

REDEMPTIVE CRITICISM: SIGMUND FREUD, WALTER BENJAMIN, STANLEY
CAVELL, AND DEMOCRATIC CULTURE

By

Lara K. Giordano

Dissertation

Submitted to the Faculty of the
Graduate School of Vanderbilt University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in

Philosophy

May, 2015

Nashville, Tennessee

Approved:

Gregg M. Horowitz, Ph.D.

José Medina, Ph.D.

Lisa Guenther, Ph.D.

Rebecca Comay, Ph.D.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work would not have been possible without the financial and academic support of the Vanderbilt Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities nor without the intellectual and moral support of Michael Alijewicz, Elizabeth Barnett, Cory Duclos, Cari Hovanec, Paddy McQueen, Rosie Seagraves, and Jen Vogt, the wonderful Fellows with whom I spent the 2012-2013 academic year. Many thanks to Dr. Lisa Guenther and Dr. José Medina, who served on my dissertation committee and from whose experience and research I have benefitted so much, as well as to my outside reader, Dr. Rebecca Comay. I'm also grateful to my friends and colleagues for the patience and enthusiasm that they brought to the many hours of conversation through which I found my way through this project. Most importantly, I would like to acknowledge the depth of my gratitude to Dr. Gregg Horowitz, my dissertation chair. A more supportive, generous, and inspiring mentor is, to me, unimaginable.

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Works by Benjamin

AP	<i>Arcades Project</i>
OGT	<i>Origin of German Tragic Drama</i>
SW1	<i>Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926</i>
SW2	<i>Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1930</i>
SW3	<i>Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1931-1937</i>
SW4	<i>Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940</i>

Works by Cavell

CR	<i>Claim of Reason</i>
CT	<i>Contesting Tears: The Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman</i>
MWMW	<i>Must We Mean What We Say?</i>
PH	<i>Pursuits of Happiness: The Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage</i>
PP	<i>Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises</i>
QO	<i>In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism</i>
WV	<i>The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film</i>

Works by Freud

CD	<i>Civilization and its Discontents</i>
FI	<i>Future of an Illusion</i>
GP	<i>Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego</i>
TT	<i>Totem and Taboo</i>

Other Works

SC	Carole Pateman, <i>The Sexual Contract</i> (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988)
----	--

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABBREVIATIONS.....	iii
Chapters	
I. Introduction: Toward the Concept of a Redemptive Form of Critique.....	1
II. The Myth of the Primal Horde and the Fate of Post-Revolutionary Politics: Freud’s Critical Redemption of Anthropology.....	23
Negotiating Patriarchy and the Authority of Patriarchal Myth: Pateman on the Primal Scene.....	33
The Conservative-Revolutionary Powers of Myth-Making: Hunt’s Family Romance.....	54
The Myth of the Primal Horde: Freud’s Natural History of Secularism.....	72
At the Limits of Psychoanalysis as Social-Political Theory: The Paradox of Cultural Psychoanalysis.....	84
III. Seeing Past the Freudian Prohibition on Cultural Psychoanalysis: Benjamin’s “Weak Messianism” & the Critical Redemption of History.....	96
The State of Emergency.....	116
<i>Naturgeschichte</i> and the Allegorical Intention.....	131
Part I: <i>Naturgeschichte</i> in Marx, Lukács, and Benjamin.....	134
Part II: Benjamin’s critical method of allegoresis.....	146
The Limits of “Weak Messianism” for the Purposes of Democratic Theory.....	160
IV. The Dialectic of Privacy and Publicity in the Writing of Stanley Cavell & the Critical Redemption of the Movies.....	172
Skepticism, Anti-Skepticism, & the Dialectic of Privacy and Publicity Skepticism as fantastic discourse.....	175

Criteria and Convention –or Cavell’s Natural History.....	193
Secularity & Its Discontents.....	205
The Power and Limits of Acknowledgment in Cavell’s Anarchic Cinema.....	215
Cavell and Benjamin on audience-formation.....	226
Photogenesis as allegoresis: the cinematic redemption of skepticism.....	231
V. Conclusion: Redemptive Criticism and Democratic Institutions.....	243
REFERENCES.....	254

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: TOWARD THE CONCEPT OF A REDEMPTIVE FORM OF CRITIQUE

To my knowledge, there is but a single text that brings together the names of Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Stanley Cavell. This essay, entitled “Remains to be Seen,” is written by Cavell himself and he undertakes, in its four pages, a curiously intense yet elliptical engagement with the Walter Benjamin of the *Arcades Project* on the occasion of that text’s English translation and publication. In this piece, Cavell manages to surpass the indirection that characterizes even his most comprehensive pieces. His citational tendencies—his predilection for the epigrammatic—emerge in full-force, perhaps in homage, perhaps simply aroused by this assignation with the *Arcades*, the ambition of which was “to develop to the highest degree the art of citing without quotation marks...its theory intimately related to that of montage.”¹ And it is in this mode of abridgement and referentiality that Cavell links his own particular activity of philosophizing to that of Freud and Benjamin. He writes:

I should not forbear seeking, or questioning, another of my nows in the antitheological Freud...when early in the *Introductory Lectures*, Freud confesses: ‘The material for [the] observations [of psychoanalysis] is usually provided by the inconsiderable events which have been put aside by the other sciences as being too unimportant—the dregs of the world of phenomena.’ This picks up Benjamin. ‘Method of this project:...I shall purloin no valuables...But the rags, the refuse—these I will...allow in the only way possible to come into their own: by making use of them.’ Freud’s dregs and Benjamin’s refuse are each interpretable with Wittgenstein’s ordinary; the differences are where I come in.²

¹ AP, 458; N1, 10

² “Remains to be Seen,” 261-2

Where Freud, concerned with the suffering of private persons, made the abortive attempts of individual expression (obsessive behaviors, parapraxes, dreams, etc.) the fundamental stuff of psychoanalysis and Benjamin, for his part, found, in the detritus of capitalism, the essential material for his critique of culture, Cavell's efforts have been largely devoted to the rescue of pieces of intellectual inheritance dismissed by American academe as being below the level of philosophic regard. As he comments of his work in *Pitch of Philosophy*, "[The essay *Must we Mean What We Say?*] is explicitly a defense of the work of my teacher Austin against an attack that in effect dismissed that work as unscientific, denied it as a contender in the ranks of philosophy at all. (Since a response to some denial was part of my cue in taking up Thoreau and Emerson, even in thinking about Shakespeare and then about film, there is the sense of a pattern here, perhaps of further interest)."³

Such is the interest of the following pages, which seeks to bring into focus the pattern writ large in the work of Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell. While it was already some months into this project when I encountered Cavell's telegraphic piece in which he forms, in and under the sign of redemption, an indefinite constellation between his work and that of Benjamin and Freud, the central preoccupation of my research was already, unbeknownst to me, dedicated to the decoding and concretization of this claim that remains, in Cavell's essay, a mere suggestion, constrained to these eight lines of text. This dissertation offers a sustained investigation of the insight glimpsed in and by Cavell that, between his critical hermeneutics and that of Freud and Benjamin, there is an essential isomorphism and that, further, in his uptake of ordinary language philosophy,

³ Ibid, 9

Cavell renders thematic the differences between his two predecessors, Freud the critic of private life and Benjamin the critic of the public.

Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell are all, one could say, episodic or occasional thinkers in the sense that their work is always devoted to some particular object or text. This characteristic preoccupation with the particular—with that which defies easy subsumption under and by a ready concept and thus has the potential to contest our concepts as they stand—has left Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell largely unclassifiable in terms of extant philosophical categories.⁴ While Freud is one of the seminal thinkers of the 20th century and the writings of Benjamin have, in recent years, earned him a small but fervent following, and Cavell, for his part, has had what is undeniably a successful career within academic philosophy, these three remain nonetheless without a proper philosophic home, unassimilated to any particular school of academic thought. The predominant view, within philosophical circles at least, is that there is something deeply unsystematic—philosophically irredeemable—about the work of all three of these thinkers. This dissertation, however, examines this resistance to easy incorporation in and by the discipline as part of the philosophic work that they seek to accomplish to argue that their texts, rather than being failed instances of intelligibility, systematically chart the limits of reason and, in so doing, expose a limit internal to philosophy itself.

In other words: Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell undertake philosophy for the sake of putting philosophy in its proper place. As Cavell remarks, offering an interpretation of his philosophers of the ordinary alongside whom, as he asserts in “Remains to be Seen,”

⁴ It is unclear to me that there is “a psychoanalysis,” i.e., a monolithic tradition, of which to speak. Benjamin, for his part, was and remains, but a satellite of the Frankfurt school, his work an ideological battleground in death as in life. Cavell, for his part, has a motley pedigree, descended as his thinking is from Austin, Wittgenstein, Heidegger, Spinoza, Kant, Freud, to name those influences most immediately evident in his work.

Benjamin and Freud are interpretable, the interest of this work is to advance a “new claim to philosophy’s old authority, one whose power . . . reside(s) in a certain systematic abdication of that authority.”⁵ As I see it and as is suggested in Cavell’s use of the ethico-political concept of authority, this place is not narrowly determined in epistemological terms, but rather is derived historico-politically. While it is unsurprising, perhaps even redundant, to invoke historical and political consciousness in Benjamin’s name, I take it that this is, in the cases of Freud and Cavell, a rather bewildering assertion. For Freud’s restrictive focus on private life is commonly regarded as a form of myopia that bespeaks and engenders a blindness to the socio-historic determinates of individual existence and Cavell’s commitment to the ordinary—to what we all say and do—is taken as evidence of the deeply a-historic and a-political bent of his thinking. Yet my claim is that what is systematic within and systematic between these three can be seen in the recessed philosophy of history that undergirds and is fulfilled within their respective hermeneutic operations. In speaking of a “philosophy of history,” I mean to invoke both the implicit theory of modernity that dictates their redemptive efforts as well as the philosophy of history that determines the form of their texts. I hear in Cavell’s reference to his “now” this dual sense of history and this dual impetus, making meaning in light of the ethico-political limits that define the modern moment and for the sake of re-casting those limits, giving us new access to the present.

As the normative impulse of redemptive criticism arises in light of this theory of modernity, I will begin with a discussion of the “now” in this sense. On my reading, the homologous interpretive practices of Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell obtain in light of their shared response to the problem and promise of secular democracy. Democratic

⁵ *Pitch of Philosophy*, 9-10

community is marked, at its very heart, by an insoluble paradox. Unlike absolutist or authoritarian societies in which community is created and sustained through a leader or leading ideal, democracy is defined in and by the very absence of a sovereign person or principle. Specific to this form of life, in which authority has been secularized, in the sense that authority has no warrant beyond legitimation in the here-and-now, and social relations democratized, in the sense that nothing beyond the relations legitimizes them, is the fact that there is no one who can claim to have more or better knowledge of the nature of the good and just life and, correlatively, no authoritative interpretation of the formative ideals of freedom and equality. But this means that the very thing that makes democracy possible simultaneously exists as the innermost point of its irremediable instability. A genuinely democratic community must deny itself precisely the kind of authoritative grounding narrative around which community could coalesce and through which it could be assured. No authority can be taken on faith alone and this includes the authority of the democratic form itself as well as any of its particular historical instantiations. Shorn of the divine veneer that clothed previous political forms, democracy discovers itself endlessly exposed to a legitimation problem. It is in this that the democratic paradox obtains, democracy calling for an authority that it cannot tolerate, and from whence the leading question of my dissertation: what form of solidarity, if any, can take root in the absence of the unifying force of a sovereign individual or ideal and so is compatible with the structural “non-closure” of democratic space? What kind of culture could support such fractious togetherness?

My thesis is that the proper apprehension of the work of Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell requires the foregoing theoretical supplement—the excavation of the implicit

theory of secularity that undergirds their hermeneutics—and further that an examination of their texts alongside of and in terms of one another can yield just such a model of democratic solidarity. My redemptive critics offer something that exceeds the limits and capacities of formal political theory but without which there can be no adequate apprehension of the vicissitudes of secularized social space: a theory of the affective constitution of the post-absolutist collective that can account for both its pathologies and its prospects. As Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell see it, the affective straits upon which democratic, secular modernity are founded are essentially—incurably—ambivalent. The absence of final authority is equally the source of existential and political liberty and a condition of isolation or anonymity: an anarchic state in which there exists nothing to ethically bind individuals to one another. The secularization of politics represents both an emancipatory gain and a grievous loss, the ungrounded-ness of democratic life simultaneously a condition of hope and of anxiety. The structural undecidability upon which this ambivalence is garnered cannot be resolved insofar as democracy obtains only in this non-closure, but this means that democracy requires something more than reason can supply: namely, the individual and collective hope that the realization of a community of truly free and equal persons is already underway. Such a hope, while not liable to ultimate vindication, cannot be sustained in light of nothing. Rather, it requires practical nourishment. It requires—in a word—solidarity.

At this juncture, I would like to re-state, clarify and foreground, three points made in the preceding pages. First, this dissertation is not concerned to advance a theory of the democratic state. In using the term “democracy,” I mean an emancipatory politics that is radically secular and egalitarian. “Democracy” is here regarded as an ideal the aspiration

to which is inseparable from its achievement. It thus serves as a placeholder of sorts. That said, a key assumption of this work is that democracy obtains in more than institutions: that a genuine democracy requires an active commitment on the part of the individual to interrogate the conditions of shared social life and so to engage with those others to whom one is joined, willingly or not, in political community. I do not aim to offer here a normative theory of the status apparatus, but I do offer something equally important to understanding secular democracy: a model of solidarity, a theorization of democratic culture.

This brings me to my second point: while my concept of democracy remains “thin,” the concept of secularity that I advance is essential to the legibility of the normative impulse at play in democracies. My dissertation is, it could be said, a phenomenology of secularism in the Hegelian sense of the unfolding of its inner life. It is a commonplace of mainstream political theory, of both the foundationalist and proceduralist varieties, that democracy is necessarily secular and that a commitment to secularity only obtains in the progressive rationalization of the world. Such a thesis is not simply the product of speculative philosophy, but captures a historical process in which scientific advancement was bound up with the disenchantment of traditional forms of authority through which democratic conceptions of authority then announced themselves as a kind of answer. Viewed in terms of this history, democracy seems to have as its prerequisite or correlate, a process of disillusionment, its ideal trajectory aiming at an era in which reason alone would reign. In other words, according to this narrative, democracy, achieved through a process of secularization, where secularization is treated

solely as an epistemic achievement, is intrinsically opposed to myth and mythic worldviews.

Against such a view, however, Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell understand secularity not as the era of myth's slow demise, but rather as the land where myth goes to thrive. For, lacking transcendent authority, the only good authority on which we have to go is that of everyday experience; nothing more than commonsense. Yet, the pre-reflective power of commonsense is a power accumulated over time, established in repetition and realized in and as habit. Commonsense is the repository of interrogated history and the everyday world to which it corresponds seems self-evident, being beyond or before explanation. To find oneself before a *de facto* authority such as this is to confront one wholly anathematic to secular politics in which no authority can be taken for granted, i.e., on faith alone. The everyday is thus oddly powerful and yet entirely fragile. For while it is already absolutely authoritative in appearing as unquestionable, i.e., not appearing at all, when it does emerge from its pre-reflective oblivion, its power, being no-account, comes to appear as but a matter of conventional; wholly arbitrary. This indistinction between the categories proper to commonsense—between the necessary and the contingent, the natural and the social—renders the scene of the everyday intrinsically unstable, constituting what my three thinkers know as the surrealism of the habitual.

The condition of the secular collective is such that we have no greater authority to which to appeal other than that of the everyday and yet, for the claim of the quotidian to be rightly heard, it must first be subject to radical re-casting. It is in the awareness of the need for the perpetual transfiguration of the mundane—the need for secularized redemption—that Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell turn their attention towards that which

appears, within the field of typical experience, as senseless or insignificant. For this element heterogeneous to the everyday has the power to disrupt its field. These are the conditions under which, as per my three redemptive critics, philosophy is to be inherited. A truly secular philosophy must, in this sense, be critique, yet not only critique. To speak again with Cavell, it is not enough to “accept a therapy of disillusion (or dismantling),” but to do so “without succumbing to disillusionment...as an attitude, something between discouragement and cynicism.”⁶ By contrast to ideology critique, which regards re-mythification in modernity as having a particular source and specifies the conditions of its overcoming, redemptive criticism sees this pathology—this madness—as endemic to the secular condition, the contestation with and over commonsense unceasing.

This brings me to my third point: redemptive criticism neither establishes itself in direct relation to the political—say, aiming at revolution—nor is it reconciliatory. For while democracy would seem to abide in the overcoming of this anarchic condition in which we lack the rational principle by which to assure our relations in and to the everyday, this anarchism cannot be overcome nor can the ambivalence that it engenders. As opposed to philosophies of reconciliation, redemptive criticism sets as its goal the restoration of an awareness of what it is that secularity, of its own concept, demands and attempts to render bearable the infeasible indeterminacy of life lived unsponsored by absolute authority, redeeming ambivalence itself as the engine of a form of myth-making adequate to the project of life lived in freedom and equality with others.

