SEPARATION, DEATH, THE THING, FREUD, LACAN, AND THE MISSED ENCOUNTER

Translated by Steven Miller

How could it be! An X-ray was made of my head. I, a living being, have seen my cranium—is that not something new? Come on!

—Guillaume Apollinaire, The New Spirit and the Poets

The frightening unknown on the other side of the line is that which in man we call the unconscious, that is to say the memory of those things he forgets... those things in connection with which everything is arranged so that he doesn’t think about them, i.e. stench and corruption that always yawn like an abyss.


1. Methodological Clarification

If it still remains possible to constitute cerebrality as a specific regime of events, if it remains possible to show that trauma—as unexpected accident or unforeseen catastrophe—possesses a determining and not merely a triggering power within the psyche, this possibility could only be elaborated at the heart of Freud’s thinking of danger, destruction, and the annihilation of the psyche. It would thus be necessary to enter as deeply as possible into this thinking and to show the precise way in which the place of cerebrality opens up within the powerful economy of the death drive.

Once again, the confrontation that I am staging here is not simple. As my argument advances, it becomes even clearer that it is impossible to naively oppose the neurological discourse on the psychic impact of brain lesions to the theory of neurotic predisposition. Freud, we have shown, accords a fundamental role to the factor of surprise, fright, and the psyche’s lack of preparation for the external accident or danger.

The cloven structure of sexuality, the “screen” of the “libido theory” (according to which sexuality is also—and perhaps before all—encompasses the other of the sexual or the otherness of sexuality to itself) enlarges the signification of sexual etiology. Indeed, by virtue of this structure, sexual
etiology accords a fundamental place to mortiferous eventality that cannot be separated from sexuality as such even though it is foreign to sexual life.

The meaning of Freud’s refusal of any instinctual monism ultimately lies in the recognition that there are two sources of events at the very heart of the same causal character. Freud readily admits that the psyche is exposed to unforeseeable catastrophes of destructive events. The dual organization of the concept of sexuality makes it possible to account for the constitution as well as the destruction of the psyche.

The confrontation between sexuality and cerebrality, therefore, should not become an exposition that contrasts between two types of discourse: a neurological discourse that would insist on the psyche’s constitutive vulnerability and a psychoanalytic discourse that would insist on its imperishable character. Contrary to what one might be led to suppose, such a confrontation distinguishes two apparently similar but, in fact, radically opposed concepts of destruction.

I will now examine the status of the psychoanalytic hypothesis of an annihilation of the psyche—or rather, the hypothesis of absolute danger. It is necessary to begin from this hypothesis in order to show what remains unquestioned within it. Only such a critical opening can give cerebrality its chance. Where and how are these two visions of destruction distinguished from one another? This is the question that the present chapter seeks to address.

2. The Freudian Idea of Death as Separation from Self

A. The unconscious as the original relation between the psyche and its own destruction

Freud affirms that the unconscious knows no negation, time, or death. He insists on the perennial longevity of unconscious structures, on the force of the phylogenetic inheritance of pasts not lived. Nonetheless, for Freud, this very perennial nature bears witness to the fact that the unconscious is nothing other than the form of the original relation between the psyche and its own destruction. As Deleuze quite rightly underscores: “Freud supposes the unconscious to be ignorant of three important things: Death, Time, and No. Yet it is a question only of death, time, and no in the unconscious.”3 Everything that making and letting die might mean for the psyche, in fact, is elaborated at great length in a work that never stops referring to annihilation, to an Ego capable of letting itself perish as it gives in to the anxiety about death that occurs both “as a reaction to an external danger (äußere Gefahr) and as an internal process (innerer Vorgang), as for instance in melancholia.”4 To do justice to Freud, one must show that, for him, danger comes as much from outside as inside the psyche. He asserts:

The fear of death in melancholia only admits of one explanation: that the ego gives itself up because it feels itself hated and persecuted by the super-ego, instead of loved... But, when the ego finds itself in an excessive real danger [realen Gefahr] which it believes itself unable to overcome by its own strength, it is bound to draw the same conclusion. It sees itself deserted by all protecting forces and lets itself die [läßt sich sterben].5

Freud in no way minimizes the importance of external threats or perils. It is thus not a matter of contesting the existence, in Freud, of an idea of psychic destruction but rather of examining and discussing the unconscious status of this idea and the role that it plays within the psyche itself. How does the psyche apprehend its own end?
B. “Real” danger and the cut: castration, punishment, and birth

For Freud, the relation of the psyche to its own disappearance is envisaged as a separation of the psyche from itself. Separation from self is the psychic phenomenon of mortality. For Freud, the anticipation of death is lived as the ego’s farewell to itself. Dying signifies taking leave of oneself. Anxiety, as a reaction to danger, is then always fundamentally separation anxiety, the affect of cutting as such. These precise definitions will become the focus of the controversy with neurology.

But let us begin with the Freudian conception of anxiety: whether it is the affective expression of internal instinctual danger or whether, on the contrary, it is a reaction to an external threat, anxiety remains the affect of distancing or tearing apart. From his Papers on Metapsychology, where Freud contends that anxiety is produced by repression and is a reaction to internal instinctual peril, to Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, where anxiety becomes the direct reaction to a “real” external danger and the cause of repression, the basis of the Freudian idea of the destruction of the psyche remains the phenomenon of separation from self.

