . . . are brought together under the category of the pedagogical.”³⁶

A question therefore remains about how this ethical perspective can differentiate itself from advocacy teaching: from the strong personalism that has invaded the classroom and the profession as a whole, and which, as in politics, succeeds not so much by astringent evidence or humane conversation as by scandal, publicity, and sheer force of display in a “society of the spectacle.” I certainly don’t mean that Cathy Caruth, or Susan Handelman, or Barbara Johnson, or Jill Robbins, or Avital Ronell, or Cynthia Chase—or, in the previous generation, Shoshanna Felman, Jacqueline Rose, and Julia Kristeva—take that path. In fact, they are exemplary in *not* setting up a counterideal to “mastery,” or a mocking feminist reversal of that hierarchical and complacent mode of teaching. But it will be necessary to spell out how *their* “recuperation of the Pedagogical Moment” can avoid politicization or cultic personalism.

A step toward that comes when we remind ourselves that, so far, the discourses explored by this reintroduction of the pedagogical moment are psychoanalysis (or medicalized speech generally) and midrash, as well as literary criticism. Feminism enters as a critique of both psychoanalytic and literary discourse. It exposes in analyst, critic, and artist a distortion of gender issues. We confront potentially traumatic questions bearing on sexual identity and the tyranny of psychosocial constructs.³⁷ Getting personal, feminism breaches the barrier between autobiographical reflection and institutional concerns.

My remarks are limited here to “the pedagogical moment,” and what can be learned from it to alter the reader/text relationship. Reception theory, for example, whether or not it is prompted (as in Norman Holland, David Bleich, Jane Tompkins) by psychoanalysis, is intensely pedagogic. It offers a way of *slowing* reading by allowing the student’s opinions, prejudices, and positions to emerge, and subduing the teacher’s own rage for order. The potential impact of midrash on literary criticism is a more complex case. Midrash originally flourished in a legal-religious, and so authoritarian, context. Yet it is the very freedom of this form of commentary which appeals, the creative response to a Writing that remains, all the same, sacred and unalterable. There is, very often, a challenging of the symbolic order and, simultaneously, its recuperation. I suspect that the response of midrash can be so daring because of the relation between orality and aurality. The pseudo-ear is challenged; we find ourselves in a commentary that restores an elided and intricate type of hearing. Rabbinic interpreters often discover or reconstruct a virtual text, words within words that yield new meaning through otomatic (“eary”) punning.

Where, in fact, does the received text lodge: in the text or in ourselves? It is hardly satisfactory to resolve the issue by saying the text is

in the text but its meaning is in us. We soon get lost again in epistemological niceties. It is better to admit that a traumatic or enthusiastic element may enter secular exegesis, as it does midrash or the religious relation to Scripture. We sense it in such comments as Levinas's "Teaching is not reducible to maieutics [the Socratic method]; it comes from the exterior and brings me more than I can contain,"³⁸ and Norman O. Brown's "The book sets the reader on fire."³⁹ Emerson's humanistic dictum, that in reading others we recognize our own "alienated majesty," also provides this insight.

Rabbinic midrash is a remarkable blend of ecstatic and maieutic practices. After Sinai, and all the more after the *hurban* (the destruction of the Second Temple, leading to the Jewish diaspora), the community has *received* the law, that is, accepted it once and for all, so that this law is not, or is no longer, heteronomous. The obligation to interpret and transmit it rests now on the teachers of the community, even though the otherness of God remains. Methods of study evolve which are, at once, commentary (constative) and prayer (performative). They encourage communal inquiry and intense intellectual exploration but do not exclude the possibility of inspired or mystical readings. The text is now more in the text than ever, rather than in God, yet it is "revealed" through both legal and freer kinds of midrash, through Scripture's active "reception"—even consumption—by rabbinic interpreters.⁴⁰

Something like this reception theory, at once introspective and enthusiastic, also motivates the secular practice of literary criticism, without being acknowledged. What is assumed by the theory is that reception goes hand in hand with teaching and transmission, that the materials being studied are contagious, and that there will be a transference between teacher and student. (A wonderful example of *textual* contagiousness—typical of the way literature works, with or without a teacher—comes when Lacan, commenting on the dream recorded by Freud, characterizes the child's address to the father, "Don't you see I am burning?" as a "firebrand.") We have an obligation, of course, to analyze that transference process, and to recognize the "subject position" as, also, a limiting fact. But the hope is that literary studies, in contemplating spurned ancestral modes, and thinking back through trauma theory to religious experience, might become more imaginative rather than more pious.