Part of my aim in reading Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell as constituting a unique hermeneutical tradition has been to work toward an account of what such a democratic, self-critical tradition might look like. Tradition, insofar as it names the sanctification of

⁶ “The Politics of Interpretation (As Opposed to What?),” 59

convention—its authority as *Kultur*—would seem to be anathematic to secular or democratic conceptions of authority. Yet democracy must consist in more than institutions. Because modern democracies emerge from out of a history of violence and carry that violence within them, they can be sustained only by a culture that consists in an on-going conversation with and about this past. There can be no justice without such an interrogation. To ask after the rights and roles of the past in the present is to invoke the question of tradition: how to inherit, individually and collectively, this world that is not of our making, but for which we are nevertheless responsible. This is the formative question of Walter Benjamin's work. For that matter, reformulated strictly in terms of the individual, it is, as well, the formative question of Freudian psychoanalysis, which views the project of self-authorization in terms of the ability to acknowledge what of the past still claims us in the present. My thesis, then, prefigured in the works of Freud and Benjamin but which I find fulfilled in the philosophy of Cavell, is that democracy, too, requires tradition, but a tradition that paradoxically abides in its own critical self-overcoming. The culture adequate to democracy must exist in the condition of aesthetic modernism, which is not the rejection of tradition, but the permanent, radicalized interrogation of the material conventions that constitute a tradition (or practice or genre). Democratic culture must become philosophy. I might make this point from the opposite direction instead: in gathering these outliers together under the umbrella concept of redemptive criticism, I have attempted to provide them with the make-shift philosophic home that they have thus far been lacking. But redemptive criticism is not much of a home. For, as we shall see, this "tradition" does not designate a strict methodological procedure or a philosophic school so much as a mode of attunement.

We thus arrive at the “now” in its second, interrelated sense as the *telos* of redemptive criticism and hence that which determines the shape of its discursive productions. Given the diagnosis of what ails the secular collective, it should come as no surprise that it is a philosophy of history that serves as the theoretic basis of these texts that have a redemptive aim. It is Walter Benjamin who, in the concept of *Naturgeschichte* (natural history), offers the most direct means by which to apprehend this common hermeneutic perspective and the deconstructive/constructive principle of allegoresis to which it gives rise. While *Naturgeschichte* is the principle concept of Marx’s social ontology, Benjamin had actually already, prior to his confrontation with Marxist theory, developed and crucially deployed this concept in his 1925 study of the *Trauerspiel*. Where Benjamin’s contemporaries and predecessors had dismissed German Baroque allegory as an aesthetic failure, Benjamin, through the concept of natural history, accessed the *Trauerspiel* and its curious allegorical form as a reflection of the historico-political crises of its day. As Adorno emphasizes in his 1932 lecture, “The Idea of Natural-History,” natural history designates a critical perspective, i.e., a particular way of being attuned, rather than a method. In his lecture, Adorno reads this hermeneutic viewpoint as originating in the work of Lukács, articulated therein through the concept of second nature, and finding its dialectical fulfillment in Benjamin’s *Trauerspiel* study and further presents natural history in terms of the dilemma of secularity that I have just outlined.

This world is a second nature; like the first—“first nature” for Lukács is likewise alienated nature, nature in the sense of the natural sciences—“it can only be defined as the embodiment of well-known yet meaningless necessities and therefore it is ungraspable and unknowable in its actual substance.” A world of

convention as it is historically produced, this world of estranged things that cannot be decoded but encounters us as ciphers, is the starting point of the question with which I am concerned here. From the perspective of the philosophy of history the problem of natural-history presents itself in the first place as the question of how it is possible to know and interpret this alienated, reified, dead world. Lukács already perceived this problem as foreign to us and a puzzle to us. If I should succeed at giving you a notion of the idea of natural-history you would first of all have to experience something of the shock that this question portends. Natural-history is not a synthesis of the natural and historical methods, but a change of perspective.⁷

We see here a reprisal of the dialectic of the everyday in which uninterrogated history, i.e., convention, takes on the false appearance of pre-given being—of inarguable nature—yet, in its authoritative self-evidence, remains nevertheless senseless: both wholly typical and entirely mysterious. How then to produce the shock such that the obviousness of the obvious, as Althusser would say, crumbles? And, further, how to gain critical traction? As Benjamin sees it—and as do Freud and Cavell—nature and history must come to serve as the instruments of one another’s demythification. The interpretive procedures of Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell supply the vantage-point from which “the natural can be read as a sign for history and history, where it seems to be the most historical, appears as a sign for nature.”⁸

Such allegorical signification is possible in that, at a certain critical juncture, the concepts of nature and history open onto one another. While nature names eternally pre-given being, the concept of time is nonetheless at play within it. For nature is transitory. As Benjamin writes in the *Trauerspiel*, “if nature has always been subject to the power of

⁷ “The Idea of Natural-History,” 118

⁸ *Ibid.*, 121

death, it is also true that it has always been allegorical.”⁹ Nature as subject to transformation (registered here as fatedness to death) is itself “historical,” hence it means its opposite as well. Conversely, while history betokens the self-consciously undertaken transformation of social conditions, i.e., progress, it is, at the same time, the substance of the conventions through which we find ourselves living. The neediness that drives history is also the neediness that leads to the static reproduction of social formations. History congeals in and as habit, becoming a second nature.

The demonstration of the natural in the historical and vice versa is a critical moment in that it undermines the absoluteness of the categories constitutive of (even philosophic) commonsense. When the everyday comes to appear as nature, the disclosure of its historicity serves to undo the illusion of its inarguable necessity. Conversely, when history comes to appear as a “universal idea,” i.e., as ineluctable rational progress, the disclosure of the neediness or “first nature” that drives it—the primitive that is recurrent within it—breaks up the false appearance of history as a salvific *Geist*. As Susan Buck-Morss elegantly makes this point: “Whenever theory posited ‘nature’ or ‘history’ as an ontological first principle, this double character of the concepts of was lost, and with it the potential for critical negativity: either social conditions were affirmed as ‘natural’ without regard for their historical becoming, or the actual historical process was affirmed as essential; hence the irrational material suffering of which history was composed was either dismissed as mere contingency (Hegel) or ontologized as essential in itself (Heidegger). In both cases, the result was the ideological justification of the given social order.”¹⁰

⁹ OGT, 166

¹⁰ *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, 54

For Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell, natural history provides the critical perspective *par excellence*. It has its deepest implication in the “eddy in the stream of becoming” that Benjamin referred to as the “dialectical image.” In the dialectical image, the antinomies that drive the dialectic are not reconciled, but rather come to a zero-point of arrest; the tension between nature and history concretized in graphic form.¹¹ This dialectical construction was meant to provide the shock by which Benjamin’s reader could be awoken to the *Jetztzeit*, abbreviated by Cavell in “Remains to be Seen” as the “now,” but which is better rendered as the “here-and-now.” In Freud’s work, this dialectical sensibility receives its most direct elaboration in the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred action) in which the repressed, i.e., infantile desire (nature), is anachronistically constituted in and through a crisis within the present field of meaning. In the re-emergence of the repressed, history is revealed, not as progress—or, I should say, maturation—but rather as the repetition of the primitive past. Yet, inasmuch as this unconquerable archaic element only emerges in and through a moment of historical rupture, nature, too, is treated as historical. For the repressed only gains substance as some *thing* in and through its penetration of this historical moment. It gains its meaning historically, which is to say, retrospectively. Surprisingly, this same conceptual structure finds its figuration in the seemingly ahistorical Cavell and does so in his conception of the ordinary, in which the common world appears only in and through the skepticism that

¹¹ As Benjamin states in the XVII thesis: “Materialist historiography...is based on a constructive principle. Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure, he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past,” (*Selected Writings: Vol 4*, 396).

would deny it—and so as too late: as already lost. As Cavell writes in the lecture, “The Uncanniness of the Ordinary:”

The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same. (A tempting picture here could be expressed by the feeling that ‘there is no way back.’ Does this imply that there is a way ahead? Perhaps there are some “back’s” or “once’s” or pasts the presence to which requires no “way.” Then that might mean that we have not found the way away, have not departed, have not entered history.¹²

The thought that history is but a catastrophic failure—nothing more than the recycling of the ever selfsame—is a cause for despair, but it is, as my three redemptive critics see it, also a source of hope. For, in its uncanny disclosure, the ordinary is exposed not as the ineluctable ground of our activity, but rather as a goal to be attained. Only in the repetition of catastrophe—the re-emergence of the repressed (Freud) or the oppressed past (Benjamin)—does there abide the possibility of the redemption of what in history has been untimely, sorrowful, and denied and thus the ability to, as Benjamin would put it, “read what was never written.”¹³

Clearly there is no method by which such a divination could occur. The impositions of theoretical subjectivity upon historical material results only in the dismissal, silencing, or assimilation of the heterogeneous and unruly elements within it. The perspective of natural history, in which the everyday comes to appear, fantastically, as a field of ciphers, yields instead to a practice of “physiognomic reading” or allegoresis.

¹² *In Quest of the Ordinary*, 166

¹³ Quoting Hofmannsthal in the “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” (*Selected Writings: Vol. 4*, 405).

In speaking of allegoresis as opposed to allegory, I mean to designate a mode of understanding rather than a technique of textual production or a literary genre. In this hermeneutic mode, the surface meaning of a “text” is regarded as a dissimulation that both conceals and expresses another deeper message. It thus takes up the practice of reading as an activity of decoding or decipherment in which the text is to be divested of its veneer of easy intelligibility. It seeks out those moments in which a text is at odds with itself, not so that they can be reconciled and a greater unity of meaning produced, but so that this tension or ambiguity can be intensified into paradox, the text’s coherence disrupted. This critical hermeneutics reads the whole from the perspective of its fragment; in terms of that which cannot be fully incorporated into its overarching structure of meaning and which, accordingly, has the power to re-configure, around itself, the meaning of the whole.

Each one of my redemptive critics realizes this undertaking in different ways and one of the fundamental labors of this dissertation has been to pronounce these differences against the backdrop of their affinity. It is this aim that accounts for the structure of my argument as a whole. I begin with Freud, not simply because of his chronological priority, but, moreover, because his work establishes the historico-political horizon of redemptive criticism. While the *Interpretation of Dreams* is the *Ur*-text of secular allegoresis, it is *Totem and Taboo*’s critical redemption of anthropology that establishes psychoanalysis in its crucial bearing on democratic theory. As I see it, Freud’s primal horde myth is legible as a critical allegorization of the two fundamental origin stories of the secular collective: the myths of contract and the French Revolution. Inasmuch as the latter names an actual event that designates the cataclysmic break with a prior world-

order, it is both a piece of history and, at the same time, a myth. Freud re-assembles, from the perspective of the defunct ethico-political ideal of fraternity, the elements basic to these founding narratives and, in so doing, recovers the affective dimension of the post-absolutist collective. Freud argues that the cohesiveness of secularized social space depends upon a commitment in excess of what can be justified, legislated, or otherwise institutionalized. It depends, in a word, on solidarity. Yet, as Freud sees it, the affective straits upon which modernity is founded are essentially—incurably—ambivalent; the band of brothers haunted by the principle of patriarchy that it would abjure.

For Freud, self-authorization is not a presupposition of secularity, but rather the troubled promise of the modern form of life. Freud argues that this melancholic attachment to the delegitimized authority of the past occurs both at the level of the historical life of the collective, which longs for an absolute authority in which it cannot believe and which it cannot condone, and at the level of the private individual. For, while patriarchy is overcome as a political principle, it nonetheless finds refuge in and as the *arche* of the private sphere. Freud accordingly makes the private sphere legible in its materialist, sociological dimension and, what's more, treats this privatization of patriarchy as the source of madness in modernity. For, while patriarchy remains the universal form of secularized social life, the relation to this authority is individualized, the passage through the crucible of the Oedipus complex is privately undertaken. Private life is conditioned by and conditions the reproduction of the structural totality from which it is nonetheless disarticulated.

In treating the (failed) struggle against patriarchy as a primitive phenomenon and simultaneously registering that its modern reprise gives rise to a genuinely new historical

order, Freud's myth of the primal horde performs the double action that characterizes natural-history, discovering the archaic in what purports to be the most modern and the historical in what presents itself as the most natural. Yet even as he is able to gain critical traction in the myths constitutive of modern political thought and provide redemptive criticism with its essential problematic, his tale nonetheless lacks normative grip. Committed to the project of individual self-authorization, Freud attempts to de-theologize the concept of redemption so as to redeem it for secularized social space. Yet the redemption that he undertakes in and for the sake of the private individual cannot be accomplished or sustained as a project outside the solidarity that he forswears. Freud's primal horde narrative poses the question of secular community, but suspends the question of justice. What is inconceivable to Freud is a form of meaning-making that is shared yet nonetheless non-coercive. Hence, in *Civilization and its Discontents*, he issues a ban on the cultural psychoanalysis that would seem, on his own accounting, to be in order.

Benjamin, conversely, regards the essential issue of modernity in terms of the identification and cultivation of a form of tradition consonant with secularized conceptions of authority, i.e., a material collective form of remembrance in which the critical reception and transmission of the shared past is at stake. For there can be no justice for those who cease to mourn the violence of their shared past. Benjamin shares Freud's understanding of secularized social space as essentially unstable, split as it is between the private and the public spheres. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud presents this instability in terms of its potential regression in either of two directions: anarchic disaggregation or fascistic totalization. However, Benjamin, who views the problem of

modernity not in terms of the persistence of patriarchy, but rather from the perspective of the new economic form of domination, identifies disaggregation and totalization as concomitant realities of the modern collective, in fealty as it is to capital, rather than as opposed possibilities. Both the project of individual liberation and the pursuit of genuine community are blocked within the capitalist form of life in which we are abandoned to the privatized experience of cultural history in the anonymous form of the commodity; it is from this isolated condition that arises the madness of modernity, what Benjamin refers to as *phantasmagoria*. Hence it is the attitude of consumption that must be undone if a new collective, self-critical form of tradition is to be achieved and secularized social space redeemed in and as an emancipatory politics. Indeed, in consuming culture as a commodity precisely what is forgotten is the labor of the dead.

The aim of Benjamin's cultural psychoanalysis is thus to liberate desire from exchange-value and it is to this end that he undertakes allegoresis in and as the essential constructive principle of his *Arcades Project*. Benjamin reads the Paris of the nineteenth century as the prehistory of twentieth century consumer culture. He takes up its cultural treasures and pieces of kitsch from the perspective of natural history, discovering in these obsolescent commodities, the denied utopian desires of the collective. In other words, he finds nature hiding in the failed matter of history and, shows, at the same time, that our own era is not the fulfillment of the promises of this past, but merely its repetition.

While Benjamin's work, devoted as it is to the critical redemption of history, provides the setting for the sustained elaboration of the theoretical basis of this hermeneutic tradition, his cultural psychoanalysis nonetheless falls short of the concept of redemptive criticism that it seeks to articulate. Benjamin sees that redemptive criticism

cannot have a purely private character, but rather that it finds its proper home as a practice of solidarity. Yet, even as his weak messianism conceives of redemptive criticism as a cultural practice and accordingly secures the normative dimension that Freud could not get in hand, there is still something about private experience and its significance for emancipatory politics that remains uncomprehended in Benjamin's work. For while Benjamin uses the tools of private experience, he does so in service to its overcoming, mistakenly treating privacy as the antithesis of community and shared experience. Ultimately Benjamin holds an insufficiently dialectical conception of solidarity, which is to say, an insufficiently democratic conception of it. For privacy is not to be overcome, but rather secured as the ground of mutuality.

This dissertation thus finds its summation in the work of Stanley Cavell. Cavell's uptake of ordinary language philosophy represents the dialectical marriage of the respective redemptive criticisms of Freud and Benjamin, dedicated as it is to navigating the indistinctions of the private and public dimensions of speech. Fundamental to Cavell's activity of philosophizing is his redemptive re-casting of modern skepticism. This is to say that skepticism plays the same central structuring role for Cavell that dream-life does in the work of Freud and the *Trauerspiel* does in the work of Benjamin. In his transcription of the skeptical/anti-skeptical debate beyond the exclusively epistemological terms in which it is commonly read, Cavell makes the polarization of the private and public dimensions of language legible as a mythic reflection of the material conditions of secularized social space, constituted as it is in the disarticulation between the public and private spheres. In so doing, Cavell demonstrates that mutual intelligibility is, at its base, not an epistemic achievement, but rather depends, on the one

hand, on solidarity or what he terms acknowledgment and, on the other, on self-authorization or what he treats in terms of voice and exemplarity. As Cavell sees it, intelligibility is not a function of the conformity of one's speech to a neutral, pre-existent and exhaustive set of linguistic criteria, but rather a solidaristic practice that has, at its base, our willingness and desire for conversation—to understand and to make ourselves understood. In speaking for myself, I am necessarily speaking for others because I must present myself as (and take myself to be) representative of our shared linguistic constitution. Thus I am, in my willingness to speak, at the same time allowing others to speak for me, asking for their consent to my usage hence for acknowledgment as a member of this linguistic community.

As Cavell sees it, communication comes in the form of appeal and acceptance and depends therefore upon a form of accord. Yet, there is no fact of the matter in virtue of which mutual understanding obtains; nothing that undergirds the harmony of our collective practices—nothing deeper than this harmony itself or, what Cavell terms, the ordinary. The issue of the ground or, more precisely, the groundlessness of our mutuality only even comes into question, appearing as some *thing*, in the breakdown of the intersubjective weave of the everyday. The ordinary is anachronistically produced, constituted as it is through specific semantic crises. From this, I draw two conclusions. First, that in his non-foundationalist account of the necessity at play in our linguistic conventions, Cavell reveals himself to be a dialectical materialist in the sense in which this project understands the term, i.e., in the sense of a natural historian. For Cavell presents linguistic conventions as a form of second nature, as an historical precipitate that radically predates my own acceptance of a native tongue, but for which I am nevertheless

responsible. Second, in this understanding of mutual intelligibility as resting upon a form of agreement that is prehistoric in nature, Cavell's uptake of ordinary language philosophy offers itself to be read as a critical allegorization of the myth of contract.