Certainly, the theoretical trajectory from one work (Papers on Metapsychology) to the other (Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety) is remarkably complex and the conclusions in each work even appear to contradict one another. In Papers on Metapsychology, in fact, anxiety appears as a consequence of repression while, later, repression appears to be a creation of anxiety. In New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, Freud addresses this “inversion” of the relation between anxiety and repression: “It was not repression that created the anxiety… it was anxiety that made the repression.”

Accordingly, this inversion results from a new attempt to take danger into account. At this point in Freud's thinking, it is no longer internal instinctual danger that appears as the prime form of all danger; for, he shows that this instinctual danger itself is only the internalization of a real material danger: “But what kind of anxiety can it have been? Only anxiety in the face of a threatening external danger—that is to say, a real anxiety (Realangst).” Indeed: “It must be confessed that we were not prepared to find that internal instinctual danger would turn out to be a determinant and preparation for an external, real, situation of danger.” Freud then affirms that every “instinctual situation which is feared goes back ultimately to an external situation of danger.” In fact, he pursues, “neurotic anxiety has changed in our hands into real anxiety, into fear of particular external situations of danger.” Freud will no longer be concerned, as he was in Papers on Metapsychology, with the psychic importance of “how a neurotic anxiety is changed into an apparently real one,” but, on the contrary, with the priority of real anxiety itself as a response to an actual external danger.

What, then, is this danger that is more originary than internal danger? It is precisely the danger of separation, which, at this stage of Freud’s analysis, appears in the three principal forms of birth, punishment, and castration. Beginning from the last in the series, Freud explains the order in which these forms are derived. The “punishment of castration,” the “loss” for the little boy “of his member,” appears as a “real danger that the child fears as a result of his love for his mother.” Freud clarifies:

You will of course object that after all that is not a real danger. Our boys are not castrated because they are in love with their mothers during the phase of the Oedipus complex. But the matter cannot be dismissed so simply. Above all, it is not a question of whether castration is really carried out; what is decisive is that the danger is one that threatens from outside and that the child believes in it.
Castration anxiety (the third form of separation) is itself a substitute for the fear of punishment—punishment by the mother who threatens to withdraw her love for the child (the second form of separation); and this punishment anxiety, in turn, is the expression of an even older anxiety linked to the trauma of birth (the first form of separation):

If a mother is absent or has withdrawn her love from her child, it is no longer sure of the satisfaction of its needs and is perhaps exposed to the most distressing feelings of tension. Do not reject the idea that these determinants of anxiety may at bottom repeat the situation of the original anxiety at birth, which, to be sure, also represented a separation from the mother. Indeed, if you follow a train of thought suggested by Ferenczi, you may add the fear of castration to this series, for a loss of the male organ results in an inability to unite once more with the mother (or a substitute for her) in the sexual act. I may mention to you incidentally that the very frequent fantasy of returning to the mother’s womb is a substitute for this wish to copulate.¹³

Finally, Freud turns to the work of Otto Rank, who “has the merit of having expressly emphasized the significance of the act of birth and of separation from the mother.”¹⁴ And Rank leads him to take into account the fact of “helplessness [Hilflosigkeit],” the distress of the newborn engendered by its state of immaturity and absolute dependence. As the child grows up, this distress continues to develop and his separation anxiety takes a different form at every age:

The danger of psychical helplessness fits the stage of the ego’s early immaturity; the danger of loss of an object (or loss of love) fits the lack of self-sufficiency in the first years of childhood; the danger of being castrated fits the phallic phase; and finally the fear of the super-ego, which assumes a special position, fits the period of latency.¹⁵

These three “dangers” of separation—birth, punishment, and castration—are analyzed in the same fashion in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety. In this work, Freud more clearly distances himself from Rank, showing that his hypothesis of “birth trauma” is “unfounded and extremely improbable.”¹⁶ Nonetheless, separation always appears as the predominant factor when the psyche is exposed to danger and birth remains one of the most striking phenomena of this separation. Separation is inflected into what Lacan calls the “five forms of loss (Verlust) that Freud designates in Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety”¹⁷—that is, the gradation birth-castration-loss of love-punishment-exclusion:

We have already traced the change of that context from the loss of the mother as an object to castration. The next change is caused by the power of the superego. With the depersonalization of the parental agency from which castration was feared, the danger becomes less defined. Castration anxiety develops into moral anxiety—social anxiety… ‘separation and expulsion from the horde’… The final transformation which the fear of the superego undergoes is, it seems to me, the fear of death (or fear for life) which is a fear of the superego projected onto the powers of destiny.¹⁸
It emerges clearly from these analyses that the situation of real danger is finally much older than instinctual danger, which then appears as its trace or memory. Phobia, for example, is always derived from this primary danger, of which it is only a substitute. Returning to the case of “Little Hans,” Freud modifies his original conclusions and writes:

As soon as the ego recognizes the danger of castration it gives the signal of anxiety and inhibits through the pleasure-unpleasure agency... the impending cathetic process in the id. At the same time, the phobia is formed. And now the castration anxiety is directed to a different object and expressed in a distorted form, so that the patient is afraid, not of being castrated by his father, but of being bitten by a horse or devoured by a wolf... There is no need to be afraid of being castrated by a father who is not there. On the other hand one cannot get rid of a father; he can appear wherever he chooses. But if he is replaced by an animal, all one has to do is avoid the sight of it—that is, its presence—in order to be free from danger and anxiety. ‘Little Hans,’ therefore, imposed a restriction upon his ego. He produced the inhibition of not leaving the house, so as not to come across any horses.19

Repression thus becomes a true action of suppression rather than a production of anxiety:

The ego notices that the satisfaction of an emerging instinctual demand would conjure up one of the well-remembered situations of danger. This instinctual cathexis must therefore be somehow suppressed, stopped, made powerless... With this the automatism of the pleasure-unpleasure principle is brought into operation and now carries out the repression of the dangerous instinctual impulse.20

As his theory of anxiety evolves, Freud seems to elevate the process of individual separation—produced within the drive itself by a repression that divides representation and affect—to the status of a transcendental experience: originary separation.