X

My own interest in the relevance of psychoanalysis to literary studies has not centered on trauma. The poets were there before, as Freud once declared, so I prefer to talk of "psychoaesthetics" and "representation-

compulsion.”⁴¹ But I share with trauma studies a concern for the absences or intermittences in speech (or of conscious knowledge in speech); for the obliquity or residual muteness of “flowers of speech” and other euphemic modes; for the uncanny role of accidents; for the “ghosting” of the subject; for the connection of voice with identity (the “appeal” in cryptonymy, punning and specular names); for interpretation as a feast not a fast; and for literature as a testimonial act that transmits knowledge in a form that is not scientific and does not coincide with either a totally realistic (as if that were possible) or analytic form of representation.⁴²

How does traumatic knowledge become transmissible—how can it extend into personal and cultural memory? Though Wordsworth evokes the role of “mute, insensate things” in the growth of the mind, rather than a psychogenesis of speech, he records early “spots of time” which become the support of “far other” experience. In *Wordsworth’s Poetry* I associated trauma with such eidetic and referential flashbacks. A “spot syndrome” that fortified the youngster for the mystery of individuation marked even the mature poet’s mind, haunting it with particular objects or places (“And there’s a tree, of many one”).⁴³ These places, mythic and realistic, never lose their aura entirely; indeed, Wordsworth’s “Where shall I seek the origin?” inspires him to evoke quasi-sacred sites of “first encounter,” binding contacts between his imagination and earth, as if earth had *omphaloi*, specific localities that could restore poetic strength and lead to a future as strong as the past. The forming and deforming power of such fixations could be *creative* symptoms of trauma linked to reality-hunger, or a compulsive desire for “the real.”⁴⁴ They are to nature what scenes of *pathos* are to tragedy, according to Aristotle.

Considerations like this foster a nonreductive psychology. At the same time, it is possible to move from Wordsworth to the present. There is something very contemporary about trauma studies, reflecting our sense that violence is coming ever nearer, like a storm—a storm that may already have moved into the core of our being. The reality of violence, not simply as external fate, but intrinsic to the psychological development of the human species, and contaminating its institutions (the Law system not excluded) is “the fateful question” posed by Freud in the closing pages of *Civilization and its Discontents*. Today we must add to Freud’s insight an enlargement of the fact of violence through technical resources that relay powerfully both fiction and news. Audiovisual media pressure a mind that is no longer allowed to “sleep” but must continually react. Wallace Stevens already defined imagination as a violence from within responding to a violence from without. Soon there will be no versions of pastoral; Wordsworth’s may have been the last viable one, at the threshold of modern industrialization and urbanization. The inter-

est in trauma, moreover, goes together with an interest in testimony as a genre that indeed presses back with the courage and patience of memory.

It is also relevant that Lacan's famous "return to Freud" makes so much of chapter 7 of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, where the first adumbrations of a metapsychology appear. For that chapter anticipates Freud's hypothesis that there is an *organic* tendency to keep sleeping, to not wake into full consciousness, and that *this* may be the real explanation of dreams, the wish that underlies every other wish. The organism itself seeks a return to its preconscious state; or, as Freud declared in his most famous aphorism, "The aim of life is death." Under those conditions, testimony in the social and historical sphere, like objectivity and analytic precision in the sciences, can be said to modify the death-drive by not ceasing from mental fight. It makes an ethical cause out of vigilance, and carries it even to the point of reality-denial by clearly witnessing, yet not giving in to, the death-manifestations all around. Strengthening this denial, and paradoxically from within sleep itself, is the restorative relation of dreams to mental health, the articulate dreams, above all, produced by the antiselfconscious labors of art.

Epilogue: "Father, don't you see . . . ?"

Commenting on the dream of the burning child, Freud surmised that the words "Father, don't you see I am burning?" were actually uttered in some form during the child's illness, which may have been accompanied by a high fever. Though Freud adduces here a general principle of dream-interpretation (that dreams incorporate the day's residue, or actual words and perceptions), his aim is to show that this dream is not hard to *interpret*, so that he can concentrate on the question of how to *explain* it. But to explain a psychical event like dreaming means to trace it back in the psychical chain to a determining cause; and, unable to do this, Freud begins to speculate on what is later called metapsychology, which takes us back to the beginnings of conscious life, to the "waking" of matter into memory. (I have often thought that the importance given to imagining this moment is essentially erotic, as in the Pygmalion story—the thought of waking the body itself, never animated enough, into a passionate response.)