If Cavell's realization of the ordinary language tradition represents the critical allegorization of the myth of contract, it is in his treatment of the movies that this critico-redemptive reading finds its fulfillment. Cavell generates, in his treatment of the cinematic audience, a mythic image of democratic solidarity in which privacy is not overcome, but rather transformed from a condition of isolation and anonymity into the basis for a renewed search for community. Cavell sees the movies as a place where we live the madness of secularized social space and discover it as not only tolerable, but livable with others. The movies, for Cavell, represent the secularized realization of myth, i.e., myth stripped of religion, and hence the promise of a solidaristic practice of collective meaning-making adequate to democratic community. Before the silver screen, the public gathers together to view the disembodied fragments of history. Cavell redeems the audience of the movies, the mass culture commodity *par excellence*, as a democratic community the promise of which is yet fulfilled but which has all the material it needs before it. It is thus through Cavell that I am able to demonstrate that redemptive criticism has democracy as its proper setting.

CHAPTER II

THE MYTH OF THE PRIMAL HORDE AND THE FATE OF POST- REVOLUTIONARY POLITICS: FREUD'S CRITICAL REDEMPTION OF ANTHROPOLOGY

In this essay, I will offer a reading of *Totem and Taboo* as a text that is, if not itself a piece of democratic theory, one that nonetheless bears crucially upon it. Specifically, my topic is the “scientific myth,” as Freud called it, by which *Totem and Taboo* finds its denouement and which would recur in subsequent publications, not just as a persistent theme, but instead as a fundamental touchstone of psychoanalytic thinking. *Totem and Taboo*, largely an analysis of the conventions and religious rituals of the aboriginal tribes of Australia, constitutes a pivotal moment in the development of psychoanalytic thinking. It is, accordingly, my sense that, while *Totem and Taboo* is most often read in terms of what Freud imposed upon Australia—as if its analyses amounted to but a form of hermeneutical muscle-flexing, Australia an occasion to prove psychoanalysis’ power to conceptually colonize even the cultures most remote from the Viennese scene of its development—the text is better read (more productively; more provocatively; more psychoanalytically), as Jacqueline Rose has suggested, in terms of what “Australia forced Freud to do with his thought.”¹⁴ Freud describes these aboriginal tribes simultaneously as “the most primitive and conservative races,” i.e., ahistorical cultures, and as “*ancient* races (that) have a long past history behind them during which their original conditions of life have been subject to much development and distortion.”¹⁵ As is evident from this dialectical description, Freud felt himself to have discovered the

¹⁴ “Freud in the ‘Tropics,’” 51. As Rose’s fascinating article develops this pivotal moment in terms of race/culture and the enactment of racial/cultural difference between Freud and Jung, a topic ancillary to the concern of this dissertation, I do not engage her directly.

¹⁵ *Totem and Taboo*, 4n2

unconscious in a concrete social form and thus a new medium by which to examine the non-historicist imbrications of historicity, one of the central themes of psychoanalysis. But more than this, in totemism, Freud encountered the social form of, what he had already, in his 1907 essay “Obsessive Actions and Religious Practices,” identified as the private religion of neurosis and thus a means by which to understand neurosis as an effect of privatization, i.e., the splitting off of the private and the public spheres, and thus of secularization itself. Thus, my reading of *Totem and Taboo* in terms of democratic theory will serve to show not just the socio-political salience of psychoanalytic thinking in general, but as well its “modernist” interest.

A bit of background: in his “Just-So Story,”¹⁶ Freud offers a mythological explanation of the symbolism and social function of the ritual totem meal in which the tribe is collectively allowed what is individually forbidden: the killing and consumption of the sacred totem animal. Freud accounts for this practice and the tribal social form in which it is inscribed by means of an origin story, adopting a Darwinian supposition as his own. Freud posits that the earliest form of social organization from out of which tribalism arose is that of a horde in which a mass is ruled over by a single violent and despotic male, the primal father. The primal father embodies all prerogative, sexual and aggressive, and expels from the horde any males that challenge his *dominium*. As Freud tells it, archaic sociality is brought to an end when the exiles enact a cannibalistic coup. Yet, after the literal assimilation of the tyrannical patriarch’s flesh and the figurative assumption of his power, the rebellious males nonetheless repudiate their murderous deed. In this act of deferred obedience to the dead father’s law abides the essence of the social contract, or so Freud maintains. The brothers thus institute the two fundamental

¹⁶ *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, 122

taboos of civilization: the law against killing, which originally held only for the totem animal in its capacity as a substitute for the dead father, and that against sexual congress with the women of the tribe, i.e., the law of exogamy or the prohibition on marriage within the tribal family.

Thus we can see that Freud's myth is a myth of contract. For that, it has not, to my knowledge, been treated as a member of the contractarian genre alongside of the classic texts of Locke, Rousseau, Rawls, and so forth, i.e., those political philosophies that take as the starting-point of their accounts of the legitimation of political authority an anarchic condition relative to which the strictures of society are justified. On this contractarian account, what is primal is the atomistic, egoistic individual, hence the problem and promise of politics is that of binding together these disparate individuals and, what's more, achieving this unification through precisely the self-interested, calculative rationality that would seem to render mutuality impossible. Perhaps no one has treated Freud's *Totem and Taboo* on these terms because his concern is not with the problem of the legitimacy of the social order. Indeed, Freud is quite clear in all of his texts (save for *Future of an Illusion*, an exception of which I will treat), that there is no such thing as social space without unjustified authority. By contrast with this possible but undeveloped contractarian reading of Freud's text, it is common to read Freud's claim to the attribution of "scientificity" to his myth as a reference to the social scientific material, and more specifically, the anthropological material through which he generates his tale. On this view, Freud's engagement with the foremost anthropological research of his day is seen as instrumental, the ethnography, which is now regarded as no more than a pseudo-scientific dalliance in primitivism, a means by which to legitimize

psychoanalysis' fantastic musings.¹⁷ On this interpretation, Freud's gesture towards prehistory is but a naïve reiteration and affirmation of an undialectical distinction between nature and culture. Furthermore, his analysis of tribal ritual in terms of childhood fantasy and neurotic obsession is seen as evidence that Freud endorsed and erected psychoanalysis upon the theoretical basis of enlightenment history in which the West is the site of progressive *Geist*, hence taken as confirmation of psychoanalysis' ideological envelopment within the racist colonial imaginary. Viewed this way, we could say, despite its not being obvious that Freud has questions of the legitimation of authority in mind, that his conjectural history still represents a myth of contract of sorts insofar as it has decidedly normative implications. Freud *qua* alleged anthropologist would, even in the avowal of prehistory as a fabrication, maintain that his imaginative projection captures that which is essential to human being hence what is necessary to or for social organization to obtain.

It seems to me that this too quickly resolves the question of Freud's intentions in constructing a myth for modernity and does so without any real engagement with the text. In what follows, I will argue that, while Freud's myth is not contractarian, it should be read alongside of the myth of contract as a critical re-working of that myth. As Rose summarizes the yield of *Totem and Taboo*: "we can see sketched out here, if not a critique of liberalism, certainly what could be read as a form of advanced impatience with any politics seeking...to wipe the worst violences of its own history from the collective, national, mind. For Freud, collective identity is unavoidably violent."¹⁸ The essential insight emblemized in and by Freud's myth of the primal horde, an insight that is

¹⁷ See, for example, Kelly Oliver's *Animal Lessons: How Animals Teach Us to be Human*.

¹⁸ "Freud in the Tropics," 56

obscured by the commonsense “anthropological” reading, is that society requires, for its grounding, authority in excess of what can be justified, hence that its grounding remains shaky at best. This insight into the paradoxical structure of the law in which it embodies and exercises precisely the violence that it forbids pertains equally to Western European society and its politics of consent as it does to Australian tribal culture as documented by Frazer, et.al.¹⁹ For “though expressed in a negative form and directed toward another subject-matter, (taboos) do not differ in their psychological nature from Kant’s ‘categorical imperative,’ which operates in a compulsive fashion and rejects any conscious motives.”²⁰ In his psychoanalytic examination of the totemic social form, Freud discovered the barbarism and ineradicable violence that lay, not at the heart of Australian tribalism, but at the heart of civilization itself.

I take it that Rose is right to invoke only to deny the idea that *Totem and Taboo* offers a direct or sustained critique of liberalism. Yet, it is my aim, in this essay, to offer a hermeneutic approach to *Totem and Taboo* such that its subtextual critique of Western political modernity becomes explicit. In what follows, I will argue that the “scientificity” of Freud’s myth is not to be understood in terms of the realist commitments of the social scientific research that constitutes its essential matter, but rather in terms of the critical standpoint of natural history, in which Freud achieves the disclosure of the archaic in that which purports to be the most modern, the historical in that which appears as the most

¹⁹ Benjamin shares this insight with Freud that there is something rotten at the heart of law that undermines it from within, describing this character of the law, in the “Critique of Violence,” in terms of the unstable oscillation between the law-making and law-preserving forms of violence. Of course, where Benjamin regards this as the source of law’s putrefaction, Freud regards this as the source of *jouissance*, which results not in the law’s self-overcoming, but gives it a perversely robust character. See, for instance, Eric Santner’s “Freud’s Moses and the Ethics of Nomotropic Desire.”

²⁰ TT, xiv

intractable and primitive.²¹ In his myth of the primal killing and the subsequent establishment of the fraternal social form, Freud offers a myth for modernity, one that proceeds from and engenders a critical attunement in and to our present, insofar as our present is that of liberal democracy. So, while it is the case that ethnography constitutes the material upon which *Totem and Taboo* performs its labors, the text does not itself attain to membership in that genre. Freud's foray into the ethnographic literature is just a step on the dialectical pathway to his own interpretation in which what is offered is not the solution to a problem native to the terrain of social science, but rather the posing of a dilemma that lies beyond its purview: that of the Oedipus Complex in which modern individuality and the polis constituted by the plurality of such individuals is undercut by the very thing that makes it possible.²² Freud's allegorization of the founding myth of the liberal-democratic order restores the patriarchal past through which atomistic individuality emerges and, in so doing, throws into relief what is obviated in and by formal political theory, which means it is also a critical allegorization. By restoring the primacy of patriarchal absolutism and reconstructing the myth of contract from the perspective of the ethico-political ideal of fraternity, Freud shows that the cohesiveness of the democratic social fabric is to be discovered in its intrinsically affective texture, hence also that the restrictive focus on political institutions is insufficient to both the reality and ideality (the normative structure) of the post-absolutist constitution and its vicissitudes. For the private sphere is not safely beyond, before, or outside the political, but dialectically bound up with it and, as Freud points out in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, if we are to understand the principle by which anonymous

²¹ For a fuller elaboration of the concept of natural history, see the introductory chapter.

²² As we shall see, Cavell maintains this is how the contractarian genre should itself be read rather than in foundationalist terms.

individuals are joined together in community (or not), we must first apprehend authority as it is constructed in the private sphere as a field of material dependence. In mythically recounting the emergence of the political form of republicanism in and through the disarticulation between the public and the private, Freud tracks dethroned patriarchy as it takes refuge in and as the *arche* of the domestic interior. In so doing, Freud makes the family legible as a site of materialist, sociological analysis.

Thus, in reading the primal horde myth as a piece of *Naturgeschichte*, I mean, at the same time, to advance an anti-doctrinal understanding of psychoanalysis as a species of materialist dialectics. To be more precise, my claim is that psychoanalysis is first and foremost to be understood as a hermeneutic method, one dialectically developed with and undertaken in light of its understanding of the modern *aporia* of authority and self-authorization. This means further that, in the elaboration of the dialectical dynamic in which psychoanalytic mythmaking obtains, I will provide a sketch of the historico-political horizon within which redemptive criticism is in context, thereby setting the scene for this dissertation as a whole.

The insight that Freud's scientific myth recasts the ideals definitive of the liberal-democratic order and, in so doing, makes available a critical vantage-point from which to re-assess the problem and promise of democracy is not mine alone. My dialectical reading is anticipated in Carole Pateman's *Sexual Contract* and Lynn Hunt's *Family Romance of the French Revolution*, analyses of the genesis and development of post-revolutionary conceptions of authority that find their orientation through Freud's primal horde myth. Pateman and Hunt, attentive to the content of Freud's tale if not always its self-consciously mythic proportions, are in agreement that Freud's foray into prehistory is

unproductively read as a piece of ethnography and simultaneously that it cannot be fit to the contractarian genre even as it molds itself in the image of that tradition. Hunt and Pateman maintain that, if the critical potential of Freud's narrative is to be realized, it must be read in terms of the modern civil order rather than as a description of the origins of civilization *per se*. As Hunt summarizes her own interest in Freud:

I find Freud's analysis in *Totem and Taboo* suggestive because it sees a set of relationships as being critical to the founding of social and political authority: relationships between fathers and sons, between men, and between men and women. In addition, Freud's own need to write a myth of human origins demonstrates the centrality of narratives about the family to the constitution of all forms of authority, even though Freud's account cannot be fruitfully read as an analysis of an actual event in prehistory or as a rigid model for social and political relationships. I will be arguing that the experience of the French Revolution can be interpreted to put pressure on the Freudian account, even though that account provides an important point of departure.²³

This expression of Hunt's self-understanding, stripped of its specific reference to the French Revolution, captures as well Pateman's sense of her own undertaking in relation to its basis in and its attempt to supersede Freud. Where Hunt is concerned to offer a historicized treatment of the republican imaginary through which liberal-democratic conceptions of authority are generated and to show the essential role that the institution of the family plays in such a process, Pateman seeks to expose the patriarchal underpinnings of liberal society. Both Pateman and Hunt invest in Freud's primal horde narrative because it serves as a resource for their reconstruction of a story that is censured in and by contractarianism. Against the ahistorical contractarian presentation of the isolated individual as the pre-given starting-point of the social order, Freud restores the violent

²³ *Family Romance of the French Revolution*, 8

history of individuation itself, re-framing liberal-democracy in terms of the political past from out of which it proceeds and by means of which it formulates its concept of authority.

Both Pateman and Hunt access Freud's text as an allegory of civil society and, in so doing, use it to generate their own critical and historicized reconstructions of the genesis of liberal-democratic ideals; yet Freud is never taken up in their texts as a serious interlocutor. Rather he remains but a point of departure. That the question of what Freud's scientific myth is meant to be, i.e., what meaning it has for and what role it plays within psychoanalysis, is left unaddressed is not without consequence for the projects of Pateman and Hunt. In Hunt's case, the failure to properly countenance Freud on his own terms appears as a failure of self-recognition; it hence undercuts the radicality of her account, although it must be acknowledged that she nonetheless preserves intact her insight into the centrality of mythmaking for politics and the centrality of familial authority to the construction of political authority. In the case of Pateman, however, the misreading of Freud is fatal. For psychoanalysis, properly read, would have yielded the conceptual equipment required for success in her battle against idealist political theory. As is, the *Sexual Contract*, while compelling, fails to develop a coherent account of the relationship between the myths in which it self-consciously trades and the historical realities that it attempts to bring to bear upon and incorporate into the political imaginary. Pateman, like Freud, believes that, if the good life is to become possible in the present, we must first establish a relation to our past that acknowledges the violence that constitutes and continues on in post-absolutist political culture. But Pateman, unlike Freud, believes that it is epistemologically possible to get beyond myth to History itself:

that myth is merely a veil covering over the real historical conditions determining the nature of the present. Pateman thus remains blind to the essential, unresolved problematic of her text and to the limit against which psychoanalysis establishes itself as a hermeneutic: the hermeneutic limit posed by the inextricability of myth and history. In thrall to the myth of science as Freud was not (and here again *Future of an Illusion* is a possible exception), Pateman is attempting to arrive, beyond myth, at a real scene of violence. This same hermeneutical urge that defines her text also prevents her from grasping the dialectical character of Freudian concepts and constructs. Her odd attempt to collapse the primal horde into the primal scene, which I analyze below, makes perspicuous the limitations of her method and account. While Pateman can tell us a story about the conservative and pernicious tendencies of mythmaking, she does not understand that the attempt to supplant myth with history already takes place within the tract of the former.

There is the further matter that myth is not simply an instrument of oppression, but can, as well, serve as a revolutionary mode of remembrance. This insight into the conservative-revolutionary capacities of fantasy is the crux of psychoanalytic hermeneutics and from whence its critical potential. It is this insight into mythmaking with which Hunt is equipped. Arriving on the theoretical terrain of *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* via the unresolved problematic of *The Sexual Contract* helps to make plain the stakes of Hunt's text and to exhibit its decisive, albeit disavowed, Freudian cast. While Hunt's project is not damaged by her inadequate treatment of the psychoanalytic hermeneutic, in misrecognizing Freud, she misses what is of real interest in her own undertaking. That said, Hunt's invocation and employment of the Freudian

concept of the family romance serves as the lens through which Freud's "scientific myth" can be seen as a myth for modernity. Because my leading concern is with the afterlife of individuation and problems of legitimate authority, a dialectical engagement with Pateman and Hunt will take me to the core of my concern.