C. Fear of death
All of the previously evoked dangers—birth, loss of love, and castration—manifest the fact that the psyche can only represent its own annihilation in the mode of a cut or a dissociation from self. Indeed, in the unconscious there is no meaningful content associated with the concept of one’s own death. “My” death remains un-representable: “for death is an abstract concept with a negative content for which no unconscious correlative can be found.”21 Or:

But the unconscious seems to contain nothing that could give any content to our concept of the annihilation of life... Nothing resembling death can ever have been experienced; or, if it has, as in fainting, it has left no observable traces behind.22

Separation alone can provide an image of what would otherwise remain pure abstraction. Just as “castration can be pictured on the basis of the daily experience of the faeces being separated from the body or on the basis of losing the mother’s breast at weaning,”23 death, in turn, can
only be represented through the (not directly representable) experience of castration. The only sensible
given that allows for the phenomenal translation of destruction is loss or the cut:

I am therefore inclined to adhere to the view that the fear of death should be regarded as
analogous to the fear of castration and that the situation to which the ego is reacting is one
of being abandoned by the protecting superego—the powers of destiny—so that it no longer
has any safeguard against all the dangers that surround it.24

In the same way that everyday physiological separations “represent” castration, castration itself
“represents” the ego’s farewell to itself. Through such representation, death only becomes one’s
own, “my death,” to the extent that it appears as the process whereby psychic instances dissociate
from one another—as if the ego gave itself the slip, spent its time preparing for and negotiating its
own departure, a departure that will have been intimated, throughout its life, by “constantly
repeated object-losses.”25

Freud’s analysis of the motif of the double in The Uncanny confirms this point. The uncanny,
the strange, or unheimlich, is “everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has
come to light.”26 That which suddenly emerges from its hiding place is also “dangerous.” The
remainder of the analysis, with its very beautiful reading of The Sandman, will increasingly identify
the unheimlich with the motif of the double. The instance that emerges from hiding is the very inti-
macy (Heimlichkeit) of the ego, its inside which, by taking leave of its “box,” prefigures the moment
of fatal separation. The ego prefigures death as the avowal that a part of itself—the double of the
other—has relinquished life and departed. The double is the ego that is ready to leave the other, to
go ahead into nothingness. In The Ego and the Id, Freud writes:

It would seem that the mechanism of the fear of death can only be that the ego relinquishes
its narcissistic libidinal cathexis in a very large measure—that is, that it gives itself up, just as
it gives up some external object in other cases in which it feels anxiety.27

Culture has transformed the double—long considered the immortal part of the self, as its incorrupt-
able “soul”—into the messenger of death:

For the ‘double’ was originally an insurance against the destruction of the ego, an ‘energetic
denial of the power of death,’ as Rank says; and probably the ‘immortal’ soul was the first
‘double’ of the body… Such ideas, however, have sprung from the soil of unbounded self-
love, from the primary narcissism which dominates the mind of the child and of primitive
man. But when this stage has been surmounted, the ‘double’ reverses its aspect. From having
been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death.28

The ghostly double, the dead man, “becomes the enemy of his survivor and seeks to carry him off
to share his new life with him.”29 The ego doubles itself and this scission opens the psyche to the
horizon of its own disappearance.
D. Clarification of the relation between sexual etiology and the fear of death

This fundamental point makes it possible to return to the complex—that is, cloven—structure of sexual etiology. I asserted that the otherness of sexuality to itself solidifies rather than threatens the discourse of its causal power. However, we can now see that there is an indissoluble relation between sexuality and death to the extent that death is prefigured in castration. Haunted by the fear of loss—loss of a member, a part of the body, or loss of self—sexuality is itself structured by the anticipation of separation and death. The fear of death is thus not an affect that draws the psyche beyond or away from sexual causality, but rather is the immanent manifestation of the distinctive feature of both sexuality and death: separation.

In Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, Freud returns to the question of traumatic neurosis precisely in order to highlight the role of sexual etiology within it. In the eyes of the detractors of psychoanalysis, traumatic neurosis seems utterly foreign to such etiology. How could trauma—in all its suddenness, with its unforeseen character—have anything to do with sexuality? How could it awaken castration anxiety? Reviewing the arguments of his adversaries, Freud writes:

If anxiety is the reaction of the ego to danger, we shall be tempted to regard the traumatic neuroses, which so often follow upon a narrow escape from death, as a direct result of a fear of death (or a fear for life) and to dismiss from our minds the question of castration and the dependent relations of the ego. Most of those who observed the traumatic neuroses that occurred during the last war took this line, and triumphantly announced that proof was now forthcoming that a threat to the drive of self-preservation could by itself produce a neurosis without any admixture of sexual factors and without requiring any of the complicated hypotheses of psychoanalysis.30

Nonetheless, responds Freud, such arguments represent a misunderstanding of castration anxiety! In fact, this anxiety does not primarily represent the loss of a specific object but rather the indeterminate threat of a cut. Accordingly, everything that places life in danger necessarily occurs as a blade that threatens to separate the ego from itself, to cut it to the quick. This is the sense in which the danger of death corresponds to the danger of castration. Every self-preservative drive is an originary response to the possibility of separation. Narcissism itself is only thinkable as a reaction to the possibility of cutting. It thus becomes obvious that the only satisfying manner to explain traumatic neuroses is in terms of sexual etiology. Freud pursues: traumatic neurosis does not “contradict the etiological importance of sexuality” to the extent that “any such contradiction has long since been disposed of by the introduction of the concept of narcissism, which brings the libidinal cathexis of the ego in line with the cathexes of objects and emphasizes the libidinal character of the drive of self-preservation.”31

For Freud, sexual etiology is thus perfectly suited to account for the fear of death. Fundamentally, it is the cut—the fantasy or anticipation thereof—that opens the psyche to the horizon of its own relation to itself, to the way in which it can see itself die by doubling itself. Mortiferous separation from self is the very origin of the speculation or reflection whereby the ego takes itself as an object. The birth of the superego is thus inseparable from this process of self-observation:
A special agency is slowly formed [in the ego], which is able to stand over against the rest of the ego, which has the function of observing and criticizing... The fact that an agency of this kind exists, which is able to treat the rest of the ego like an object—the fact, that is, that man is capable of self-observation—renders it possible to invest the old idea of a ‘double’ with a new meaning.32

This horizon of observation, which opens up thanks to the way in which the process of mortal doubling distances the ego, pertains to the structure of anticipation that every form of anxiety—internal or external—has in common. By the same token, it is the apparatus of psychic openness to all types of events and accidents. Whether it is “materially real” or “psychically real,” the event comes to affect a structure of anticipation elaborated on the basis of the originary possibility of leaving oneself behind.

3. The Indestructible Character of Annihilation

The distinction between Ereignisse (external events) and Erlebnisse (lived and conscious experience) breaks down a bit further. Every accident, whether “endogenous” or “exogenous,” affects the structure of anticipation opened by the separation of the ego from itself. This first separation is, according to Freud, the first trauma, a “real” event without being. Originary separation takes place without actually happening. The first trauma is at once Ereignis and Erlebnis without being more one than the other.

Freud goes so far as to risk the hypothesis of a primitive trauma that occurs to the species as a whole—to everyone and no one. This would be a “particular important event [ein gewissen bedeutungsvoll Ereignis], incorporated by inheritance—something that may thus be likened to an individually acquired hysterical attack.”33 However, it is obviously impossible to know whether or not such an event has really occurred, whether it ever happened to the psyche or whether it is a creation of the psyche.

In Overview of the Transference Neuroses, Freud, pursuing Ferenczi’s idea, elaborates the hypothesis that this trauma dates from the Ice Age:

Our first hypothesis would thus maintain that mankind, under the influence of the privations that the encroaching Ice Age imposed upon it, has become generally anxious [ängstlich]. The hitherto predominantly friendly outside world, which bestowed every satisfaction, transformed itself into a mass of threatening perils. There had been good reason for real anxiety about everything new.34

Whether this experience of anxiety is the phylogenetic transmission of a distressing memory or whether it is, on the contrary, the unexpected upsurge of sudden anxiety, and regardless of the “long dispute over whether real anxiety... is more originary,”35 what matters in the end is the fact that anxiety takes place within a structure of anticipation that pre-exists it and that is the very form of the unconscious.

In one of the addenda to Inhibitions, Symptoms, and Anxiety, entitled “Supplementary Remarks on Anxiety,” Freud insists on the proximity of anxiety and anticipation. What is danger? Is it a matter of the surprise that it provokes the “first time” that it occurs or rather of the dread of its repeti-
tion? Is it a matter of newness or of recurrence? It is not possible to separate the one from the other since anticipation is always constituted by both instances at once:

The individual will have made an important advance in his capacity for self-preservation if he can foresee and expect [erwartet] a trauma situation of this kind which entails helplessness, instead of simply waiting for it to happen [abgewartet]. Let us call a situation of this kind which contains the determinant for such an expectation a danger-situation. It is in this situation that the signal of anxiety is given. The signal announces: ‘The present situation reminds me of one of the traumatic experiences I have had before. Therefore I will anticipate the trauma and behave as though it had already come, which there is yet time to turn it aside.’ Anxiety is therefore on the one hand an expectation of a trauma, and on the other a repetition of it in a mitigated form.36

In the beginning, it might be that trauma was ‘passively experienced,’ that it was purely and simply undergone, and that the psyche bears the trace of this experience, a trace that is always liable to be reactivated upon the return of any threatening situation. At the same time, it is now quite clear that the distinction between the experienced and the not experienced, the first time and the repetition, anticipation and recollection, breaks down to such an extent that these oppositions necessarily belong to one and the same structure.