Lacan then intervenes to keep dreaming within the psychical chain of events (and out of biology or metapsychology). He does so by a self-referential turn that is also a metaphorical turn: the "fever," he suggests, is also that of Freud, namely, his ardent wish to find a "real," a "first encounter." This "fever" is itself a psychic fact, and bears not just on

Freud the individual but on the institution, the received theory of psychoanalysis which has failed to see the real as always *manqué*, or as an impossible object of desire. Lacan, at the same time, understands that the pathos of "Father, don't you see . . ." comes not only from a parent's projected self-reproach—heightened by a metaphor that turns fever into flame even before the flame is literal—but also from the invocational force of the child's direct address against a background in which everyone is asleep.⁴⁵ *Lacan too is addressed*, as one whose return to Freud means a return to Freudian texts: the recovery of a "missed encounter" with them.⁴⁶ A watcher by Freud's tomb, Lacan is awakened by the "firebrand" phrase and inserts himself into a psychoanalytic sequence—into a genealogy which makes the child the father of the father.⁴⁷

The notion of "first encounter," though it often structures biography and autobiography,⁴⁸ has something dreamlike about it, and belongs more to the fantasmic than to a localizable "real." So it is possible to see the entire career of Keats as seeking that "fantasmic real" through *un indéfiniment jamais atteint réveil*.⁴⁹ The poet's imagination, attracted to what he himself calls "the extreme," seeks to advance beyond pastoral modes: beyond "Flora and Old Pan," the language of myth, the language of flowers. Keats shared Freud's Enlightenment ethos, and cultivated a consciousness unafraid to "meet" reality and to express itself in the directest terms. Must poetry, then, traditionally associated with "sleep"—that is, with an unconscious element often formally expressed as dream-vision—be given up as childish?

No more than Freud gives up the interpretation of dreams. Keats is not deceived by the false dawn of absolute Enlightenment, because Dante, Milton, and Shakespeare remain part of the real, so that his own genius, embarrassed by their strength, cannot dismiss them in the name of reality or scientific progress. In the *Hyperion* project, consisting of two long epic fragments, Keats, more dramatically than Lacan, intrudes in person upon a genealogical scene, a twilight of the gods he creates out of an older, mythic poetry. The poet, in this interregnum moment, must bear the new by bearing the old upon his senses. It is an act of imaginative re-generation which responds not only to a body of prior poetry and its burden of greatness, but also to a missing or unfulfilled element. That element is basically feminine, a radical expansion of the muse-figure who remains marginal in the great tradition of epic verse. Keats does not envision a new generation of gods as much as a new poetry. More precisely, the birth of a new psyche: a psychic awakening *not* accompanied by trauma, that is, *not* involving gods or transformation *in allo genere*. Yet *The Fall of Hyperion*, however powerfully imagined, is but a negative and nightmarish progress, and remains entangled in all the rhetorical symptoms of trauma.⁵⁰

It is the "Ode to Psyche" that comes closest to unwounded yet "awakened eyes," whether they belong to Psyche or to Keats himself.⁵¹ The poem is richly ambiguous on that point: "Surely I dreamt today, or did I see / The winged Psyche with awaken'd eyes?" If this moment of enlightenment, with sexual overtones, describes the awakened eyes of Psyche, it must be those of the redeemed ("winged") Psyche; for we know from the myth that the original moment of discovery was fatal. What is seen (or dreamt) by the poet is therefore a wishful repetition—a "repetition in a finer tone," as Keats once called it—and not Lacan's "the first encounter, the real."

"The Imagination," Keats wrote in a letter, "may be compared to Adam's dream: he awoke and found it truth."⁵² Keats's mention of Adam alludes to the eighth book of *Paradise Lost*, to a scene that skirts yet averts traumatic loss. In it Milton stages his version of a first encounter, an *original* awakening that is already a repetition. God gives Adam a glimpse of Eve in a dream, then has him "wake / To find her." The caesura's slight suspension, mimicking expectancy, also insinuates a "wake / To lose her"—which is the sinister alternative depicted in Keats's ballad "La Belle Dame sans Merci." Loss casts its shadow on presence, even in this first encounter, whose pre-traumatic stress shows Milton as teacher preparing the imagination for trials to come.⁵³

YALE UNIVERSITY

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Room of One's Own, Personal Criticism, and the Essay," *Twentieth Century Literature*, 40 (1994), 165–90.