Negotiating Patriarchy and the Authority of Patriarchal Myth: Pateman on the Primal Scene

The *Sexual Contract*, Pateman's seminal 1988 feminist work, is a treatise devoted to the exposure of the essential misogynistic dimension of the liberal doctrine of rights. It is in service to this goal that Pateman turns to Freud. Pateman regards Freud's work in *Totem and Taboo* as indispensable to her subversive re-writing of the myth of the social contract as a contract that establishes and sanctifies the "male-sex right," i.e., the right that men qua men exercise over women. As per Pateman (and Freud), the autonomous, rights-bearing individual, which serves as the conceptual nucleus of the liberal theory of politics, is so only in virtue of the *dominium* that this specifically male individual holds over the society of the family. The liberal form is thus from the first self-divided, secured as it is on an essentially illiberal basis, and, if it is to maintain its appearance of consistency, the myths of liberal theory that prop it up and lend it the air of legitimacy must serve to suppress the fact that the deprivation of women's public voice and standing is not incidental to the formation of the civil order, but constitute its very crux. Contractarianism achieves precisely this in that, while it recognizes the private sphere as an essential element of the liberal-democratic state, it nonetheless maintains that the dimension of domesticity, of privacy more generally, is ultimately a-political. Freud's myth of contract, conversely, in emphasizing the decidedly a-rational desiderative and

affective dimension of and motivations to the social order, allows access to the familial sphere as it exists in dialectical co-constitution with the sphere of politics. Put otherwise, Freud rescues the political dimension of domesticity that is obviated in and by traditional tales of contract. Freud's account rests on the acknowledgment that fraternal society is significantly formed through and in service to the distribution of women's bodies and, what is the psychic correlate of this material practice, the proscription and prescription of desire. In Freudian parlance: fraternal society is formed in and as the shadow of the incest taboo.²⁴ On Freud's telling, the women are freed from the indiscriminate desire of the primal father only to become the symbolic tokens mooring, through their on-going circulation, the classificatory system of the fraternal clan and simultaneously the concrete objects through which sexual desire, the chastened remainder of inner nature, is channeled and legitimated. In other words, sexual domination serves as the principle of this social order. This is because the "band of brothers" was only held together by means of the vertical relation to the sovereign patriarchy, his deposition results in a period of fratricidal strife (the war of all against all), which is only brought to an end through "a revival of the old state of things at a new level. The male became once more the chief of a family, and broke down the prerogatives of the gynaecocracy which had become established during the fatherless period....And yet the new family was only a shadow of the old one; there were numbers of fathers and each one was limited by the rights of the

²⁴ "The prohibition of incest has a powerful practical basis as well. Sexual desires do not unite men but divide them. Though the brothers had banded together in order to overcome their father, they were all one another's rival in regard to the women. Each one of them would have wished, like his father, to have all the women to himself. The new organization would have collapsed in a struggle of all against all, for none of them was of such overmastering strength as to be able to take on his father's part with success. Thus the brothers had no alternative, if they were to live together, but—not, perhaps, until they had passed through many dangerous crises—to institute the law against incest, by which they all alike renounced the women whom they desired and who had been their chief motive for dispatching their father. In this way they rescued the organization which had made them strong," (TT, 144).

others.”²⁵ In other words, patriarchy, no longer eligible to serve as the explicit principle of the political sphere, is reconstituted and re-affirmed as the *arche* of the private.

Pateman argues along with Freud that, in the act of contract, *patria potestas* is not dispelled, but rather displaced. This is what she records in her central concept of the sexual contract that generates the “the male sex-right, the right that men exercise over women.” Pateman invests in Freud’s narrative of the primal horde both because it makes visible what is concealed in and by the myth of contract and because she is of the mind that this fantastic recapitulations of the origins of liberalism will, once appropriately corrected, yield a kernel of historical truth. For Pateman, this truth is not, however, the crime of patricide, as one might expect given Freud’s telling of the myth. Rather she pushes it further back to the necessary condition of patriarchal power, namely the forceful assertion of the male-sex right, a right that continues on obscured yet undiminished in the liberally constituted society. “Freud ends *Totem and Taboo* with the words, ‘in the beginning was the deed.’ But which deed? Before a father can be murdered by his sons a woman has to become a mother: was that deed connected to a ‘horrible crime’?”²⁶ This citation of Freud’s desire for and assumption of an action, i.e., a positive historical precedent, is cited by Pateman in authorization of her archeological enterprise of discovering, behind the myths of contractarianism, the prior, biological reality of sexual conquest through which fatherhood and so paternal law, is formed.

Pateman’s commitment to historical realism is not in itself odd, but paired with her fabulous objects of analysis, the classic myths of contract theory, it creates a dissonant effect, one that comes to disturb the very coherence of her undertaking.

²⁵ GP, 135

²⁶ *Sexual Contract*, 105

Pateman stages her intervention in liberal consciousness by means of the reinterpretation and revision of political stories rather than through a reading of political histories, but references to epochal conjugal law and the citation of juridical incidents dot the landscape of her text. It remains unclear how precisely these bits of fact can root themselves within, grow out of or enrich, the material of myth into which they are interjected and awkwardly transplanted. They are presented, rhetorically, as supplements, but Pateman does not offer a theoretical explanation of how we can best negotiate, what is, by her own lights, the obvious disjunction that separates the registers of political imagination (the ideal) and historical fact (for Pateman, the real). As a result, she oscillates, seemingly unawares, between the two. Pateman's account of the sexual contract ends up prostrated on the same unresolved dilemma between historical fact and the conceptual order that is given body in contractarian myth. For the entire effort of *The Sexual Contract* proceeds from the conviction that the exposition of the misogynous foundations of the liberal state requires an engagement with the constitutive ideologies of this material institution, but instead Pateman reaches beyond the fantastical premises of liberal myth, searching for their positive basis in history.²⁷ Pateman is right to maintain that it is precisely the idealist divorcement from historical reality that allows liberalism its veneer of universality. It is what must be exposed or corrected if we are to gain insight into the conditions of injustice definitive of the present. However, Pateman lacks a theory of ideology—of, that is, what drives idealism—by which she would be able to move coherently back and forth between the registers of the imaginary and historical.

²⁷ “The original contract is merely a story, a political fiction, but the invention of the story was also a momentous intervention into the political world; the spell exerted by stories of political origins has to be broken if the fiction is to be rendered ineffective” (Ibid, 219).

Had Pateman countenanced Freud on his own terms, she would have discovered the methodological means by which to subvert from within the contractarian imaginary of liberalism. The error of the *Sexual Contract* can be summarized in the following way: Pateman hears correctly, in Freud's invocation of the Faustian deed, a declaration of his commitment to materialism. Yet Pateman too quickly moves from the materialist recognition of the on-going power of the past to a commitment to historicism; that we can and must arrive at the scene of the past "the way it really was." Yet materialism does not entail historicism. In fact, Freud's scientific method of mythmaking is a consequence of his self-conscious rejection of historicism. The problem that Freud claims as his own is how to get ahold of the myths constitutive of a form of life from within the horizon made possible by those very myths. In other words, Freud's conception of history is dialectical in nature. This dialectical philosophy of history finds its clearest articulation in the concept of *Nachträglichkeit*, deferred action, in which the traumatic past, i.e., the repressed, receives its retrospective constitution. According to Freud, the repressed is not a positivity that predates the emergency that calls it forth. Rather the traumatic past only becomes legible in and through its activation in a present crisis.²⁸ The past and the present are, on Freud's view, interlocked in material struggle with one another. While *Nachträglichkeit* is a concept that Freud develops at the level of ontogenetic history, it is my claim that this temporal dynamic is at play in his myth of phylogenetic prehistory, the myth of the primal horde. Although I will not be able to demonstrate this conclusively until the end of my encounter with Hunt, we are, in this engagement with the *Sexual Contract*, already on our way. From my analysis of Pateman's mishandling of Freud, I

²⁸ See, in particular, "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety" and The Wolf Man case history, i.e., "History of an Infantile Neurosis."

will derive two fundamental features of psychoanalytic critique: (1) the dialectical understanding of the relationship between myth and history and (2) the dialectical understanding of the relationship between the individual and the social totality, which is to say between the private and the public spheres. In showing that Freud was, by no means, an historical realist, I will displace as well the basis upon which *Totem and Taboo* is received as a piece of social science and show rather that scientific mythmaking, in Freud's sense, is an instance of, natural history, and, by extension, of the practice of what I am terming redemptive criticism.

Let me now bring the problematic of Pateman's text into full-relief and demonstrate, through her misreading of Freud, the limits of her method and the psychoanalytic alternative to it. Pateman credits Freud with bringing to light sexual difference as the basis upon which the civil order gains its form, but simultaneously she indicates that his account of law-making violence fails to sufficiently appreciate the original and very real violence that is perpetuated against women. For Pateman, Freud errs in his identification of the crime *par excellence*, i.e., the transgressive act upon which the liberal order is founded and which continues to animate post-absolutist space. What must be foregrounded, she contends, is precisely what the stories of fraternal contract secretly inscribe within themselves, namely the sexual contract and its sanctification of the male-sex right and what is the historical correlate of this: the social and physical domination of women by men. She attempts to rectify this Freudian slip in which the priority of sexual conquest gets buried beneath patriarchy and patricide through bringing together two central—and distinct—psychoanalytic constructs: the primal horde and the primal scene. I have already offered a sketch of the primal horde. The primal scene, for

its part, refers to three possible scenarios, which are mutually implicating: the observation of parental intercourse, a seduction to which the child is exposed and usually at the agency of an adult, and the castration threat. Pateman's interest, in particular, is in the primal scene of the Wolf Man, in which the observation of parental intercourse is equally seductive and threatening. While Pateman appears to aspire to an integration of the primal scene and the primal horde, her treatment succeeds in no more than their juxtaposition. Pateman introduces her task in the following way:

To tell the story of the sexual contract a good deal of reconstruction has to be done...Freud's stories of political origins have to be considered alongside the more famous social contract stories and the story of the primal scene has to be told...The arguments about 'original' political right all begin after physical genesis, after the birth of the son that makes a man (a husband) a father. But a father cannot become a father unless a woman has become a mother, and she cannot become a mother without an act of coitus. Where is the story of the true origin of political right? In the stories of political origins, sex-right is incorporated into father-right, and this nicely obscures the fact that the necessary beginning is missing. All the stories lack a political book of genesis. The stories lack what, borrowing from another part of Freud's work, I shall call the primal scene.²⁹

Pateman thus appropriates and transforms the Freudian concept of the primal scene. She does so concretely by means of re-writing the moment in Freud's reconstruction of the Wolf Man's case history in which Freud treats a memory of a sadistic parental sex act as a product of revision hence attempts to push the memory "further back," as it were. Freud claims that the initial impression upon which the memory is based was one of maternal gratification and, what's more, a vision of maternal pleasure had in virtue of her

²⁹ SC, 77

mutilated condition.³⁰ Only in willfully submitting to male potency, i.e., only in virtue of castration, can that pleasure be had. Pateman wants to read Freud against himself and tarry with the original interpretation of the primal scene as one of unambiguous violence. What the child was exposed to, she maintains, was knowledge of the male-sex right in its most distilled form: that of rape. She stakes her tendentious reading simultaneously on two grounds. One is a consideration of the historical reality of the marital laws of the period supplemented by reference to juridical precedent, while the other bears on the consistency of the Freudian imaginary. The first is thus an external criticism, calling for historical fact to correct the mnemonic corruptions wrought upon the text of the past, while the second attempts to challenge and contest Freud on his own territory: the register of the fantastic afterlife of violence. While Pateman does not indicate that one of these arguments is of more consequence than the other, the second objection must, in light of Pateman's historicist commitments, be interpreted as subsidiary to the first, alien as it is to her way of thinking. In fact, Pateman has no license to reinterpret the fantastic afterlife of violence. In having constructed myth as the other of history—as that which must be dispelled by and replaced with historical fact—she has already rejected the idea of, hence deprived herself of the theoretical and methodological means necessary to, an internal critique of fantasy.

Pateman is driven to this methodological inconsistency because, while she maintains that the possibility of justice in the present depends upon retrieving from its burial beneath myth the real violence of the past, she seems, at times, nonetheless, to be aware that historicism is not a position that can or should be ascribed to Freud. She is

³⁰ As is rather gleefully discussed in the secondary literature, the primal scene of the Wolf man is an act of coitus undertaken “doggy style.” Thus the observation of the parental sex act involved the castration threat in the form of an exposure to the mother's genitals. See, in particular, Kelly Oliver's *Animal Lessons*.

thus compelled to contest Freud on his own terms even as she fails to apprehend precisely what those terms are. As Pateman sees it, Freud's interpretation of the Wolf Man's case history is in contradiction with the myth of modernity offered in *Totem and Taboo*. It is on this ground that she justifies the collapse of the primal scene into the primal horde—of imaginary sexual violence into imaginary social violence. Pateman's position appears to be that the myths in and through which we live do not cohere with one another and their collective unintelligibility is symptomatic of the amnesia from which we suffer, an amnesia that these myths effectuate by keeping the scandal of rape and the subjection of women out of consciousness. Our self-understanding is inherently flawed, the stories through which we represent our shared life incoherent because they work in service of the repression of the facts of sexual violence that are fundamental to the social order.

However, the identification of repression and incoherence represents Pateman's most significant methodological departure from psychoanalysis. Fundamental to Freudianism is the view that repression is not that which compromises or undercuts intelligibility, but rather the very force through which rational order obtains. As in Nietzsche's will to power and Spinoza's *conatus*, Freudian epistemology maintains that knowledge has a corporeal source, its motivation ultimately affective and it is the unbearable contradiction, what Freud registers as ambivalence, that calls for the repressive intervention of reason and from whence the imposition of the veneer of intelligibility on material that is otherwise unreconcilable. The drive to intelligibility, rational reconciliation, is the force of repression. The distortions of fantasy are not mere error, Freud maintains, but reflective of a contradiction in the objective situation that compels such fantasizing in the first place.

A full elaboration of ambivalence as the engine of myth-making will have to wait until our confrontation with Hunt. Suffice it to say, for now, that where Pateman strives for coherence, citing the incoherence of fantasy as grounds for its dismissal as but illusion, Freud theorizes fantasy as an implicitly critical faculty inasmuch as it enjoys a relative autonomy from the demand for reality-testing to which the demand for coherence is central. Pateman neither acknowledges nor disputes Freud's opposed position on how it is that we should read fantasy in relation to reality, myth in relation to history. Yet this is key. For where Pateman ultimately reads the distortions of myth and fantasy as the token of social domination, Freud reads the contradictions and ambiguities of fantasy-myth as both a sign of the repressive/oppressive work of reason and a quiet subversion of it. Although there are numerous places in the Freudian corpus where Freud identifies reason as an oppressive force, we may remain within the text that is of primary concern. In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud likens philosophy to a "paranoiac delusion,"³¹ calling the latter a caricature of the former. In general, Freud treats system-building—say, philosophy in the sense of rational doctrine—as inherently illusory and always affectively motivated. In the third section of *Totem and Taboo*, entitled "Animism, Magic and the Omnipotence of Thoughts," Freud explicates the animism of the Australian aborigines as a *Weltanschauung*, a "system of thought, the first complete theory of the universe,"³² thereby according the mythic worldview the same status as monotheism and science and metaphysics. To explain what is characteristic of a system, he turns, of course, to the dream, which is the psychoanalytic object *par excellence*. Dreaming attains this status in Freud's thought not simply for genetic reasons—his turn-of-the-century text the moment

³¹ TT, 95

³² Ibid, 94

in which psychoanalysis proper emerges—but because dreaming is fantasy, which is to say, mythmaking, in distilled form. Whereas mythmaking is a collective form of fantasy, a mass delusion (as Freud describes religious systems in *Civilization and its Discontents*³³), fantasy represents the privatization of this social practice hence the loss of the communal guarantee of meaning and ethical imperatives characteristic of mass practices. Fantasy comes to be, through this process of privatization, exempted from reality-testing;³⁴ yet, it still adheres to the norms of narrative coherence, norms enforced by the ego, the conscious mind. However, in dreaming, there is a relaxation of the ego that, in waking life, polices the borders of the preconscious and refuses admission to any content at odds with the rational personality. Dreaming is thus a form of imaginative activity that enjoys (relative) autonomy from the demand for intelligibility. Freud writes in *Totem and Taboo* that

The essential elements in a dream are the dream-thoughts, but these have meaning, connection and order. But their order is quite other than that remembered by us in the manifest content of the dream. In the latter the connection between the dream-thoughts has been abandoned and may either remain completely lost or be replaced by the new connection exhibited in the manifest content...It must be added that whatever the original material of the dream-thoughts has been turned into by the dream-activity is then subjected to further influence. This is what is known as “secondary revision,” and its purpose is evidently to get rid of the disconnectedness and unintelligibility produced by the dream-activity and replace it by a new “meaning.” But this new meaning, arrived at by secondary revision is no longer the meaning of the dream-thoughts.

The secondary revision of the product of dream-activity is an admirable example of the nature and pretensions of a system. There is an intellectual

³³ CD, 84

³⁴ See, in particular Chapter II of *Civilization and its Discontents*.

function in us that demands unity, connection, and intelligibility from any material, whether or perception or thought, that comes within its grasp, and if, as a result of special circumstances, it is unable to establish a true connection, it does not hesitate to fabricate a false one...The system is best characterized by the fact that at least two reasons can be discovered for each of its products: a reason based upon the premises of the system (a reason, then, which may be delusional) and a concealed reason, which we must judge to be the truly operative and real one.³⁵

The concealed reason for the system is, of course, the need for concealment itself: the repression of some element of unconscious mental life. Further “instinctual repression (is the) measure of the level of civilization that has been reached,”³⁶ where civilization presents itself as the rational ordering of shared social life. Freud’s great insight is that reason, which presents itself in modernity as a salvific force, is also barbaric; it establishes its reign only through the subjugation of nature, inner and outer. This deep suspicion of what presents itself as immediately and purely intelligible is a defining characteristic of redemptive criticism and from whence the problem it shapes for us and to which its hermeneutics stands as an answer: that the dream of reason is itself an element of the mythic milieu of our own thinking and so cannot offer us traction in redeeming myth. This is a discussion that, for now, I set aside, but which I will take up in further detail in Chapter Two and my analysis of the work of Walter Benjamin. For, in Benjamin’s distinctive appropriation of the Marxist conception of ideology critique as the disruption of victor history, we will see a reprisal of Freud’s *Traumdeutung*. Benjamin’s allegorical critique of Paris *qua* phantasmagoria and Freud’s allegorical critique of dreamlife mutually interpret one another.