This breaking down of distinctions also affects the distinction between external and internal danger:

In relation to the traumatic situation, in which the subject is helpless, external and internal dangers, real dangers and instinctual demands converge. Whether the ego is suffering from a pain which will not stop or experiences an accumulation of instinctual needs which cannot obtain satisfaction, the economic situation is the same, and the motor helplessness of the ego finds expression in psychical helplessness.37

A stunning analysis. Everything is inverted and becomes strictly speaking a game of doubling. The double—which is to say: the ghost of separation—appears, in the final analysis, as the agency that links the real and the psychic or the exterior and the interior. Real or not, trauma is caused by remembered or future separation; it is the cause of separation that sees itself coming. The anticipation of mourning for oneself, anticipation as mourning for oneself, the experience of being cut away from the most intimate intimacy at the most intimate point of oneself, is indestructible.

This is the central point of our discussion. If, for Freud, the anticipation of danger is the horizon that opens toward every event, nothing seems to threaten this horizon itself. The structure of the effacement of the subject (anticipation of separation) is itself ineffaceable, indelible; it is the indestructible substrate of destruction. In Lacan’s words, the horizon of anticipation constituted by the unconscious is at once “fragmented and indestructible.”38 Never, for Freud, does separation separate from itself.

“Would you claim,” Lacan writes, “that [Freud] solicits [anxiety] only to reduce it to anticipation, preparation, a state of alert, or to a response that is already a mode of defense against what is in the offing? Yes, that is Erwartung, the constitution of the hostile as such.”39 Indeed, even though
Freud defines trauma as an effraction that penetrates a psyche that does not have time to prepare for this intrusion, he still lays out an entire propaedeutic to this state of unpreparedness which constitutes the originarily anticipatory structure of the psyche. This structure itself cannot be destroyed by the trauma that it anticipates.

Herein lies the crux of the debate between psychoanalysis and neurology with respect to psychic destruction. For the neurologists, the very structure of the cerebral anticipation of death—described as a structure of auto-affection—is not insulated from danger, unlike the structure of the unconscious as it is defined by psychoanalysis. Certain types of damage can overwhelm it: the neurological horizon of the anticipation of destruction is destructible.

As a result, certain subjects with brain lesions are deprived precisely of the possibility of seeing or feeling themselves die. A lesion or a synaptic rupture, therefore, can never coincide, symbolically or materially, with anxiety of the cut or of castration.

### 4. Lacan and the Thing on the Horizon: Meeting Point and Vanishing Point

Before developing this decisive point, we must further clarify the relation between the unconscious and its destructibility—this time with Lacan, who expands and amplifies the scope of the question.

At first sight, Lacan seems to contradict everything that we have just established about the infaceable character of the subject's effacement or the indestructible character of the unconscious structure of the ego's relation to its own disappearance. Indeed, for Lacan, originary separation—characterized as separation of the ego and the subject—is interpreted as the inscription of alterity, or lack, within the ego: “in the circuit, the ego is really separated from the subject by the petit a, that is to say by the other.”

This separation is the signature of finitude and the form of the structure of anticipating death—a structure that Lacan will call the horizon of encounter. But this structure of anticipation is strangely doubled by its negative, constituted by a borderline that marks the occurrence of unforeseeable, unthinkable or impossible events—events that cannot happen. The set of these “non-events,” in Lacan, are grouped under the name of the Real, “the vanishing point of any reality that might be attained,” which is trauma as such, in excess of any horizon of anticipation. This negation of the horizon is indeed the threat that the horizon itself might be destroyed.

The unconscious must then be conceived as the coincidence between the encounter and the vanishing point, the conjugated possibility of events that happen and those that are beyond all happening. Trauma, to the extent that it belongs to the second order of events, is thus unassimilable and inappropriable: it resists any transformation into Erlebnis, (conscious experience), any encounter, any separation anxiety. This is the sense in which, for Lacan, the Real is beyond the Symbolic. The Real—or that which is properly traumatic in trauma—does not correspond to any symbol, that is, to any structure of fragmented unity, to any “soldering.” The Real is inseparable. Without distance, without horizon, without “fissure” or lack: “There is no absence in the real.”

Contrary to what we have been arguing, doesn’t psychoanalysis, ultimately, take into account, besides events that let themselves be encountered, other events that are like holes within the symbolic fabric and exceed any horizon that might encompass them? Freud, as Lacan recalls, distinguishes
between two types of events and acknowledges that “what is not illuminated by the Symbolic appears in the Real.”44 Mustn’t we affirm, therefore, that the psychic horizon of anticipation is itself threatened with real destruction?

A. A new “soldering”: the Thing

In the end, we must answer this question in the negative. It seems, in fact, that a new form of “soldering” intervenes to make it impossible for Lacan, no matter what he says, to think of such destruction without a symbolic remainder. This “soldering” of the symbolic fabric is achieved by what Lacan will call “the Thing”: das Ding. This “Thing”—“the absolute other of the subject,”45 this “prehistoric Other that it is impossible to forget,” this “nothing,” this “emptiness,” this “hole,”46 this originary trauma—remains, to my mind, that aspect of the Real that can and in fact never ceases to be said and imagined. Indeed, the Thing is “that which in the real... suffers from the signifier.”47 The Thing is the aspect of the Real that still happens; and that, in spite of everything, still happens to me.

The Real knows no lack, it exceeds any horizon of anticipation and, for this reason, can never be encountered. But, for Lacan, this lack of encounter is always converted into a missed encounter. The Thing is a trope that grants a horizon to this lack of lack and that, in spite of everything, allows the psyche to see it coming.