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NOTES

- 1 Adam Phillips, "The Experts," *London Review of Books*, 16 (22 December 1994), 25.
- 2 The nearest visionary analogue to Blake's depiction of aboriginal trauma may be Julia Kristeva's theory of *abjection*, even though the mysterious primordial separation is, in Kristeva, from a maternal rather than a paternal entity. Blake's Urizen reacts to abjection by a pathological boundary-setting, an exclusionist ordering. See Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon Roudiez (New York, 1982). Lacan's more complex linking of "the real" with loss, desire, and death drive can at least be *opposed* to Blake's equation of Creation, loss, and pseudo-order.
- 3 "[Freud] s'attache, et sur un mode presque angoissé, à s'interroger quelle est la rencontre première, le réel, que nous pouvons affirmer derrière le fantasme." Lacan's treatment of the dream is found in his "Tuché and Automaton," in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1978), pp. 53–64. Lacan affirms the "psychic reality" of the father's dream as "homage to a missed reality, which can only repeat itself indefinitely in an indefinite awakening never attained" ["en un indéfiniment jamais atteint réveil"] and so modifies Freud's pessimism about finding the origin of the "psychical process" of dreams. "Rencontre première" is, as often in Lacan, a highly charged phrase, evoking the primal scene concept but also subsuming Freud's interest in causal explanation, in discovering the primitive ("first") event that triggered psychic consciousness in matter. (See Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 29–30.) "Fantasme" too is a charged word, close to phantom or a haunting idea. "According to Lacan," writes Herman Rapaport, "the very idea of adding or inventing a new originary scene [that which haunts psychoanalysis] is itself typical of an impossible desire." See his *Between the Sign and the Gaze* (Ithaca, 1994). My comments have

been stimulated and helped by Cathy Caruth's "Traumatic Awakening," in *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (Baltimore, forthcoming).

4 Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York, 1992), p. 4.

5 The neurological construction of sensory reality may also enter. See Oliver Sacks, *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat, and other Clinical Tales* (New York, 1985).

6 Ellie Ragland, "Lacan, the Death Drive, and the Dream of the Burning Child," in *Death and Representation*, ed. Sarah W. Goodwin and Elisabeth Bronfen (Baltimore, 1993), p. 97.

7 "[I] est nécessaire de fonder d'abord cette répétition dans la schize même qui se produit dans le sujet à l'endroit de la rencontre. Cette schize constitue la dimension caractéristique de la découverte et de l'expérience analytique, qui nous fait appréhender le réel, dans son incidence dialectique, comme originellement malvenu." "L'oeil et le regard," translated as "The Split between the Eye and the Gaze," in Miller, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, pp. 67–78. I need hardly add—but some contemporary polemics make it necessary—that this position does not deny, any more than Freud does, the facts of social reality: it begins with the patient, or with the person who is already mentally disturbed, which is the complex individual situation a psychoanalyst must engage.

8 On this point, however, trauma theory does not seem clear enough. There is an otherness which connects with Lacan's "discours de l'Autre," with the symbolic order, and whose recognition can blend with "l'autre," that is, with the otherness of a person or a different culture. But the otherness associated with traumatic "experience" is something more akin to a *tremendum*, and the path from it to ethical or realistic recognition is the difficulty. Hegel tries to establish such a path in his section of the *Phenomenology* devoted to the master-servant relationship; but in Kierkegaard, and in religious thinkers who follow Rudolf Otto's *The Holy*, a suspension or mystical negation of the ethical is stressed. The Holy, in short, may be difficult to distinguish from the Unholy, as is the case in Holy Wars, and which affects the gravest historical trauma of our time, the Holocaust: an evil undertaken not in the name of evil but in the name of a purifying nationalism.

9 For example, Susan Sontag: "Nothing I have seen in photographs or in real life ever cut me as sharply, deeply, instantaneously. Indeed, it seems plausible to me to divide my life into two parts, before I saw those photographs (I was twelve) and after." She is referring to Holocaust photographs. (Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [New York, 1977], p. 20.) On the "cutting" word, see my "Words and Wounds," ch. 5 in *Saving the Text: Literature / Derrida / Philosophy* (Baltimore, 1981), pp. 118–57.

10 It is interesting that Andrew Marvell, in "The Picture of little T.C. in a Prospect of Flowers" evokes, apotropaically, the killing effect of premature (sexual) experience.

11 On the relation of "the tyranny of sight" to symbolic process, see Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Unmediated Vision* (New Haven, 1954), the chapters on "Valéry" (pp. 97–124), and on "Pure Representation" (pp. 127–55); also my "Retrospect 1971," in *Wordsworth's Poetry*, 2nd ed. (New Haven, 1971), pp. xviiff. For a systematic treatment, focusing on the visual nature of the fantasm in its relation to verbal figuration, see the post-Lacanian work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torotk, esp. *The Wolf Man's Magic Word: A Cryptonymy*, tr. Nicholas Rand (Minneapolis, 1986) and *L'Écorce et le noyau* (Paris, 1978). Also Rapaport, *Between the Sign and the Gaze*. Freud has important remarks on scopophilia in *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*, in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, tr. and ed. James Strachey (London, 1953), vol. VII, p. 194.