³⁵ TT, 94-95

³⁶ Ibid, 97

But I must first return to Pateman, whose contention that the repression of the sexual contract results in contradiction and that Freud can be shown to suffer from this amnesia insofar as there is a contradiction between his respective constructs of the primal horde and the primal scene, I can now criticize in light of the thought that, for Freud, the unreflective commitment to coherence is the mark of reason at its most barbarous. Concerning the initial and, as I maintain, primary justification of her revisionism that Freud's reading of the Wolf Man's fantasy is incongruent with the socio-historical reality of the time, Pateman writes that

Freud's interpretation depends on the assumption that 'consent' has genuine meaning in sexual relations, so that consensual intercourse can be clearly distinguished from enforced submission. However, in most legal jurisdictions, the marriage contract still gives a husband right of sexual access to his wife's body whether or not, in any instance of marital relations, she has consented. The young Wolf Man may have accurately interpreted what he saw; we can never know. Moreover, in sexual relations more generally, the belief is still widely held that women say 'no' when they mean 'yes', and the empirical evidence about rape and the way in which rape cases are dealt with in the courts shows, sadly, that there is widespread lack of ability to understand what consensual intercourse means; all too often, enforced or unwilling submission is treated as consent.³⁷

What is striking here is Pateman's admission that "we can never know" about the reality of the primal scene and the further advisement that "it is important to note that an actual example of conjugal relations is not necessarily at issue here."³⁸ This is to say that whatever matters here will be missed if one approaches its relevance with a concern for "the way things really were" or in terms of verifiability. The undialectical opposition of fantasy/reality is not the proper kind of distinction to make when we are dealing with

³⁷ SC, 106

³⁸ Ibid, 106

mythic history such as this. The primal scene does not belong to the genre of novelistic realism in which, perhaps, the subtleties of the conjugal laws of the time and the appetites of the Wolf Man's mother might have relevance beyond a boyhood imagination of the nature of female desire. Rather, the primal, arising as it does at the limits of understanding, is the essential marker of "psychical reality," which calls upon and elaborates a conception of fantasy that is not simply the opposite of reality. Pateman offers her disputatious reading of the Wolfman despite her acknowledgement that "we can never know" and that what is at stake is a matter of psychical reality, not historical fact. This admission, though, ultimately has no bearing on her account. Her, I think, unwitting commitment to realism is clear and it is the belief that she needs a real act of violence to overturn Freud's mythmaking that prevents her from getting a handle on what is actual at stake in psychoanalytic critique.

Now, this critique of Pateman must not be overplayed. We can detect in Freud a similar indecision, a similar desire for an account of fantasy in which it can be traced back and explained by original scene; this is a demand of reason that persists unaffected by the knowledge that, with mythical history such as this, there is no getting at the thing itself. That Freudian texts testify to their author's failure to fully vanquish his realism is a point that has been emphasized by Laplanche, who argues that it is precisely in the Wolf Man case history that Freud's purported failure in his struggle to resist the seductions of a vulgar materialism are showcased. Laplanche claims that

Throughout the whole of Freud's work, an endless series of oscillations concerning seduction and, more generally, the reality of primal sexual scenes may be discovered....whose very existence demonstrates that Freud by no means achieved a *definitive* mastery of the category of 'psychical reality'; and thus, even

though he affirms that, after all, it makes little difference whether what has been discovered is reality or fantasy, since fantasy has its own reality, he is continually in search of factual clues concerning what happened in childhood. We shall simply recall that the principle point of reference here is the analysis of the ‘Wolf Man’ and the discussion, to which numerous pages in the case history are devoted, of whether the ‘primal scene’—the witnessing of parental intercourse—was in fact observed by the patient or simply refabricated from later events or virtually insignificant ones.³⁹

Freud, stricken by doubt as to the scientific adequacy of psychoanalysis, was, to be sure, tempted at times to be unfaithful to its concept, permitting himself flirtations with realism. It must be said though: if Laplanche is correct that Freud was never able to fully quell the prurient desire to get his hands on the hard stuff of the real, in the majority of his work, it is textually underdetermined and indeterminable whether or not Freud offers his constructions as real or imaginary scenes. The interpretive value of the distinction real/fantastic comes to be deflated to the point of its total impotence. But while disabled, this opposition is not, for that, superseded. Because reality and fantasy are mutually constitutive concepts, the reassertion of the epistemological hegemony of this binarism is a perpetual possibility. The remark by which Freud concludes his detective work in the case of the Wolf Man testifies both to his dismissal of the relevance of the distinction and the impossibility of severing, once and for all, the concepts of fantasy and reality: “I should myself be glad to know whether the primal scene in my present patient’s case was a phantasy or a real experience; but, taking other similar cases into account, I must admit that the answer to this question is not in reality a matter of very great importance.”⁴⁰ The gap between fantasy and reality ceases to be, for Freud, the place from which issues

³⁹ *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*, 33

⁴⁰ “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” 97

pathological effects, but it does not, for that, admit of closure even on the side of fantasy. As in the Kantian schema, the disjunction between the noumenal and the phenomenal persists and so also the consternation—the dread—caused by this opening. Reason wants still what it knows it cannot have. Psychoanalysis, after the abandonment of the seduction theory, will no longer seek a resolution to the question of where fantasy leaves off and reality begins and it offers no guarantee that the anxiety caused by this indeterminacy can or will be cured. Rather, it translates the dilemma posed by the composite knowledge of the imaginary constitution of the objective and the necessarily material and irretrievable origins of the imaginary into a contestation of and contention with fantasy in terms of its capacity to support a world fit for the good—that is to say, the happy—human life.⁴¹ The question thus becomes how to gain critical distance from the fantasies that form the bedrock of our own thinking. Contra Laplanche, who, faced with this hermeneutical limit, brackets the question of history altogether and declares the independence of “psychic reality,” as though the real and the imaginary could exist indifferently alongside one another, for Freud, history and myth—reality and fantasy—constitute a unity. There is no access to the past save through the mediations of historically produced subjectivity. History such as this is present only in the form of its fantastic afterlife. And as with Laplanche, so, too, with Pateman, who endeavors to replace myth with history as though myth was merely a veil shrouding the historical rather than the very means of its preservation.

⁴¹ As Cavell remarks in the *World Viewed*, the text by which this dissertation will conclude: “Does someone claim to know the specific balance sanity must sustain between the elaborating demands of self and world, some neat way of keeping soul and body together. What was Freud’s advice? To retrieve stifled fantasy so that its annihilating power can command the self’s self-esteem, the admiration of men and the love of women—to insist upon a world with room in it for fruitful work and love. Merely that,” (85).

Although Pateman's second objection concerns the internal logic of Freudianism and thus challenges Freud on his own ground, this critique also fails and, on my reading, precisely because Pateman's attachment to the fantasy of a real origin, one itself untainted by fantasy, prevents her from getting ahold of the way in which history is importantly at play in Freud's constructions. In this second line of attack, Pateman justifies her collapse of the primal scene into the primal horde on the grounds that Freud's interpretation of the Wolf Man's case history is in contradiction with the myth of modernity offered in *Totem and Taboo*. She writes

If the Wolf Man was reporting an infantile fantasy, Freud's own account of political origins makes his interpretation of the primal scene most implausible. The will of the primal father, the *patria potestas*, is absolute and unbounded; in the beginning his is the deed. His will is law, and no will counts but his own; thus, it is completely contradictory to suggest that the will of the woman is relevant in the primal scene. Yet her will must be relevant if sexual intercourse is consensual. It makes nonsense of the all-powerful primal father to imply that, before he becomes a father, his will is constrained in any way by the will of another being or the desire of a woman for coitus.⁴²

Pateman here reduplicates the same move that deprives her first objection of critical power, i.e., acknowledging the fantastic (and personal) status of the primal scene and then, despite this, trying to move beyond to the real, historical experience of the mother. For Freud's reconstruction of the Wolf Man's case history only makes nonsense of the all-powerful father if we take it that an identity holds between the prehistory of modernity (primal horde) and the prehistory of the modern individual (primal scene). In other words, what is at stake here is the issue of how Freud theorizes the relation between the social totality and the individual and how Pateman should herself treat it insofar as her

⁴² SC, 106-107

concern is to elaborate and to understand precisely the privatization of patriarchy. Pateman's central preoccupation is the consequences of the transformation of authority that occurs in the disarticulation of the private and public sphere hence the relation between the political past and the present. Yet Pateman, even as her text registers the disjunction between the primal scene and the primal horde, fails to see this disjunction between the individual and the social as an essential issue of Freudian theory and one that should be, as well, her foremost concern.

What Pateman identifies as “completely contradictory” constitutes the dialectical character of Freudian myth-making—dialectics at a standstill in which the past and the present are graphically rendered in their dialectical co-constitution and irresolution.⁴³ The primal horde and the primal scene of the Wolf Man are such dialectically related images and can be seen as such on the condition that they are read in terms of the way in which they respectively and differently articulate the Oedipus Complex, which names the dialectical structure of secular selfhood. The primal horde myth is the heuristic construct that grounds psychoanalysis and provides the interpretive horizon in which individual experience is to be handled. In other words, it provides the socio-historical backdrop against which modern individuality obtains, narrating the emergence not of any particular individual, as does the primal scene, but rather of modern individuality itself in and through the negation of the absolute individuality embodied in the patriarch-monarch. As Freud claims in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, the companion piece to *Totem and Taboo*:

⁴³ On “the dialectical image” and “dialectics at a standstill,” see, in particular, Walter Benjamin’s “On the Concept of History” and the N convolute of the *Arcades Project*.

We must conclude that the psychology of groups is the oldest human psychology; what we have isolated as individual psychology, by neglecting all traces of the group, has only since come into prominence out of the old group psychology, by a gradual process which may still, perhaps, be described as incomplete... Further reflection shows us in what respect this statement requires correction. Individual psychology must on the contrary, be just as old as group psychology, for from the first there were two kinds of psychologies, that of the individual members of the group and that of the father, chief or leader... The members of the group were subject to ties just as we see them to-day, but the father of the primal horde was free. His intellectual acts were strong and independent even in isolation, and his will needed no reinforcement from others... absolutely narcissistic, self-confident, and independent.⁴⁴

The atomistic individuality, which serves as the basis for liberal theory, is modeled upon the figure of the political sovereign, the one who is absolutely free, existing beyond any relations of dependence and obligation, and who guarantees the social order inasmuch as he stands outside of it. This ideal of individuality as autarkic is unachievable in reality, but not for the reason that contractarianism specifies. For the atomistic self is not pre-given and then sacrificed for the sake of social order, but historically produced, molded from out of the prior life of the horde. To put this otherwise: actual individual psychology—and its psychological concept—and the idealized individuality of the sovereign are not original, but rather derivative. Individual psychology represents the remains of the group psychology that preceded it and continues to be structured in terms of this prior moment. The process of individuation thus remains incomplete in the sense that it threatens to collapse into the group psychology from out of which it proceeded. “Just as primitive man survives potentially in every individual, so the primal horde may arise once more out of any random collection; in so far as men are habitually under the

⁴⁴ GP, 123

sway of group formation we recognize in it the survival of the primal horde.”⁴⁵ Modern selfhood is both made possible and undermined by its on-going dependence on the delegitimized authority of prehistory.

While the relationship between individual and group psychology requires further elaboration, this must wait for my direct engagement with the text of the primal horde. At this juncture, my concern is to make clear where and upon what grounds the primal horde and the primal scene meet, hence to specify the dialectical relation that holds, for Freud, between the individual and the social totality. While the primal horde is the myth by which Freud makes sense of the problems and pathologies endemic to modern individuality, the primal scene, conversely, is a concept developed within this pre-established framework. The primal scene is the concept that countenances the origin story of a given individual. What Pateman misses, even as she registers it in her objection that, between the primal scene of the Wolf Man and the myth of the primal horde there is a striking disparity, is that the primal scene of the Wolf Man is his primal scene alone: a fantasy constructed over the course of analysis and in service to the acknowledgment of his on-going attachment to the parental authority of his personal prehistory. The concept of the primal scene is, unlike the concrete construct of the primal horde, an abstraction that only gains content in and through its application to specific individuals. It is only in virtue of its abstract nature that the concept can be used to comprehend individuality. The universality of its application, that it is part of the phylogenetic inheritance, is what allows for the identification of difference. In the disarticulation of the private and public spheres, the Oedipus Complex remains universal and serves as the principle of totalization. Yet nonetheless the passage through this

⁴⁵ Ibid,123

crucible is one that is privately undertaken. This secret history, this private past, is both that which renders the individual other to the social totality and, at the same time, the very mechanism of her integration. The Freudian concept of the primal scene thus registers the individual's determination by the social totality and, at the same time, the fantastic parting of the individual and the group.

In sum, the internal contradiction of Pateman's account is this: Pateman's avowed goal is to make perspicuous the fact that patriarchy has not been defeated, but rather has taken refuge within the private sphere and, from its position there, continues to determine the contours of public and political life; yet, she continually effaces the specificity and relative autonomy of the private sphere, insisting that it be read wholly in terms of the social totality within which it occurs. There is no room in Pateman's fantasy for experiences that exist in tension with the status quo. And this means that the redemptive moment that guides Freud's mythmaking remains invisible to her. For fantasy is not merely a force of oppression, as Pateman maintains, but has, as well, the capacity to individuate, which is to say, to liberate.⁴⁶ It is upon the ground of the emancipatory capacities of fantasy that Lynn Hunt meets Freud.

⁴⁶ "It was then that, perhaps, some individual, in the exigency of his longing, may have been moved to free himself from the group and take over the father's part. He who did this was the first epic poet; and the advance was achieved in his imagination. This poet disguised the truth with lies in accordance with his longing. He invented the heroic myth...The myth, then, is the step by which the individual emerges from group psychology. The first myth was certainly psychological, the hero myth. The explanatory nature myth must have followed much later. The poet who had taken this step and had in this way set himself free from the group in his imagination, is nevertheless able to find his way back to it in reality. For he goes and relates to the group his hero's deeds which he has invented. At bottom this hero is no one but himself. Thus he lowers himself to the level of reality, and raises his hearers to the level of imagination. But his hearers understand the poet, and, in virtue of their having the same relation of longing towards the primal father, they can identify themselves with the hero," (136-137).

The conservative-revolutionary powers of mythmaking: Hunt's Family Romance

Where Pateman turns to *Totem and Taboo* in the conviction that it can help to make stark what is obscured in and by the idealist discourse of contractarian theory, Hunt, by contrast, turns to Freud's *Totem and Taboo* as a means by which to grasp the historic *imaginary* that gave birth to modern conceptions of authority. Furthermore, where Pateman, despite her commitment to history as the lens by which to correct the distortions wrought by liberal ideology, investigates liberalism as a structure of authority rather than in terms of its historical development and accordingly grants access to Freud's "scientific myth" as a critical allegory of the a-historic myth of contract, Hunt is concerned to furnish an historical understanding of revolutionary consciousness and the germination of liberal-democratic ideals. Her engagement with Freud thus offers the perspective from which the myth of *Totem and Taboo* becomes legible as a critical allegory of the French Revolution, which exists simultaneously as history and as myth.

Like Pateman, Hunt's reception of the primal horde is mediated through another central Freudian concept: that of the family romance. Before turning to Hunt's reading of the primal horde, we should first get this concept in hand. A quick comparison with the "primal scene" will be of service. Where the "primal scene" refers to the origin story of the individual, the family romance names a childhood fantasy of an origin alternative to one's own. This fantasy, unlike the primal scene, is not necessarily constituted through the work of repression. Or, to be more exact, it does not refer exclusively to a construct shaped through the discursive process of psychoanalysis by which repression is undone. Freud specifies that there is both a consciously remembered family romance and a "neurotic family romance." Conscious or unconscious, the family romance designates a

fantasy precipitated in and by a disappointment dealt the child at the hands of his parents and, what this amounts to, the loss of conviction in the absoluteness of parental authority and love. Disabused of this belief in the parents' omnipotence and omni-benevolence and by way of compensation for this bereavement, the child fantasizes that he is a step-child or adopted; in other words, that his origin is other than it is and that his association with his own disappointing parents is but happenstance. Inasmuch as "for a small child his parents are at first the only authority and the source of all belief,"⁴⁷ fantasy is here not merely compensatory but emancipatory. "These day dreams are found to serve as the fulfillment of wishes and *as a correction of actual life*. They have two principle aims, an erotic and an ambitious one—though an erotic aim is usually concealed behind the latter... The child's imagination becomes engaged in the task of getting free from the parents of whom he now has a low opinion and of replacing them by others, who, as a rule, are of higher social standing."⁴⁸ Hence disillusionment is not, for Freud, the end of myth-making, but rather one of its most notable beginnings.

It is in the introduction of a gap between need and its fulfillment that fantasy arises. This faculty of fantasy, exempted from reality-testing, accomplishes the hallucinatory gratification of the need whose satisfaction has been denied. Fantasy "props" desire up, as it were. Desire requires such support in that, without trust in the possibility that it can, in principle, be met, it cannot be sustained. In the development of this capacity for imaginative wish-fulfillment, the individual gains relative autonomy from the external world. For what will not be given in reality, he will find in the imagination. The denial of desire and the loss of the absolute parent of prehistory is thus

⁴⁷ Freud, S. (1909). Family Romances. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908)*: 236.