How is it possible to defend such an understanding of the Thing when it seems to run counter to the most widespread interpretations of the concept? A striking chapter from The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis is what makes it possible. The title of the chapter, “Tuche and Automaton,” speaks for itself. This remarkable text elaborates the concepts of chance and necessity, encounter and real, starting precisely from the signification of the event in psychoanalysis. Lacan undertakes this elaboration through a reading of a dream that Freud discusses in The Interpretation of Dreams, the “dream of the burning child.”48

Lacan recalls that the simplest, least conceptually elaborate meaning of the word tuchè, which one finds in the work of Aristotle, signifies “fortune,” that which happens by chance, that whose ground is something like a rolling ball. Automaton, on the other hand, literally designates “that which happens on its own,” that which works all by itself and repeats itself according to strict mechanical necessity—as in “automatons” or “automatisms.” This distinction can thus account for the two types of event that Freud identifies. Tuchè could designate the mode in which Erignisse occurs—as “pure,” unforeseen, and perfectly contingent accidents. Automaton, on the contrary, could designate the formation and regulation of the endogenous events that only obey their own law and, in a sense, engender themselves.

Accordingly, Lacan proposes to translate tuchè as “encounter with the real.” The Real can only occur by chance, without any machination. Tuchè thus names the specific way in which trauma occurs—since trauma is the Real itself, “unassimilable” by the psyche. To speak of an “encounter with the real,” then, amounts to speaking of an impossible encounter. Trauma is what pierces, by force of its contingency, the psychic horizon of anticipation.

The word automaton designates “the return, the coming-back, the insistence of the signs by which we see ourselves governed by the pleasure principle.”49 It characterizes the regime of events that, as opposed to the first type of events, can be perfectly well assimilated by the psyche; they are “lived events” that do not overwhelm the energetic circuit, the mechanism, or the automatism of homeostatic regulation.
Hasn’t the distinction between pure accidents (tuchè) and lived events (automaton), real events and non-events, thus been definitively established? Lacan goes so far as to claim that the Real is, in fact, “Freud's true preoccupation.” “As the function of fantasy is revealed to him, ...he applies himself in a way that can almost be described as anxious, to the question—what is the first encounter, the real, that lies behind the fantasy?” This Real, “there is no question of confusing [it] with repetition, the return of signs, or reproduction, or the modulation by the act of a sort of acted-out remembering.” Lacan insists quite clearly, therefore, upon an essential aspect of the Freudian thinking of the Real—its status as first trauma, which happened primordially, and without a horizon of anticipation.

This is the point at which the concepts become complicated and appearances are inverted. Freud does indeed remark, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle, that trauma tends to repeat itself and that a work of binding (Bindung) readies it to be assimilated by the psyche. On the other hand, he finds, as he had already done in The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, that everything associated with automaton can also happen by chance. The origin of trauma, as Lacan recognizes, might only be “apparently accidental” and the machination of lived or fantasmatic events might only obey the caprice of fortune. It is impossible to reduce the ambivalence of these terms.

In fact, deeper study of the Aristotelian concepts of tuchè and automaton reveals that their respective significations are even more ambivalent than they appear. Tuchè can certainly be categorized as an exceptional event, but this does not prevent it from figuring “among things which are for something.” On the other hand, o automatismos signifies in Greek “that which happens on its own.” But this formula must be understood in two ways: 1) what happens on its own can do so if it bears its own necessity within itself; 2) what happens on its own can also do so, inversely, by pure chance. In this case, contingency is its self-justification. Aristotle uses to automaton precisely to mean “an instance of chance,” in opposition to technè, technique or machination. The verb automatizein mobilizes both senses at the same time: to do something by one’s own movement or, inversely, to act without reflection, by chance. The chance productions of tuchè, therefore, all have the same sense—that is, a certain finality—whereas “automatic” events can happen by chance. Necessity and contingency thus change places. In the same manner that the automatism of the event can escape anticipation, the Real, in the final instance, can be encountered thanks to the very finality of its contingency, can be encountered within facticity as a missed encounter.

Lacan asks: “Where do we encounter this real? For what we have in the discovery of psychoanalysis is an encounter, an essential encounter—an appointment to which we are always called, with a real that eludes us.” And this encounter, which is rendered at once possible and impossible by the tuchè, is indeed “essentially the missed encounter.”

But is this response satisfying? Doesn’t Lacan himself, at the very moment when he formulates it, miss the hypothesis of an encounter that would irremediably miss being missed?

**B. Freud's narrative of the “dream of the burning child” and its reading**

Let us turn to Freud’s narrative of “the dream of the burning child”:

A father had been watching beside his child’s sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child’s body was laid out, with tall
candles standing round it. An old man has been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat
beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours’ sleep, the father had a dream that his
child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: ‘Father,
don’t you see I’m burning?’ He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room,
hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrap-
pings and one of the arms of his beloved child’s dead body had been burned by a lighted can-
dle that had fallen on him.\textsuperscript{57}

Lacan interprets this dream as the dream of an accident but right away raises a troubling question:
‘Where is the reality in this accident?’\textsuperscript{58} What is real—really accidental—in this accident dream? Does
the accident lie in the candle’s falling, the actual accident that upsets the sleeper, or is it located
within the dream—that is, in the sudden appearance of the child who grabs his father by the arm
and speaks to him? Is the accident the tuchè of the fire or the automaton of speech, the symbolic man-
ifestation of a reproach? Lacan asks:

\textit{What is it that wakes the sleeper? Is it not, in the dream, another reality?—the reality that Freud
describes thus—Daß das Kind an seinem Bett steht, that the child is near his bed, \textit{ihn am Arme
fasst}, takes him by the arm and whispers to him reproachfully, \textit{und ihm vorwurfsvoll zu raunt:
Vater, siehst du denn nicht, Father, can’t you see, daß ich verbrenne, that I am burning?’}

“Is there not more reality in this message than in the noise by which the father also identifies
the strange reality of what is happening in the room next door? Is not the missed reality that
caused the death of the child expressed in these words?”\textsuperscript{59}

The reality of the automaton is thus more real than that of accidental flame and noise; the son’s
speech is more real than the material reality of falling and burning. The tuchè—flame and noise—is
nothing but the means of another reality that it allows to happen. Something “more fatal” (the dead
son who comes to speak) than (material) reality happens “by means of [material] reality.” The tuchè
thus triggers the automaton; and the “atrocious vision” of the Thing surges up at the point of conver-
gence between the encounter and the missed encounter: \textit{the Thing occurs as a missed encounter between
the father and the son.}

The “material” of the dream, the fortune that gives birth to it, the brute or “idiotic” accident,
comes to pass as such—ambiguity of the tuchè. The finality of the fortuitous accident consists in the fact
that it can only surrender its place to the symbolic expression of the accident: “Father, can’t you see I’m
burning?”

The fact that the symbolic signification of the automaton can be inverted to become a mech-
anical signification only reinforces the former and proves that there is an automatic signification of
separation. This sentence, “Father, can’t you see I’m burning,” is itself a “firebrand—of itself it
brings fire where it falls.”\textsuperscript{60} For the father, it “perpetuates… those words \textit{forever separated} from the
dead child that were said to him”—these words cut off from the flesh that they designate, which
allows them to be repeated in the absence of the child; these separate words that accomplish sepa-
ration. The real thus fully projects itself into the field of the symbolic, of the world where we expect
it, where we understand it, and where we encounter it.
“What encounter can there be from now on,” Lacan asks, “with that forever inert thing—even now being devoured by the flames—if not the encounter that occurs precisely at the moment when, by accident, as if by chance, the flames come to meet him?”

Tuchè thus reveals that its proper finality lies in the automatism of repetition that, for Lacan, is signifying commemoration: “It is only in the dream that this truly unique encounter can occur. Only a rite, an endlessly repeated act, can commemorate this not very memorable encounter...”

Do we not thereby rediscover—no matter what Lacan says—the motif of the indestructibility of the horizon of the encounter, the perspective within which the subject (in this case, the father) is always vulnerable to the event of separation? Nonetheless, to conclude his analysis, Lacan insists upon the indissoluble link between the repetition compulsion and the formation of a horizon. Reopening the question of the fort/da game in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, he asserts:

The ever-open gap introduced by the indicated absence remains the cause of a centrifugal tracing in which that which falls is not the other, qua face in which the subject is projected, but the ordinary cotton-spool linked to itself by the thread that it holds. Expressed here is that which, of itself, detaches itself in this trial, self-mutilation on the basis of which the order of significance will be put in perspective. For the game of the cotton-reel is the subject’s answer to what the mother’s absence has created on the frontier of this domain—the edge of his cradle—namely, a *ditch*, around which one can only play at jumping.

What appears here, once again, is the horizon of anticipation as the horizon of separation from self. The structuring role of castration in the elaboration of this horizon is explicit: “This spool is not the mother reduced to a little ball by some magical game worthy of the Jivaros—it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him while still remaining his, albeit externally retained.”

The encounter with the Real as missed encounter does not contradict sexual etiology but rather confirms it: “The central bad encounter is at the level of the sexual.” If it is true that all events—even “real” or traumatic events—ultimately occur at the heart of the psyche’s separation from itself, as proof of this very separability, then the ordeal of cutting, structurally linked to sexuality, remains, for Lacan no less than for Freud, the *indestructible horizon of destruction*.

It is precisely this ineffaceable character of separation—that is to say, of effacement—that, for Lacan, constitutes every trace as a signifier: “The nature of the signifier is precisely that it makes an effort to efface a trace. The more one seeks to efface it, in order to rediscover the trace, the more the trace insists as a signifier.” For Freud as for Lacan, separation signifies its own effacement—which is to say that it is never effaced.

5. Conclusion: The Resistance of Cerebrality

If there remains a chance for cerebrality to resist sexuality, it lies perhaps in the possibility of abandoning the paradigm of separation for the idea of a psyche without any structure of openness, a psyche without its other on the horizon, without a double. Such a psyche cannot, or can no longer, encounter itself, even by missing itself. Its history has been annihilated. Its trace has finally been effaced along with its becoming-signifier.
Despite Freud’s assertions to the contrary, we have seen that there exists a process of cerebral auto-affection. Like any psyche, the brain is constituted by a mirror effect, a reflection of alterity within the loop or “circuit” of selfhood. But this alterity has a particular signification that reveals its full strangeness within the ordeal of trauma. To a certain extent it is a matter of the other of the self in the self; but, here, it is the self, and not the other, who never lets itself be encountered when traumatized. It is the self who is lacking, without specular recuperation.