12 For this space, and its importance from earliest childhood on, see Donald W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (New York, 1971). Whereas Lacan is always analyzing how an absent object can have presence (in function of its very absence), Winnicott analyzes the mature imagination as a capacity for being present in the presence of the other.

13 The explosive issue of how credible such memories are throws a pall over trauma

studies, even at this emerging stage. Freud's ambivalent turn from diagnosing child abuse to diagnosing it as a fantasy is being reenacted today in the polemic about recovered memories. The *legal abuse* of cases that play on our raised consciousness of having in the past seriously underreported this kind of violence extends, to my mind, the original abuse. It is a legal violence that ignores rather than faces the issue of the suggestibility of the human mind, and the difficulty of conducting a search for "the real," for decisive evidence, without increased damage to the individuals involved. Eventually, one hopes, good jurisprudence will prevail in this area; at the moment it is salutary to remember that, as I indicate further on, imagination is a coercive, not simply a persuasive, faculty.

14 See Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, *Doctors' Stories: The Narrative Structure of Medical Knowledge* (Princeton, 1991), a remarkable description of the appropriateness of the literary ethos to clinical practice. See also Stanley A. Leavy, *The Psychoanalytic Dialogue* (New Haven, 1980), esp. ch. 3 where the difference between holding a "conversation" with a text and a person is discussed. Recovered memories that are false are usually implanted by suggestion, by a false conversation. Richard Weisberg seeks to lay the basis for a (more) "literary jurisprudence" in his *Poethics, and other Strategies of Law and Literature* (New York, 1992).

15 The rhythm, embodied in the verse-measure, remains on automatic pilot, which guarantees that the poem continues, though without voice-feeling. The latter is also assured by the sensitive prose glosses added later.

16 Wordsworth's distinction from Coleridge is made clear by Alan Liu's extraordinary statement that "The true apocalypse for Wordsworth is reference." What is implied here is an everyday trauma, mediated by "nature," or what Wordsworth conceptualizes as nature. Liu identifies the traumatic aspect with history as *histoire événementielle* (catastrophic or eventful history) rather than everyday history, but despite this ambiguity his position is clear and valuable: "The true apocalypse will come when history crosses the zone of nature to occupy the self directly, when the sense of history and Imagination thus become one, and nature, the mediating figure, is no more." See Alan Liu, *Wordsworth, the Sense of History* (Stanford, 1989), pp. 42, 31. For the phenomenology of this understanding of reference, see also Anselm Haverkamp, "The Memory of Pictures: Roland Barthes and Augustine on Photography," *Comparative Literature*, 45 (1993), 258–79. Haverkamp signals the relation between *punctum* and trauma.

17 We are satisfied, that is, with "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as a narrative poem, even when we cannot get to the real behind the fantasy. One could also say that poetic reference approaches an inverse vanishing point, a *de te fabula narratur*. Compare Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, tr. Alan Sheridan (New York, 1978), p. 106.

18 Concerning the religious implication in particular: Lacan's psychoanalytic genius is to absorb a line of paramystical speculations on death and (absence of) the self, which leads from Hegel's "labor of the negative," strongly reintroduced into French thought by Kojève, to Mallarmé's famous letter to Henri Cazalis (April 1886), to Maurice Blanchot's lifelong effort at linking literature and an undialectical relation to death, a relation "which is not that of possibility, which does not lead to mastery or to an understanding or to the progressive achievements of time, but exposes him [the person] to a radical reversal" (*The Space of Literature*). There is a striking similarity between Coleridge's depiction of the Ancient Mariner and Blanchot's Thomas the Obscure (in the novel of that title): "He was really dead and at the same time rejected from the reality of death. In death itself, he was deprived of death, a horribly destroyed man, stopped in the midst of nothingness by his own image, by this Thomas running before him, bearer of extinguished torches."

19 I allude to Donald W. Winnicott's well-known theory of transitional objects and phenomena in *Playing and Reality*.

20 In an exploratory paper, which suggests that "Psychoanalysis itself is, arguably, a

theory more about knowledge than therapy," Dori Laub and Nanette Auerhahn typologize different forms of traumatic knowledge: "Knowing and Not Knowing: Massive Psychic Traumatic Memory," *Bulletin Trimestriel de la Fondation Auschwitz* (Actes V, Colloque International, Brussels, November 1992, Histoire et mémoire des crimes et génocides nazis), nos. 44–45 (1994), 69–95.