⁴⁸ *Ibid*, 237-238

a necessary event if the child is to gain the internal resources that characterize normative adulthood. Fantasy is an essential resource in that it is by means of this capacity that the individual is able to satisfy and sustain himself in an inherently unsatisfying and generally indifferent world. Disillusionment dealt at the hands of the parents is thus not only ineludible, but necessary if the child is to discover a feeling for the future and to maintain himself in relative independence from not just those first love-objects, but as well, from the anonymous group to which he will inevitably be delivered up. Indeed, Freud introduces the problem of the family romance specifically in terms of the problems of autonomy and succession:

The liberation of an individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents is one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development. It is quite essential that that liberation should occur and it may be presumed that it has been to some extent achieved by everyone who has reached a normal state. Indeed, the whole progress of society rests upon the opposition between successive generations. On the other hand, there is a class of neurotics whose condition is recognizably determined by their having failed in their task.⁴⁹

This event by which the child is “freed” from external authority is the birth of the skeptical predisposition, but, at the same time, this event gives rise to fantasy, specifically the fantasy of the family romance through which the child takes the first steps in the process of self-authorization, which is to say the project of personal autonomy that is, in modern democratic space, a political, personal, and moral imperative.

Hunt makes the rich observation in the introductory pages of her text that “in *Totem and Taboo* (1913)...Freud offered his own version of the origins of the social

⁴⁹ Ibid, 237

contract, or what might be called the original family romance.”⁵⁰ This insight that privatized mythmaking is an indispensable part of entering into and maintaining oneself in the social order and further that this need is rooted in the mythic conditions of modernity as specified by Freud’s primal horde construct serves as the stimulus to Hunt’s re-thinking of the French Revolution. For her, the de-legitimation of a long established political system whose roots are deep—cosmological, ontological, and religious—and the shaping from out of its remains new ethico-political grounds is to be characterized predominantly as an imaginative effort. *The Family Romance of the French Revolution* takes as its presumption and then demonstrates this thesis through a series of concrete engagements with cultural artifacts of the period that there is, indispensable to any revolutionary reconstruction of the socio-political sphere, a decidedly imaginative effort that precedes, accompanies, and follows moments of profound historical breakage. What must be defeated is not simply a set of material institutions, but the pre-reflective belief in their legitimacy. In other words, dissatisfaction with the status quo must be experienced not as incidental but identified, through a narrative elaboration, as endemic to the system itself and so as a demand for a different form of life in which needs and desires could be properly met. Disillusionment, though, is not, of itself, sufficient, as the establishment of an alternative system of relations of command and subordination cannot be accomplished without the simultaneous development of a new model of political legitimacy. The stability of the state is attained in virtue of the citizen’s belief in its legitimacy, but conviction in the rightness of a new form of authority requires more than reason alone can supply. There is an investment that must be made before a framework can come to

⁵⁰*The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, 6

serve a justificatory function and Hunt, following Freud, argues that such “reasonableness” obtains only in light of an investment that is affective and imaginative.

In other words, liberation from the belief in a particular form of authority is not enough; disillusionment must be accompanied by a concomitant re-enchantment. Yet the imagination of a happy home(land) in which ones needs would be met, hence one that appears as just, has no place else to derive its content but the past. Here, we come up against the limit of the emancipatory capacity of the imagination, a limit the recognition of which serves as the basis of Hunt’s exploration of French Revolutionary consciousness and of her view that familial symbolic imagery played a decisive role within its attempts to re-conceive political authority. As Freud remarks of the family romance, “the technique used in developing phantasies like this...depends upon the ingenuity and the material which the child has at his disposal.” Hunt, like Freud, knows that the only material with which we have to work is that which descends to us from our past. Hence any new system generated in and through the destruction of a prior order will necessarily be both a reconfiguration and repetition of the delegitimized past.

As Hunt sees it, Freud’s account of childhood disillusionment and the emancipatory purpose served by the formation of a personal mythology of a superior origin provides the theoretical framing by which to apprehend the experience of the French Revolution of 1789 as it is concretized and preserved in the artistic monuments of the period, which is to say by means of an analysis of its fantastic afterlife. Hunt takes up the major cultural objects of the France of the late 18th Century as embodied expressions of the pre- and post-Revolutionary “political unconscious.” She treats these aesthetic

objects as the production of a collective “psychic reality,” hence as the means by which to get a hold of the inner agenda of French revolutionary culture.⁵¹

Hunt thus sees what Pateman does not. That social fantasy— of which art is, in pre- or proto-capitalist secularized society, the primary expression—is not undialectically opposed to reality, hence does not serve merely to obscure it. Rather fantasy is, as wish-fulfillment, engendered by material conditions, hence, in its own way, testifies to these conditions. Because fantasy and reality are mutually constitutive—because our access to history is mediated in and through the fabricated cultural objects in which it is preserved—the contestation with myth is not to be thought of as the attempt to rip or pull back the “ideological veil” shrouding objective fact. Rather, one must develop the hermeneutic means to enter into the logic of and gain critical traction within these aesthetic/fabulous constructs. Such is basic to the practice that I am referring to as redemptive criticism.

In this, Hunt is profoundly Freudian, her methodology arising from out of the insight that myth and history, fantasy and remembrance, cannot simply be pulled apart but form a conceptual constellation. This though is not Hunt’s understanding of her engagement with Freud. She instead accounts for the usefulness of Freud in terms of an analogical relation that she sees between the subject-matter of the primal horde narrative as interpreted through the concept of the family romance and the predominant subject-matter of the cultural artifacts of 18th Century France: that of familial symbolic imagery.⁵² As was the case with Pateman, Hunt’s account explicitly acknowledges the

⁵¹ The uptake of psychoanalysis to diagnose the cultural unconscious will be the central concern of my discussion of Walter Benjamin’s redemptive hermeneutic.

⁵² “The French had a kind of collective political unconscious that was structured by narratives of family relations. I do not claim that this is a universal phenomenon: other peoples at other times might well

fantastical status of the Freudian primal horde, but somehow this insight has no bearing on the subsequent uses that she makes of Freudian texts. Hunt is unfaithful to the implications of her own suggestion that Freud's account of the social contract is the "original family romance" and, as it is Freud's attempt to give expression to "psychic reality" in the expanded sense of the "collective political unconscious," the primal horde narrative is only appropriately evaluated according to the standards specific to this register. Oddly, Hunt remains blind to the methodological kinship that she shares with Freud. Although in her introduction, she claims that the French Revolution "can be interpreted to put pressure on the Freudian account," this pressure is never directly applied. Rather she distances herself from Freud by means of invoking what she takes to be the central characteristics of Freudian dogma—that it is ahistorical, evolutionist, potentially misogynist, realist, etc.—and then summarily dismisses it. Regarding the former: "In Freud's terms, there is no escape from the "longing for the father." I reject this view as inherently ahistorical and reductionistic (everything can be interpreted as reflecting longing for the father), and I hope to demonstrate that the shift toward the good father fatally undermined absolutist royal authority."⁵³ As for the latter: "For Freud, true development consists in the replacement of such matriarchal systems with patriarchal ones...Social organization, then, requires the reinstatement of patriarchy in a sublimated form, the form of the law."⁵⁴ The few other invocations of Freud that occur throughout the text can be sorted, for the most part, along these two axes of interpretation. While she correctly declaims that, construed as either an explanatory piece of philosophic

experience politics in other terms. But most Europeans in the eighteenth century thought of their rulers as fathers and of their nations as families writ large. This familial grid operated on both the conscious and the unconscious level of experience," (*The Family Romance of the French Revolution*, xiv).

⁵³ Ibid, 25

⁵⁴ Ibid, 144

anthropology or read in the hortatory register of normative contractarianism, the primal horde narrative cannot support or enable a critical apprehension of modern forms of authority, this being the fruit that, Freud's account, properly met would bear,⁵⁵ she herself vacillates between precisely these two formulations.

In sum: while it is the case that Hunt sees in psychoanalytic theory a means to newly illuminate French revolutionary consciousness, she does not make the inverse move and re-read Freud in terms of the ideological and material legacy of the French Revolution. Quite the opposite: Hunt's reading of Freud remains static, unmoved by her own insight that the co-determination of the familial and political sphere is specific and necessary to the formation of republicanism and that the significance of this fact is uniquely registered in Freudian theory.

In light of these observations, I would like to turn to a closer consideration of Hunt's mistaken assessment of the terms of her engagement with Freud's "Family Romance." I deploy the same method with Hunt as I did with Pateman, rendering explicit the elements of Freudian mythmaking either misrecognized or as-yet incipient in his critics' account. What Hunt sees about the family romance—that it serves as a model by which to apprehend the process and purpose of mythmaking—is not lost on Freud. He explicitly identifies the family romance as a relative of, hence a means to comprehend the nature of, myth.

There are only too many occasions on which a child is slighted, or at least *feels* he has been slighted, on which he feels he is not receiving the whole of his parents' love, and, most of all on which he feels regrets at having to share it with brothers

⁵⁵ Recall the passage quoted early in these pages in which Hunt remarks that "Freud's account cannot be fruitfully read as an analysis of an actual event in prehistory," i.e., as a piece of philosophical anthropology, "or as a rigid model for social and political relationships," (8) i.e., as offered in the register of contractarian normativity.

and sisters. His sense that his own affection is not being fully reciprocated then finds a vent in the idea, often consciously recollected later from early childhood, of being a step-child or an adopted child. People who have no developed neuroses very frequently remember such occasions, on which—usually as a result of something they have read—they interpreted and responded to their parent’s hostile behaviour in this fashion...These consciously remembered mental impulses of childhood embody the factor which enables us to understand the nature of myths.⁵⁶

Granted, the constellation drawn above between the acknowledgement of ambivalence, the impulse to mythmaking, and the initiation of the successful process of individuation (of self-authorization) deserves a more sustained elaboration than Freud himself provides, but nonetheless the observation is there, demanding Hunt’s recognition insofar as it is an articulation of the very conceptual constellation upon which her own account rests. This passage not only licenses the reading of the primal horde narrative as the original family romance in its observation that the ambivalent relationship to authority (the irresolution of the dialectic), which has its first occurrence in relation to one’s parents, points in the direction of myth, but the argument elided therein begs the supply of its missing premises. What’s more, the passage embodies the factor which, if explored would enable us to understand Freud’s view of mythmaking as a positive norm of modern life and thus what Freud intends in describing his myth of the primal horde as “scientific.”

Rather than undertaking such work, Hunt distances herself even further from Freud. She describes her transformative appropriation of the concept of the family romance in the following way:

By introducing the term *family romance*, I do not mean to suggest that the French revolutionaries were acting from out of some kind of pathological fantasy rooted

⁵⁶ “Family Romances,” 238

in warped individual psychologies. The revolutionary family romances (and they were plural) were not neurotic reactions to disappointments—as in Freud’s formulation—but creative efforts to reimagine the political world, to imagine a polity unhinged from patriarchal authority. I use the term *family romance* to suggest that much of this imaginative effort went on below the surface, as it were, of conscious political discourse.⁵⁷

While it is not the case that there is no distinction to be made between “neurotic reactions to disappointment” and “creative efforts to reimagine the political world,” I want to suggest that the difference is not what Hunt takes it be. Allow me to bracket, for now, the question of collective mythmaking and to begin with an analysis of Hunt’s characterization of neurosis in contradistinction to the “normal,” i.e., normative adulthood. First, neurosis is not, in principle, opposed to creative acts of the imagination; as Freud observes in “Family Romance;” “a quite peculiarly marked imaginative activity is one of the essential characteristics of neurotics and also of all comparatively highly gifted people.”⁵⁸ As is also clear in Freud’s essay, the well-adapted individual is not so in virtue of having escaped childhood unscathed by knowledge of parental fallibility, i.e., without disappointment. She too has resentment that finds its means of expression in the fantasy of the family romance. But more to the point: neurosis does not represent a “warped individual psychology” for there is, between neurosis and normalcy, no structural difference. To reproduce the relevant quotation: “It is quite essential that that liberation should occur and it may be presumed that it has been *to some extent* achieved by everyone who has reached a normal state.” According to psychoanalytic theory, liberation from the past is essential, but *always and only* partial. For subjectivity is formed only through the transformation of object-choice into identification, i.e., the

⁵⁷ Family Romance of the French Revolution, xiv-xv

⁵⁸ “Family Romances,” 238

introjection of the lost love-object in and as the ego and the superego.⁵⁹ What distinguishes neurosis from normalcy, and always along a sliding scale, is the factor of repression: whether or not the individual is capable of tolerating “one of the most necessary though one of the most painful results brought about by the course of his development,” which is to say whether or not the individual is capable of acknowledging the reality of ambivalence. For the child’s hostile impulses towards the parent are a reaction to the threat of the loss of love, a threat that is primarily to be understood not as the withdrawal of parental affection, but as a threat posed to the child’s own attachment to the absolute parental authority. It is the absoluteness of his love that is being threatened and that he is loath to give up. This threat calls up a retaliatory response against the offending parental party. Yet because the “inertia of the libido...its disinclination to give up an old position for a new one,”⁶⁰ the child continues to love the person at whose hands she has suffered. Love and hate are internally related. This bind of both loving and hating parental authority is, for Freud, universal. The resulting ambivalence—this conflict that reason cannot adjudicate—is the source of myth and, as such, is secreted in the mythical constructs to which it gives rise. Hence the neurotic must subject fantasies such as the family romance to repression lest she be confronted with the reflection of her own aggression against idealized authority.

If anyone is inclined to turn away in horror from this depravity of the childish heart or feels tempted, indeed, to dispute the possibility of such things, he should observe that these works of fiction, which seem so full of hostility, are none of them really so badly intended, and that they still preserve, under a slight disguise, the child’s original affection for his parents. The faithfulness and ingratitude are

⁵⁹ See, in particular, “Mourning and Melancholia;” *The Ego and The Id;*” and Judith Butler’s *The Psychic Life of Power.*”

⁶⁰ CD, 108

only apparent. If we examine in detail the commonest of these imaginative romances, the replacement of both parents or of the father alone by grander people, we find that these new and aristocratic parents were equipped with attributes that are derived entirely from real recollections of the actual and humble ones; so that in fact the child is not getting rid of his father but exalting him....He is turning away from the father whom he knows to-day to the father in whom he believed in the earlier years of his childhood; and his phantasy is no more than the expression of a regret that those happy days are gone.⁶¹

The family romance is both a critique of the past—the attempt to free oneself from it—and, at the same, the means by which the individual preserves her attachment to it. This holds for both the neurotic and the “well-adapted” individual. For the aspiration to and imagination of a better future inseparable from the possibility of any future at all and upon which the process of individuation from one’s parents depends is produced in and through the very disappointments of the past. Or, as Freud puts it, fantasy is a “correction of actual life, the technique [of which]...depends upon the ingenuity and the material which the child has at his disposal.” Desire only comes to know itself, i.e., to discover its aim and the object capable of fulfilling it, in consequence of its denial. The image of happiness is thus molded from out of the very experience of its failure to obtain, which is to say from out the past in which love suffered betrayal.⁶² Desire, the dimension

⁶¹ “Family Romances,” 240-1

⁶² This dialectic will find its reprisal in the “weak messianism” of Walter Benjamin. Of particular relevance here is “On the Concept of History.” “It is one of the most noteworthy peculiarities of the human heart,” writes Lotze, “that so much selfishness in individuals coexists with the general lack of envy which every present day feels towards its future.” This observation indicates that the image of happiness we cherish is thoroughly colored by the time to which the course of our own existence has assigned us. There is happiness—such as could arouse envy in us—only in the air we have breathed, among people we could have talked to, women who could have given themselves to us. In other words, the idea of happiness is indissolubly bound up with the idea of redemption. The same applies to the idea of the past, which is the concern of history. The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn’t a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn’t there an echo of now silent ones? Don’t the women we court have sisters they no longer recognize? If so, then there is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have ben endowed with a *weak* messianic power, a power

of futurity that opens in the individual, draws the individual back into the past. The human being is one strangely riveted between these two opposed impulses, one towards new conditions that exist beyond the painful restrictions and denials of the past and the other towards the restoration of this very past. “The finding of an object is always the re-finding of it.”⁶³

The family romance does not represent the supercessionist overcoming of the past, but rather the imaginative fulfillment of its betrayed promise. Fantasy then, as conceived by Freud, holds an entirely ambiguous position, reflecting the dual character of the force that fuels it. It is simultaneously critical and complicit; that which reinforces our illicit attachment to the past and, inasmuch as it issues a grievance, that through which we might find our way into a better future.

Had Hunt chosen to follow out Freud’s claim that the acknowledgment of ambivalence is what makes the difference between neurotic attachment to the past and successful individuation, she would have thereby gained the means by which to detect the dialectical stakes of Freudian mythmaking and, by extension, his purpose of making a myth for modernity. On Freud’s account, the unconscious family romance of the neurotic and the consciously remembered family romance of the non-neurotic individual both arise in and through the experience of ambivalence. What distinguishes the former from the latter is the ability to tolerate the rage of betrayal. Unable to bear the corruption of filial love and, what this amounts to, the burden of authority that redounds upon him in the loss of the parent of prehistory, the neurotic maintains his melancholic, secret attachment to this authority and, in the refusal to remember and, accordingly, to mourn, is

on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply. The historical materialist is aware of this,” (Thesis II).

⁶³ “Three Essays on the Theory of Infantile Sexuality,” 222

condemned to reenact the past. Psychoanalysis undertakes to correct this situation not through reconciling the opposed sides of the ambivalent complex, but rather through the self-conscious undertaking of fantasies that allow the individual to recognize the reality of ambivalence and transform her attachment to the past into a pathway by which to enter into a genuinely new future. Or, as Freud puts it: the patient “must have (his) capacity for love, which is invaluable to (him) but has been impeded by childhood fixations, placed freely at (his) disposal.”⁶⁴

My suggestion then is that Freudian mythmaking as a positive norm of modern life consists in the self-conscious (scientific) employment of the imagination for the sake of rendering ambivalence concrete and, accordingly, making its acknowledgment, which is to say, its acceptance possible. This is the pivot upon which the conservative, repressive tendencies of fantasy turn to release its emancipatory potential. In such consists fantasy’s redemption.