Structurally, even in its normal state, the cerebral self, or “proto-self,” affects itself without encountering itself. As I have said: no one can speak of “his” brain. Between “my” brain and myself there is a sort of opaque wall, an absence of mirror, even as it is the most intimate part of myself, the “me” who thinks and feels within “me.”

The activity revealed by brain imaging—the only mirror that can objectify cerebral auto-affection—is what makes narcissism possible to the extent that such photographs of my brain are necessarily offered, without any possible internalization, to the gaze of the other, even if this gaze is my own. However, the eye of the other upon my most living intimacy, the eye of the other upon my thinking and feeling connections, the eye of the other upon the mesh-work of my affects, which affect themselves and affect me without gazing at themselves or me gazing at myself, the eye of the other does not give birth to any mirror stage. Cerebrality does not gaze at itself.

On the cerebral level, there is not really any “reception of the self in the other”—if one thereby understands the movement that Lacan calls the “Imaginary.” There is no line of sight, no constitution of subjectivity in “seeing oneself in the gaze of the other,” no struggle for recognition and distinction amidst the threat of separation and being lost. The regulation and organization of the brain, in fact, cannot be accounted for either in terms of the “Real” or the “Imaginary.”

We take the risk of introducing a fourth instance into the program of Lacan’s Real-Symbolic-Imaginary: the “Material.” The Material would constitute the sense of an affective economy that solicits itself without seeing itself.

If the “normal” brain never affects itself without meeting up with itself in the mirage of its own separation, the damaged brain has no chance, a fortiori, of being present to its own fragmentation or its own wounding. Contrary to castration, no representation, no phenomenon, no example of separation can make it possible to anticipate, foresee, or fantasize the aftermath of a ruptured cerebral connection. Such a transformation cannot even be dreamed. There is no scene for this Thing that is not the Thing. The brain in no way anticipates the possibility of its own damage. When damage occurs, it is another self who is affected, a new self—not the double but someone else, unrecognizable. The resistance of cerebrality to sexuality, in the final instance, pertains to the manner in which the cerebral self belongs to the other without a corresponding alienation or specularity in the one. What scorches the symbolic is the material destruction of the Thing. It is notable that neurologists never present cases of brain lesions without placing them in a social context. Between psychoanalysis and neurology, it is precisely the sense of “the other” that is displaced. To gather the other’s pain is not to take his place, but to accord it.

This is what I learned—too late, too early—from a patient with Alzheimer’s.

In memory of Andrée Paulhat.
NOTES

1 Republished by permission of Avello Publishing Journal: Cambridge (ISSN 2049-498X), 2.1 The Unconscious (2012), © Jason Wakefield.


5 Ibid.

6 SE, Vol XXII, 86.

7 Ibid. [Throughout this section, I have modified Strachey’s translation to accord with the French translation of Freud and with Malabou’s argumentation—Tr.]

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid., 89.

10 Ibid., 93.

11 Ibid., 84.

12 Ibid., 86.

13 Ibid., 87.

14 Ibid., 87-88.

15 Ibid., 88.

16 SE, Vol. XX, 135.


18 SE, Vol. XX, 139-140.

19 Ibid., 125-126.


21 SE, Vol. XIX, 58.

22 SE, Vol. XX, 129-130.

23 Ibid.

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.


27 SE, Vol. XIX, 58.

28 SE, Vol. XVII, 235. On the relation between the primitive, the double, and the representation of death, see also the second part of “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death,” where Freud establishes the genesis of the relation between the “civilized” man to death by starting from the mentality of primitive man and studying the evolution of this relation. For further elaboration of this point, see my article, “La naissance de la mort: Hegel et Freud en guerre?,” in Autour de Hegel: Hommage à Bernard Bourgeois, ed. François Dagognet and Pierre Osmo (Paris: Vrin, 2000), 319-331.

29 Ibid., 242.

30 SE, Vol. XX, 129.

31 Ibid.


33 SE, Vol. XXII, 81.


35 Ibid., 14. Here is the entire passage: “We have carried on a long dispute over whether real anxiety or anxiety of longing is the earlier of the two; whether the child changes his libido into real anxiety because he regards it as too great, dangerous, and thus arrives at an idea of danger, or whether he rather yields to a general anxiousness and learns from this also to be afraid of his unsatisfied libido. We were inclined to assume the former… Now phylogenetic consideration seems to settle this dispute in favor of real anxiety and permits us to assume that a portion of the children bring along the anxiousness of the beginning of the Ice Age and are now induced by it to treat the unsatisfied libido as an external danger.”

36 SE, Vol. XX, 166.

37 Ibid., 168.


42 Lacan, The Ego in Freud’s Theory, 313: “There is only absence if you suggest that there may be a presence where there isn’t one.”


44 Ibid., 16.


46 Ibid., 129-130.

47 Ibid., 118.

48 Freud introduces the dream at the very beginning of Chapter VII, SE, Vol. V, 509.


50 Ibid., 54.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid., 55.


56 Ibid., 55.


59 Ibid.

60 Ibid., 59.

61 Ibid., 58.

62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 59.

64 Ibid., 62 [Translation slightly modified—Tr.].

65 Ibid. [Translation slightly modified—Tr.].

64 Ibid., 64.

65 Lacan, *L’angoisse*, 162. See also, 78.
The End
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