21 Valéry, developing his own philosophy of symbolism, mocks the mechanical, quasi-scientific temptation of cognitive referencing by an exam question: "What is to be thought of this custom: Piercing the eyes of a bird so that it can sing better. Explain and develop. (3 pages)."

22 The effort to be "historical" is, in this context, often a way of insisting on the nonaccidental rather than accidental status of such an encounter, on a (sometimes superstitious) valuing of coincidence or conjuncture.

23 Hegel's *Phenomenology of Mind*, while respecting history as a concrete, dialectical process, still moves toward a totalizing end-state in which history is so deeply internalized that it is forgotten. Basically the experience of history does not become a part of us but of a *substance* in which we participate.

24 Catherine Belsey argues that the Sherlock Holmes type of detective story aims "to dispel magic and mystery, to make everything explicit, accountable, subject to scientific analysis" though a "dark and magical" quality can remain, when it comes to women. I argue that this Enlightenment project does not succeed but in fact often increases our sense of the magic and uncanniness of life. See Catherine Belsey, *Critical Practice* (London, 1980), pp. 111ff., and Geoffrey H. Hartman, "Literature High and Low: The Case of the Mystery Story," in *The Fate of Reading* (Chicago, 1975), pp. 203–22. For the literary person it is often a *tolle, lege* that captivates as effectively as Cupid's arrow: a poem, part of a poem, or even a fragment, is invested with aura and becomes a riddling admonition from another world.

25 See, for example, *D. W. Winnicott: Psycho-Analytic Explorations*, ed. Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, Madeleine Davis (Cambridge, Mass., 1989), pp. 146–48. The measure of our maturity, then, is tolerating ambivalence and (more creatively) finding new transitional objects or phenomena in the realm of culture, which is the "space" for such objects.

26 Baudelaire's sonnet "Correspondences," indebted to Swedenborgian mysticism, is one of the proof-texts for the symbolist movement, and is often cited in this context. Walter Benjamin's essay on Proust ("Zum Bilde Prousts") makes the German "ähnlich" (resembling) resemble "ahnen" (to forebode), a word close to the German for ancestors. Benjamin's essay and its relevance to literary theory are expertly discussed in J. Hillis Miller, *Fiction and Repetition: Seven English Novels* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), ch. 1.

27 I must add, here, a short excursus. That there is a real-world trigger to trauma should not be denied even when we cannot prove that it originally (as a "first" encounter) had an effect on the psyche similar to that of a stroke on the human brain. However, that trigger is not necessarily a perverse or violent act. For even in such a "positive" trauma as falling in love there is schism: an intense grasping at the real on the one hand, and a devaluing or fading away of everything else, on the other: "I wonder by my troth, what thou, and I / Did, till we lov'd?" This is John Donne's good-morrow to the lovers' new world, their "waking souls." The situation becomes still more complex insofar as a desire for the real, for contact with it ("were we not wean'd till then?"), actually contributes to close encounters of the traumatic kind. We tempt fate.

What is clear enough is that the ideal of psychic integration, as in ego psychology (Lacan's *bête noire*), will have to be modified. We cannot "master" trauma: it continues to lie outside or alongside the "integrated" ego. Any accident (random event, not serious physical injury alone) may inflate into a psychic fatality by "deferred action": think of the casual, overlooked yet eventually fatal incidents that often characterize Garcia Marquez's stories.

28 The symbolic, in Lacan, is not a cure of the real but is itself a kind of trauma. For the child's developmentally necessary transition from the phase of the *imaginaire* (essentially narcissistic, or a two-body, nurturer-child relationship) to the three-body phase of the symbolic (correlative with the onset of the oedipal complex) is always traumatizing. The symbolic order must cure itself; and it does so by missing the real or accepting it as missing. Winnicott, however, has a much simpler view of the relation between traumatic and symbolic. If the mother-child dyad, as he conceives it, develops *transitional* objects that are "a symbol of the union of the baby and the mother (or part of the mother)"—that is, objects located at that point in mental time and space where separation or contiguity replaces union or continuity—then trauma occurs when such symbol-making is disabled. See Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*, esp. "The Location of Cultural Experience," pp. 95–103.

29 Oliver Sachs, in *The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat*, mentions Wittgenstein's *On Certainty*, and remarks it might have been titled *On Doubt*, being marked by doubting no less than affirming: "[Wittgenstein] wonders whether there might be situations or conditions which take away the certainty of the body, which do give one grounds to doubt one's body, perhaps indeed to lose one's entire body in total doubt" (p. 43).