Let me now re-tread this ground in terms of the issue that I bracketed: that of collective myth-making in its subversive or revolutionary and conservative or oppressive dimension and, in so doing, to turn more decisively toward the question of Freud’s intentions in constructing a myth for the modern collective. As we have seen, Freud maintains that the horde is the most archaic, i.e., natural, social formation, hence that group psychology is the oldest. Yet, this claim dialectically entails its opposite: that the absolute individuality of the primal father in relation to which obtains the group psychology of the brothers is, in fact, original. In *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, Freud argues that, after the demise of the sovereign patriarch, the epic-poet, i.e., the mythmaker, is the first individual to emerge from out of the psychology of the group

⁶⁴ “Observations in Transference Love,” 76

and that myth serves as the new basis for shared social life. Here we see again the dialectic of individuation and de-individuation, of self-authorization and the idealization of past authority, of emancipation and social enchainment:

It was then that, perhaps, some individual, in the exigency of his longing, may have been moved to free himself from the group and take over the father's part. He who did this was the first epic poet; and the advance was achieved in his imagination. This poet disguised the truth with lies in accordance with his longing. He invented the heroic myth. The hero was a man who by himself had slain the father—the father who still appeared in the myth as a totemic monster. Just as the father had been the boy's first ideal, so in the hero who aspires to the father's place the poet now created the first ego ideal... The myth, then, is the step by which the individual emerges from group psychology. The first myth was certainly psychological, the hero myth. The explanatory nature myth must have followed much later. The poet, who had taken this step and had in this way set himself free from the group in his imagination, is nevertheless able to find his way back to it in reality. For he goes and relates to the group his hero's deeds which he has invented. At bottom this hero is no one but himself. Thus he lowers himself to the level of reality, and raises his hearers to the level of imagination. But his hearers understand the poet, and, in virtue of their having the same relation of longing towards the primal father, they can identify themselves with the hero.⁶⁵

The epic poet achieves an imaginative emancipation for himself, but, also, in his capacity as a storyteller to the group, establishes myth as a new basis for communal life. In the concretization and exemplification of the traumatic history of the group, the epic poet individuates them as a people and, in the collective (albeit unconscious) recognition and acceptance of this past as their own and their subsequent recital of it, the listeners confirm themselves as a community. Thus, in the loss of the absolute individual, mythic-history

⁶⁵ GP, 136-137

becomes the means by which the disaggregated horde is re-collected. Myth is the keystone of the tribal form, the horizontal relations of equality between its members assured through the vertical relation to the myth. Myth comes to serve in the place of the absent sovereign, serving as the basis for collective social practice.

Yet, where tribal communities assure their cohesiveness through myth, precisely what we lack in Western secularized modernity are the myths in relation to which individual experience is aligned with that of the group and through which shared social life obtains. In analyzing the ethnographic documentation of tribal rituals and myths in relation to the obsessional acts and fantasies of his bourgeois patients, Freud comes to the conclusion that the pathology of neurosis is a direct consequence of the loss of myth as social practice and the rarified, abstract conception of authority that, through the process of secularization—where secularization is understood to entail the overcoming of arational or mythic grounds for our political and social obligations—comes to stand in its places. Consider here, once again, the invocation of Kant that prefaces the text:

Though expressed in a negative form and directed toward another subject-matter, [taboos] do not differ in their psychological nature from Kant's 'categorical imperative', which operates in a compulsive fashion and rejects any conscious motives. Totemism, on the contrary, is something alien to our contemporary feelings—a religio-social situation which has been long abandoned as an actuality and replaced by newer forms. It has left only the slightest traces behind it in the religions, manner and customs of the civilized peoples of today.⁶⁶

While, on Freud's account, modernity continues to rely upon taboos, these prohibitions have been privatized, deprived entirely of the concrete embodiment of the totem and the collective social practice that such a shared god enables. Now we must do right simply

⁶⁶ TT, xiv

because that is what our reason requires. Deprived of the collective practices of mythmaking, the individual is left to shoulder, on her own, the burden of making meaningful the sacrifices and self-denial requisite to sociality. Freud's verdict, in *Totem and Taboo*, is that the suffering of neurosis results from the dissolution of the *ethos* and the privatization and abstraction of ethics as the moral law. "The neuroses are social structures; they endeavor to achieve by private means what is effected in society by collective effort."⁶⁷ The neuroses are asocial social structures. In so far as they enable the individual to comply with, at the same time as she secretly (symbolically) violates social prohibitions, they both serve the purposes of socialization and as the representatives of what is socially outlaw, what is disavowed and thus must remain private and incommunicable. Such is the

...private nature [of neurosis] as opposed to the public and communal character of religious observances, religious ceremonial are full of significance and have a symbolic meaning, those of neurotics seem foolish and senseless. In this respect an obsessional neurosis presents a travesty, half comic and half tragic, or a private religion. But it is precisely this difference between neurotic and religious ceremonial which disappears when, with the help of the psycho-analytic technique of investigation, one penetrates to the true meaning of obsessive action.⁶⁸

Here it must be emphasized that the job of the psychoanalyst is not exhausted in the revelation of the "true meaning of obsessive action." For, as Freud learned in his experience with Dora,⁶⁹ the therapeutic effects of psychoanalysis abide, not in the disclosure of the missing facts of personal prehistory, but in the transference/counter-transference dynamic: the communicative techniques, i.e., the concrete practice, through

⁶⁷ TT, 73

⁶⁸ "Obsessive Action and Religious Practices," 120

⁶⁹ "Fragments from an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria"

which the rapport is established between the analyst and the analysand and sustained. Through the bond of transference, the analysand imbues the psychoanalyst *qua* doctor with all the authority of love, which enables the analyst, in turn, to use this authority to foster the individual's attempts at self-authorization, providing the intersubjective support that the patient otherwise lacks and by which she might begin to bear the private burden of meaning-making in a secularized and fragmented social world.

If this further specifies the normativity of critical mythmaking in the analytic context, what of Freud's intentions in constructing a myth for modernity such as he does in the final essay of *Totem and Taboo*? With the insights derived from the dialectical overcoming of Pateman and Hunt, I am now prepared to assert that Freud undertakes the mythic reconstruction of modernity for the sake of being able to get ahold of the pathology of neurosis for the sake of psychoanalytic practice. In so doing, Freud discovers that this pathology arises in the disarticulation of the private and public spheres and thus internal to the secularized, post-absolutist collective, structurally inseparable from the condition of its health. My suggestion is that, in the myth of the primal horde, Freud sought not, as the realist reading would have it, to secure a new basis for shared social life—he is not the epic poet—but rather to expose the infeasible ambivalence that lies at the heart of post-absolutist community and which undercuts any attempt to secure a foundation for this collective. In other words, the Oedipus Complex, the conceptual yield of *Totem and Taboo*'s investigation of neurosis in relation to tribalism, is not a solution to a pre-given problem, but rather the articulation of the structuring paradox of secular modernity. It is to that structuring paradox that I now turn.

The Myth of the Primal Horde: Freud's Natural History of Secularism

What neither Pateman nor Hunt saw was the dialectical architecture in which the significance of the fraternal clan is embedded. Only when the primal horde myth is regarded as an exercise in historical materialism, the present investigated in terms of its constitutive past, can it be redeemed as a critical resource for thinking through democratic modernity. Yet, if Pateman and Hunt's respective insights are conjoined dialectically, the critical edge of the primal horde myth can be brought fully into purview.

Through Pateman, we were able to see that, to the extent that Freud's primal horde narrative mimics liberal mythmaking, it is as a critical allegorization of that political fantasy and the post-revolutionary reality to which it corresponds. Seeking to excavate and render explicit the conceptual framework undergirding liberal institutions, contractarianism disregards the historicity of political space and, even as it avows the "state of nature" as an imaginative construct, it presents its principles as timeless universals. Accordingly, contractarianism cannot yield a critical perspective on the political ideals of the present and represents no more than an ideological justification of the status quo, oppressing precisely where it would claim to liberate. What's more, in order to derive its sovereign political ideals, contractarianism affects the forcible erasure of the violent history by which the atomistic individual is produced. In so doing, it obfuscates precisely the problem of individuation and self-authorization that drives the vicissitudes of post-absolutist social space. Against its hegemonic contractarian interpretation, Freud's myth restores the violent history of individuation to the republican collective. As we have seen, the primal horde is not a mere aggregate, but rather the collective that obtains in and through the vertical relation to a leader, the one within

whom the power of the law resides and from which it proceeds.⁷⁰ In other words, the primal horde does not represent a state of nature, if by this we mean, a pre-social condition. In Freud's rendering, prehistory is a space already defined by the presence of an institution, namely that of patriarchal monarchy or, in Freudian parlance, that of fraternal castration in which all prerogative devolves upon and is consolidated in a single figure, "the violent and jealous father who keeps all the females for himself."⁷¹ About this state of affairs there is nothing anarchic, nothing pre-social. Freudian prehistory thus does not comport with the idea of an original, animal condition, but rather that which follows from the rejection of a strong, centralized figure of authority and prior to the recognition and institution of a new basis for socio-political relations and the form of power by which such relations can be regulated and maintained. This is the period of fratricidal strife that follows the deposition of the primal father and which Freud relegates to a footnote.⁷² For psychoanalysis, the social state is the natural condition of the human being. Or, to turn this thought slightly: what is pure fantasy for Freud—unimaginable—are social relations of an unmediated nature.

Thus, what contractarianism presents as the most primitive, Freud discloses as a product of history, reading the anarchism of "the state of nature" as precipitated in and through the demise of our fealty to sovereign authority and, moreover, the demise of the pre-reflective acceptance that sovereign power might rightly be held by any given

⁷⁰ "We have already heard in the discussion of the two artificial groups, Church and army, that their necessary precondition is that all their members should be loved in the same way by one person, the leader. All the members must be equal to one another, but they all want to be ruled by one person. Many equals, who can identify themselves with one another, and a single person superior to them all—that is the situation that we find realized in groups which are capable of subsisting. Let us venture, then, to correct Trotter's pronouncement that man is a herd animal and assert that he is rather a horde animal, an individual creature in a horde led by a chief," (GP, 121).

⁷¹ TT, 141

⁷² Ibid, 142

individual. In other words, at the same time as the primal horde is readable in terms of the myth of contract, it is legible, as Hunt maintains, as the allegorical representation of the origin story of Republicanism: that of the French Revolution, the episode capable of emblemizing through its radicality and its spectacular imagery, the centuries-long process of the desacrilization of kingship. Freud bestows upon this historic content its proper mythic form. In the projection of the French Revolution into the prehistoric past, Freud names as origin the ritualistic bloodletting of Louis XVI by which the French people anointed themselves as a collective body capable of bearing sovereignty. In so doing, he de-historicizes this moment, showing that it constitutes a second nature, the substance of modernity but the remains of the murdered ideal of kingship. Freud figures the “French Revolution” as the epochal horizon from which we cannot remove ourselves and within we receive the past. The French Revolution is mythic in the sense that it arises at the limits of historical understanding, the ethico-political ideals that it embodies not liable to justification inasmuch as they constitute the very bedrock of our thinking, appearing as “natural,” i.e., self-evident, principles.

As I have argued in my review and critique of Pateman’s revisionist reading of Freud, in narrating the foundation of the civil order through the concept of fraternity, Freud is able to show that post-revolutionary politics has not yet been stripped of an essential patriarchal moment. In the act of contract, *patria potestas* is not dispelled; it is simply displaced in and through the creation of the domestic sphere. The historical accomplishment of liberalism is thus cast as but the repetition of the struggle against and

failure to overcome our transhistorical condition of patriarchal domination.⁷³ Freud reveals, in this way, the Revolution as nothing but the repetition of the primitive struggle—and failure—against patriarchal oppression. It is but nature, the repetition of the ever selfsame. “The persons who were united in this group of brothers gradually came towards a revival of the old state of things at a new level. The male became once more the chief of a family...and yet the new family was only a shadow of the old one; there were numbers of fathers and each one was limited by the rights of the others.”⁷⁴ However, from out of this archaic circuit of repetition, there is produced a genuinely new historico-political form—that of fraternal society. While the revolution is betrayed in the reinstatement of the law of the father,⁷⁵ the privatization of patriarchal power nonetheless represents the creation of a new sphere of experience, hence a new *arche* and, in the division of the private, the public, and the political, a new historical formation: that of civil society in which women/sisters are structurally excluded. Viewed this way, Freud’s primal horde myth shows the historical dimension (privatization) in that which appears to be the most primitive (the struggle against patriarchal domination). In other words, Freud’s myth is a piece of natural history, disclosing the natural in what presents itself as the most historic and the modern in that which appears as the infeasible and the archaic.

⁷³ I specify patriarchal domination as “transhistorical” rather than “natural” as Freud argues that the “father-complex” and ambivalence are acquired rather than a “fundamental phenomena of our emotional life,” (TT, 157).

⁷⁴ GP, 125

⁷⁵ “The dead father became stronger than the living one had been—for events took the course that we often see them follow in human affairs to this day. What had up to then been prevented by his actual existence was thenceforward prohibited by the sons themselves, in accordance with the psychological procedure so familiar to us in psycho-analyses under the name of ‘deferred obedience.’ They revoked their deed,” (TT, 143).

As Adorno writes, “natural history is not a synthesis of the natural and historical methods, but a change of perspective,” accomplished by way of a shock.⁷⁶ In the redemption of the ideal of fraternity, Freud re-casts the problem and promise of democracy. For, not only does fraternity frame political modernity in terms of its patriarchal past, it casts into relief a feature of post-absolutist life that remains invisible to formal political theory: that the cohesiveness of the democratic social fabric is to be discovered in its intrinsically affective texture. Such a thought is anathematic to any political theory that seeks to justify the liberal-democratic order in terms of its intrinsic rationality. The specific affect of disillusionment is a prerequisite to democracy from Freud’s perspective, for only through a process of progressive demythification do ecclesiastical and monarchical forms of power lose their self-evidence and so become vulnerable to a process of contestation. This Freud shares with the enlightenment. Yet, where Freud departs from the enlightenment treatment of secularization is in his observation that an ineradicably mythic element remains. For without an element of authority beyond justification, there can be no society at all. Freud, in rendering foremost in his account the question of the terms of investment, argues that democracy cannot separate itself from myth any more than its historical predecessors and so, if it is to maintain its claim to legitimacy, it must countenance its own mythic dimension.

For fraternal solidarity continues to be mediated by the prehistorical patriarchy that it would abjure. Only in the shadow of the patriarch-monarch does equality between male citizens, submission to no particular person but to the authority of the group as a whole, come appear as a desirable ethico-political ideal. On Freud’s account, that which founds and makes democracy possible exists simultaneously as the innermost point of its

⁷⁶ “The Idea of Natural History,” 118

irredeemable instability. What is mythically dissimulated in the ideal of fraternity is this primordial ambivalence.

I have often had occasion to point out the emotional ambivalence in the proper sense of the term—that is, the simultaneous existence of love and hate toward the same object—lies at the root of many important cultural institutions. We know nothing of the origin of this ambivalence. One possible assumption is that it is a fundamental phenomenon of our emotional life. But it seems to me quite worth considering another possibility, namely that originally it formed no part of our emotional life but was acquired by the human race in connection with their father-complex, precisely where the psycho-analytic examination of modern individuals still finds it revealed at its strongest.⁷⁷

Again, we see that Freud does not locate the primacy of patriarchal power in uncultured nature, but rather views the father-complex as a historical precipitate, i.e., one that results from the irresolvable dialectic between desire (inner nature) and authority (culture).

While Freud registers patriarchal domination as a contingent condition of human existence rather than as fate, he nonetheless acknowledges it as the single historical constant: universal history is that of patriarchal domination in the superstitious form of monotheism, the political form of monarchy, or the liberal domestication of paternal power.

We thus see, in Freud's treatment of fraternity, which names both the desire to live beyond the law of the father and the on-going attachment to the de-legitimized authority of the past, a reprisal of the dynamic that I was able to pronounce in and through Hunt's uptake of Freud's concept of the family romance. Only in the determinate negation of the past does a revolutionary picture of the future obtain. The fraternal clan has, as its precondition, a state of bondage and deprivation. The brothers

⁷⁷ TT, 157

are motivated to their criminal deed by the pain of thralldom and the imagination of the gratifications they have been denied. On the one hand, they wish to be free from the omnipresent threat of the father's violence and, on the other, they claim, in their revolt, a right to the women's bodies. Liberty is conceived only negatively, as the thought of emancipation, and it receives positive content through the utopian fantasy of unimpeded (sexual) fulfillment.⁷⁸ No lesser promise than utopia could serve to motivate and license the revolutionary overthrow of the current world-order.

The utopian imagination that drives the revolutionary impulse is, however, at odds with the self-authorization of the band of brothers. In Freud's telling of the myth of the primal horde, equality and fraternity, far from being the motivation for the brother's rebellion, do not appear until after the father has already been deposed. The rebellion is not proof of an existent proto-solidarity; rather the republican ideal of a community of interest is constituted *post festum*. "Sexual desires do not unite men but divide them. Though the brothers had banded together to overcome their father, they were all one another's rivals in regard to the women. Each one of them would have wished, like his father, to have all the women to himself."⁷⁹ The aspiration to be like the father, to possess unlimited mastery over the social environment, must, in post-revolutionary politics, transform itself into an identificatory relation between the (male) members of the polis. Only in accepting that "no one could or might ever again attain the father's supreme power, even though that was what all of them had striven for"⁸⁰ does the primal

⁷⁸ "One of the forms in which love manifests itself—sexual love—has given us our most intense experience of an overwhelming sense of pleasure and has thus furnished us with a pattern in our search for happiness," (CD, 82). Sexual union appears, in the Freudian imaginary, as the trope, par excellence, of utopian fulfillment.