30 It is interesting that in neoclassical aesthetic theory what Aristotle called the scene of *pathos* (a potentially traumatizing scene showing extreme suffering) was not allowed to be represented on stage. It could be introduced only through narration (as in the famous *récits* of Racinian tragedy). An important type of psychoanalytic literary criticism, moreover, consists in discovering and thematizing a childhood fantasm, which may have a phylogenetic as well as ontogenetic element. A perhaps unintended effect of this kind of analysis is that it suggests the relative inauthenticity or very limited autonomy of the individual's psychic development. The earliest, now classic, example is Marie Bonaparte, "L'Identification d'une fille à sa mère morte," in which a hallucinatory swan appears; the insight is deployed literarily on a large scale by Charles Mauron in *Des métaphores obsédantes au mythe personnel* (Paris, 1963).

31 Compare "[T]he distance between self and other is always disturbed, or being disturbed . . . there is always some difficulty of self-presentation in us . . . therefore, we are obliged to fall back on a form of 'representation.'" Geoffrey H. Hartman, *The Fate of Reading* (Chicago, 1975), p. 74.

32 Jacques Derrida, "Otobiographies," in *The Ear of the Other: Otobiography, Transference, Translation*, ed. Claude Levesque and Christie McDonald, tr. Peggy Kamuf (Lincoln, Nebr., 1988; original French ed., 1982). The Nietzsche extract I reproduce comes from educational writings in his *Nachlass*, in English as *On the Future of our Educational Institutions*, tr. J. M. Kennedy.

33 Fred Botting, in an issue of the *Oxford Literary Review* with the title "Experiencing the Impossible," evokes the importance of Bataille's heterology and quotes Denis Hollier's *Against Architecture*. "[T]here has never perhaps been any other theory than theories of the other, as Jacques Derrida has suggested, since all theory is deployed along the pioneer frontiers of assimilation, intervening at points where homogeneity perceives that it is threatened." Botting suggests how, through Bataille and Derrida, theory becomes the sustaining enemy to theory, a "factor in the process of disturbance . . . the shattering of the pedagogical narrative which popularized and institutionalized French writings in Britain by means of an apparently unified thread connecting structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism and poststructuralism." *Oxford Literary Review*, 15 (1993), 206. On the negative aspect of literary pedagogy, see also John Guillory, *Cultural Capital: The Problem of Literary Canon Formation* (Chicago, 1993) and Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York, 1992), p. 55.

34 Compare Susan Handelman, "The 'Torah' of Criticism and the Criticism of Torah: Recuperating the Pedagogical Moment," *Journal of Religion*, 74 (1994), 356–71. Handelman astutely contrasts Levinas and de Man, casting the latter as epistemological villain—but she

neglects de Man's interest in "blind" knowledge, his critique of the arrogance of insight, and his struggle to describe the aporia of performative and constative. Compare with Handelman Barbara Johnson's critique of de Man's impersonality in "Deconstruction, Feminism, and Pedagogy," in her *A World of Difference* (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 42–46.

35 The text is vulnerable because of its very historicity, not only because it was produced by a mortal person. See Thomas Greene, *The Vulnerable Text: Essays on Renaissance Literature* (New York, 1986). For a reconception of literary history close to the spirit of this paragraph, see Sanford Budick, "The Experience of Literary History: Vulgar versus Not-Vulgar," *New Literary History*, 25 (1994), 749–77. Budick restricts his understanding to one kind of tradition (that of the West, and in particular its effective founding through a Roman or Vergilian *translatio studii*). His chiasmic frame of mind, moreover, connects the "life-in-death" of reinscribed words (that is, intertextuality) with the experience of a death-in-life, "unrecuperable loss" that makes literary history, as the record or recovery of previous life, something potential rather than fully realizable. "The representation of this experience entails the claim that an unrecuperable loss within thought is a condition of one kind of experience of literary history (and one kind of tradition)" (767).

36 Handelman, "The 'Torah' of Criticism," 364. My discussion does not resolve, of course, the issue of metalanguage (or a language of description separate from the object language) in literary criticism. While the situation in literary studies is not the same as in medicine, Kathryn Hunter's chapter on "Narrative Incommensurability," in *Doctors' Stories*, pp. 123–47, is very suggestive.

37 See, for example, Elaine Showalter's continuing work on (male) hysteria and such sensitive explorations of tone in poetry as Susan J. Wolfson's "Lyrical Ballads and the Language of (Men) Feeling: Wordsworth Writing Women's Voices," in *Men Writing the Feminine: Literature, Theory and the Question of Genders*, ed. Thais E. Morgan (Albany, 1994), pp. 29–57. Susan Eilenberg, *Strange Power of Speech: Wordsworth, Coleridge and Literary Possession* (New York, 1992) shows these voices as a passion, something strange within the poet, and usurping. This strangeness or otherness can be but is not inevitably linked to gender issues. The issue of the identity of voice (or how voices reinforce or undermine identity) connects also with legal ownership questions and perhaps the copyright issue.

38 From *Totality and Infinity*, quoted in Handelman, "The 'Torah' of Criticism," 362. Levinas retains, however, an ideal of mastery, defined as "the coincidence of the teaching and the teacher." This is, precisely, the ideal of an embodiment that exceeds epistemological inquiry and finds exemplarity.

39 Norman O. Brown, *Apocalypse—And/Or—Metamorphosis* (Berkeley, 1991).

40 The burning bush of Scripture is never consumed, however. It is illuminating to recall in this respect both Bataille's theory that conspicuous consumption, or the disposal of excess resources, is an (anticapitalistic) religious phenomenon, and Derrida's theory of dissemination as a writing that cannot return to the father (original author).

41 See, for example, "I. A. Richards and the Dream of Communication," in my *The Fate of Reading*, pp. 20–40, and "Christopher Smart's *Magnificat*: Toward a Theory of Representation," pp. 74–98.

42 What an irreducibly literary knowledge means is clarified by Gabriele Schwab, "Das ungedachte Wissen der Literatur," *Deutsche Vierteljahrsschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Geistesgeschichte*, 68 (1994), 167–89.

43 I stress the depiction of childhood trauma, but when Wordsworth describes *political* betrayal he must be said to suffer an adult trauma. When Britain declares war on France in 1793, or when it accepts the Convention of Cintra in 1808, an imagery enters that, while not entirely different from what is found in the "spots of time," is distinctive. I quote from the opening paragraph of the poet's pamphlet *Concerning the Convention of Cintra*: "Yet was the event [of the Convention] by none received as an open and measurable affliction: it

has indeed features bold and intelligible to every one; but there was an under-expression which was strange, dark, and mysterious—and . . . we were astonished like men who are overwhelmed without forewarning—fearful like men who feel themselves to be helpless, and indignant and angry like men who are betrayed.”

44 We glimpse there a Wordsworth/Coleridge difference. For Coleridge, as I have tried to show, the obscure object of desire is symbolic, and it is the symbolic order that must be repaired.

45 See Book 11 of Lacan's Seminars: *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. I give here not a faithful exposition but a free interpretation of Lacan's commentary on the dream of the burning child.

46 One question that remains is whether Freud himself, or the very history of psycho-analysis, should be seen as a missed encounter. The main criticism of Freud at present is, as I have mentioned, by those who think he evaded the “real” as a social fact: that by moving away from evidence of child abuse, and following only the psychical aspects of the role of seduction in fantasy life, he failed as physician and reformer. It is fascinating in this regard that the child's pathetic “Father, don't you see . . .” recalls a deadly seduction scene (exerted on an ailing child's imagination) in a famous ballad that became one of the great pedagogical showpieces of German culture: Goethe's *Erl-King*.

47 Compare Harold Bloom's concept of “revisionary ratio,” *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (New York, 1973).

48 “[Newt Gingrich] often points to a visit in 1958, when he was 15, with his adoptive father to Verdun, the bloodiest battlefield of World War I, and its warehouse collection of bones, as the seminal moment in his poetical coming of age. ‘It is the driving force which pushed me into history and politics, and molded my life,’ he wrote in his 1984 political manifesto, “Windows of Opportunity.” . . . ‘People like me,’ he said last year, ‘are what stand between us and Auschwitz.’” *New York Times*, 24 November 1994, p. A28.

49 See n. 3 for this quotation from Lacan.

50 In my *The Fate of Reading*, pp. 126ff., I described that rhetoric in literary-historical terms as belonging to an Eastern or epiphanic consciousness Keats wished to convert into an English or Hesperian mode.

51 For a consideration of the *ear* as a psychic organ, see my “Words and Wounds.”

52 Even here Milton insinuates figural typology, which gave significance to time and largely structured the Christian understanding of historical progress. For Adam too is made to advance, in his first experience of woman, from her shadowy type to truth. In trauma theory reality is always under the shadow of a “truth” (an unassimilated real) which makes us “more like a man / Flying from something that he dreads, than one / Who sought the thing he loved” (Wordsworth, “Tintern Abbey”).

53 I wish to thank Kevis Goodman for helpful remarks on this essay.