⁷⁹ TT, 144

⁸⁰ Ibid, 148

horde transform itself into a fraternal clan and “rescue the organization that had made them strong.”⁸¹ In this sense, Freud is a liberal, regarding equality not as its own self-contained principle of justice, but rather as the compromise-formation necessary if the period of fratricidal strife is to be brought to an end by means other than patriarchal restoration. Equality is not part of Freud’s conception of liberty, but rather that which liberty gives rise to as the alternative to direct submission.⁸²

The band of brothers, in other words, is only retrospectively constituted as a band rather than a gang of assassins and would-be rapists. The primal horde narrative thus presents that the central challenge of post-revolutionary politics as that of transforming—redeeming—what was primarily a parricidal impulse, a negative ideal, into the basis for a positive articulation of social space and a new political project. Fraternity, the “aim-inhibited love” of the brothers, is the libidinal investment without which the desire for liberty would dissolve the commitment to equality, but the victory of fraternity has to sustain itself against the loss of the father with which it is identical. Brotherhood only is so through the fact of orphanage. The fraternal clan does not, in deposing the king, succeed in disrupting the vertical relation to the father. Rather democratic social space is haunted by the memory of absolutism, “the dead father (become) stronger than the living

⁸¹ Ibid, 143

⁸² As he writes in *Civilization and its Discontents*: “The liberty of the individual is no gift of civilization. It was greatest before there was any civilization, though then, it is true, it had for the most part no value, since the individual was scarcely in a position to defend it. The development of civilization imposes restrictions on it, and justice demands that no one shall escape those restrictions. What makes itself felt in a human community as a desire for freedom may be their revolt against some existing injustice, and so may prove favourable to a further development of civilization; it may remain compatible with civilization. But it may also spring from the remains of their original personality, which is still untamed by civilization and may thus become the basis in them of hostility to civilization. The urge for freedom, therefore, is directed against particular forms and demands of civilization or against civilization altogether. It does not seem as though any influence could induce a man to change his nature into a termite’s,” (95-96).

one had been.”⁸³ In democracy, the role of the absent father is strengthened because his function, which he can serve only when absent, is to maintain the non-closure of the space from which sovereign authority has been evacuated, which maintenance cannot be performed by any single brother, driven as he will be by his ‘utopian’ fantasies. The ideals of fraternity and equality are, in this way, merely derivative, constructed as a barrier around this void over which secular modernity teeters.

As a reaction-formation⁸⁴ rather than a primary libidinal position, the bonds of fraternity are highly unstable and, on Freud’s account, this lability renders democratic social space vulnerable to two possible deformations, deformations that correspond to the bipolarity of the ambivalence complex:

After a long lapse of time their bitterness against their father, which had driven them to their deed, grew less, and their longing for him increased; and it became possible for an ideal to emerge which embodied the unlimited power of the primal father against whom they had once fought as well as their readiness to submit to him.⁸⁵

Concerning the first aspect of this ideal: Freud’s text suggests that republicanism receives its justification, in part, through the imaginative reconstruction of the patriarch-monarch as a beast: an all-powerful, sexually voracious, and unremittingly vicious figure.

⁸³ TT, 143

⁸⁴ A reaction-formation is the unconscious transformation of an affect into its opposite. The brothers are primarily rivals and, if it is to be said that there is mutuality here, it takes the form of mutual aggression. “In consequence of this primary mutual hostility of human beings, civilized society is perpetually threatened with disintegration. The interest of work in common would not hold it together; instinctual passions are stronger than reasonable interests. Civilization has to use its utmost efforts in order to set a limits to man’s aggressive instincts and to hold the manifestations of them in check by psychical reaction-formations,” (*Civilization and its Discontents*, 112). See as well Chapter IX of *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*: “Thus social feeling is based upon the reversal of what was first a hostile feeling into a positively-toned tie in the nature of an identification. So far as we have hitherto been able to follow the course of events, this reversal seems to occur under the influence of a common affectionate tie with a person outside the group...Many equals, who can identify themselves with one another, and a single person superior to them all—that is the situation that we find realized in groups which are capable of subsisting,” (121).

⁸⁵ TT, 148

Triumph is such only against a worthy adversary; a *coup d'état* justified only against corrupt authority.⁸⁶ Retrospectively created as a figure of unlimited power and insatiable appetites, the patriarch-monarch appears as both a terrifying threat and as a seductive incarnation of the freedom that could be had beyond the strictures of democratic life. This trope of freedom and fulfillment gets constructed as the negative image of the interdependence of democratic life and the renunciations that it requires, renunciations that become a festering source of resentment against the newly established social form. The “longing for the father” that will not be stilled, when read this way, refers to an illicit fantasy of freedom as licentiousness and domination. The primal father is demonized, but simultaneously exalted as the individual par excellence, the only person to ever live by the strength of his will and desire alone, unencumbered by dependencies and obligations. He is, as Freud says, a Nietzschean *Übermensch*.⁸⁷

The longing for the father must, however, be approached from the other side as well: not as the imagination of unfettered freedom, but as an insatiable desire for a definite figure of authority. While Freud’s re-writing of the French Revolution inscribes the principle of absolutism as beastly, he explicitly identifies deification as a consequence of the murderous act. The primal father is exalted not only in the form of an admirable

⁸⁶ This point should be connected to Freud’s earlier treatment of kingship. Quoting Fraser, “The idea...that early kingdoms are despotisms, in which the people exist only for the sovereign, is wholly inapplicable to the monarchies we are considering. On the contrary, the sovereign in them exists only for his subjects; his life is only valuable so long as he discharges the duties of his position by ordering the course of nature for his people’s benefit. So soon as he fails to do so, the care, the devotion, the religious homage which they had hitherto lavished on him cease and are changed into hatred and contempt; he is dismissed ignominiously, and may be thankful if he escapes with his life. Worshipped as a god one day, he is killed as a criminal the next” (Ibid, 44).

⁸⁷ “The father of the primal horde was free. His intellectual acts were strong and independent even in isolation, and his will needed no reinforcement from others...He, at the very beginning of the history of mankind, was the ‘superman’ whom Nietzsche only expected from the future. Even to-day the members of a group stand in need of the illusion that they are equally and justly loved by their leader, but the leader himself need love no one else, he may be of a masterful nature, absolutely narcissistic, self-confident and independent” (GP, 123).

adversary, the imitable object that occupies the position to which one would like to attain, but as “everything that a childish imagination may expect from a father—protection, care and indulgence.”⁸⁸ In a post-absolutist world in which no one can claim to have more or better knowledge of what constitutes a worthwhile life, we are left to find our own private salvation. While the absence of absolute authority is, as we have seen, the condition of liberty, it also initiates a form of life characterized by isolation, an anarchic state in which there exists nothing to reliably connect individuals. In other words, the indeterminacy of non-absolutist social space can be read either as a condition of hope or anxiety. Left to authorize and authenticate ourselves in a world in which no one else is seen as fit to do so and to discover how this personal autonomy fits with the lives of others, we are apt to seek a recusal from such responsibility. We could say, with Aristotle, that this pre-political being of the primal father is both a god and a beast:⁸⁹ the beast that must be killed and the god that must be propitiated for the individual to persist as such.

Freud, in this way, identifies the democratic individual and the society constituted by a plurality of such individuals as prone to regression in two directions. On the one hand, the orientation secured in relation to absent authority gives way to a movement towards anarchy in which each seeks to restore in their own person the father-king, denying the social constitution of the self and its freedom; and, on the other, the project of personal autonomy collapses under its own weight, the commandment to gain for oneself a private life forsaken for a return to a “closed” system of meanings in which the community comes to occupy the position of absolute authority. Under the former impulse, this constitutive absence comes to act as a centrifugal force, under the impact of

⁸⁸ Ibid, 144

⁸⁹ See Book I of the *Politics*.

which the democratic collective fragments into a mere aggregate of individuals not bound to one another by any compelling norms. Under the latter, it acts centripetally, solidifying the bonds of fraternity in such a way that the individual is taken over by the demands of the totality. Democracy is in danger of dissipating into anarchy or ossifying into fascism. Whether this is the fate of the project of modernity depends upon the critical recognition of the ambivalent emotional straits upon which this new form of life is grounded. Fraternity must be recognized as a condition of inheritance in which democratic hope remains secretly indebted to the patriarchal past that it would forswear. It is here that the work of scientific myth—or, let me now say, redemptive criticism—is required; the material of the mythic past taken up in such a way that thought is able to gain a critical grip upon it. In approaching the cohesiveness of secularized space as a problem, fraternity as a cipher, Freud restores to the republican collective the history in terms of which it continues to be defined. Only in the acknowledgment of fraternity as a condition of inheritance in which democratic hope remains secretly indebted to hence defined by the patriarchal past can the animating tension of the present be known and secured as the problem in light of which collective action and meaning-making must obtain. Here the meaning and possibility of justice cannot be known or had independent of the acknowledgment of the material oppression from out of which the present emerged and in terms of which, in the disarticulation and material intertwinement of the private sphere and the public spheres, it is still configured.

Through restoring to the modern polity the history of which its hegemonic liberal interpretation deprives it, Freud's fantastic recapitulations of the (incomplete) drama of individuation recovers a crucial and insoluble problem of democratic social life. How

can community be justly formed and sustained in a political order that, by definition, lacks the sovereign principle in and through which collective identity obtains? There exists nothing other than the memory of shared subjugation to reinforce the horizontal bonds of a community of equals. Democratic space is one that is haunted by the memory of absolute authority and must remain so if it is to resist a return to absolutism and if it is to acknowledge its structural dependence upon the patriarchal power that it allegedly abjures. Freud's fantasy of the primal horde makes visible—bodies forth—the absence that is the feature without which democracy would not exist, an absence that the democratic imagination holds in continual repression by means of positive concepts such as “the will of the people” or by means of projecting outward this threat internal to the system in the form of a fanatical, invading other. This lacuna in the system into which Freud re-instates the dead body of the king is a site of trauma, a perennially open tear in the fabric of democracy. In this way, “the dead father became stronger than the living one had been.”⁹⁰ Whether or not and how it is possible to live with the remnants of absolute authority that cannot be extruded from the system insofar as they act as its foundation and with the results of the criminal deed becomes, in and through Freud's text, the question central to democracy and, as “society is now based on complicity in the common crime,” one to which each citizen must respond.⁹¹

**At the Limits of Psychoanalysis as Social-Political Theory:
The Paradox of Cultural Psychoanalysis**

The myth of the primal horde cannot be said to advance a normative political vision nor, if taken descriptively, can it be said to offer anything more than a negative

⁹⁰ TT, 143

⁹¹ Ibid, 146

anthropology. Freud is not advocating the social form that arises from out of the pre-political principle of fraternity. Fraternity, which both names and conceals the root of the modern polis, can only serve to undermine the ideals of liberty and equality with which it is arrayed but over which it is ultimately intended to reign as guardian. The concept of fraternity through which the affective basis of post-Revolutionary politics is dissimulated is a radically insufficient conception of solidarity insofar as it hides within itself the sanctification of the patriarchal politics that it claims to supersede. Through rendering fraternity the conceptual center of his analysis, Freud illuminates the mythic underpinning of what liberalism presents as the pure rationality of modern political authority. Fraternity continues to rely upon the patriarchal structure that it would disown and does so both at the level of the political imaginary and at the material level of bourgeois social life in the sacrifice of women and children to the power of the private patriarch. Such a comprehension of the family in its objective role as the private producer of the republican citizen, thus as a space whose contours are determined by the requirements of the public sphere from which it is separated off, is essential to the analytic enterprise. Only through this awareness of the dialectical co-constitution of the individual and the social through the mediating term of the family does Freud gain access to the fundamental pathology of modernity: the on-going attachment to the delegitimized authority of personal and collective prehistory. Viewed this way, oedipal individuality appears not as the result of natural fate, but rather as a piece of natural history—a cultural inheritance that we do not know how to appropriate and so which continues to dominate both public and private life.

If Freud's critical allegorization of the origin stories of Republicanism gains critical traction in the mythic milieu of our own thinking, does it further offer or point us in the direction of a solution? What positive political norms, if any, can be derived from the psychoanalytic disclosure of the patriarchal dimension of democratic, secular modernity? I suggest at the outset that psychoanalysis does not have nor can it be made to yield a theory of social life beyond that of our transhistorical condition of domination. Freud's critique of republican society does not arise against the assumption of a normative political vision nor does it seem to provide an adequate basis for the formulation of such a theory.⁹² Freud's insistence that psychoanalysis was no more than a neutral instrument and so could not provide a *Weltanschauung* was a dictum to which he remained faithful in his writing. That said: while psychoanalysis is not directly bound up with any particular political project, insofar as it is an historically-indexed *ethos* committed to supporting the individual in the project of self-authorization, it must possess some normative conception of personhood and, insofar as it countenances personhood in terms of its socio-historic determinates, this normative image of the individual must entail the recommendation of a particular form of sociality.

While it would be too narrow to suggest that Freud takes a wholly liberal view of the individual, his texts do express liberal-leanings of a sort, sympathies that become augmented when he is juxtaposed with figures such as Benjamin and Cavell. Of interest here is Freud's uncharacteristically optimistic *Future of an Illusion* in which Freud is at

⁹² While I find projects such as Marcuse and Whitebook's to be of interest, it is my view that they miscarry in their attempt to re-discover the Freudian concept of sublimation such that it comes to serve as the basis of a just social order. I take it that such a miscarriage is fated from the start. To take seriously the problem of ideology is to recognize that our rational powers are limited to the conceptual horizon of our historical moment and hence that any positive vision of utopia can only reproduce, in disguised form, the sufferings and injustices of the present moment. The truth-value of positive Freudian concepts is inseparable from the lie that psychoanalysis seeks to contest.

his closest to issuing what are, if not directly political recommendations, then at least social prescriptions for assuring the stability of a secularized community. This work appears as anomalous against the backdrop of the Freudian *oeuvre* not just because it arrogates to psychoanalysis a voice, albeit faint, of political authority, but—perhaps more remarkably—in that Freud, whose skepticism, pessimism, and resignationism are infamous, appears there unambiguously as a proponent and prophet of the Enlightenment. Freud turns—or rather returns—in *Future of an Illusion* to the question of the sustainability of a state stripped of its divine veneer. He maintains that, once the rift between political and religious authority has formed, the two are destined to fall asunder; the divestiture of faith in the religious provenance of politics is not a process that admits of reversal and so “the relation between civilization and religion must undergo a fundamental revision.”⁹³ Religion is no longer eligible to serve as the ground of shared social life, yet it nonetheless inappropriately persists in that role. The Freud of 1927 is confident that “the turning-away from religion is bound to occur with the fatal inevitability of a process of growth and we find ourselves at this very juncture in the middle of that phase of development.”⁹⁴ *Future of an Illusion* thus presents the dilemma of modernity in the following way: either coercive society must be reinstated and through means other than the defunct monotheistic model or reason which unceremoniously

⁹³ “But it is another matter with the great mass of the uneducated and oppressed, who have every reason for being enemies of civilization. So long as they do not discover that people no longer believe in God, all is well. But they will discover it, infallibly, even if this piece of writing of mine is not published. And they are ready to accept the results of scientific thinking, but without the change having taken place in them which scientific thinking brings about in people. Is there not a danger here that the hostility of these masses to civilization throw itself against the weak spot that they have found in their task-mistress? If the sole reason why you must not kill your neighbor is because God has forbidden it and will severely punish you for it in this or the next life—then, when you learn that there is no God and that you need not fear His punishment, you will certainly kill your neighbour without hesitation, and you can only be prevented from doing so by mundane force. Thus either these dangerous masses must be held down most severely and kept most carefully away from any chance of intellectual awakening, or else the relationship between civilization and religion must undergo a fundamental revision,” (39).

⁹⁴ *Ibid*, 43

stripped the halo from the state must come to supply of itself the ground of shared social life.

Freud, in elucidating monotheism as the age of the neurosis of mankind in which society was assured by “purely affective means,” is not, *à la* Nietzsche, trying to unmask, demystify, hence defeat religion so much as he is attempting to show us how to finally put the nails in the coffin. The words of his text will not be the invocation that finally banishes the spectre of absolutism. Rather, Freud takes up the role to which Kant, a century and a half earlier, had appointed the philosopher that of the “sensible teacher who does not oppose an impending new development but seeks to ease its path and mitigate the violence of its irruption.”⁹⁵ The transition from the society based on universal oppression to that of universal equality can only transpire and persist if the right kind of education is made available to all. Only those who have been raised up to the use of their own reason can be charged with the Kantian demand “*Sapere aude.*” For this, what is required is an irreligious education in which the cognitive capacities of the mass of men aren’t hobbled by the premature introduction to religious dogma. Religious doctrine is tantamount to a ban on inquiry and when it is paired with the forceful prohibition against sexual activity and sexual inquiry, the individual is unable to develop the epistemic and existential resources that would make her a fit citizen of the secular state.

Granted: such a recommendation does not a political theory make. However, Freud’s prescription of an “irreligious education” makes clear that he, like Kant before him, at this moment believed that “infantilism was destined to be surmounted” and that he stood “justified in a hope for the future”⁹⁶ domain over which rationality alone would

⁹⁵ Ibid, 43

⁹⁶ Ibid, 53

rule. He so embraces a gradualism tantamount to the repudiation of revolution (whence the very popular—and very probably correct—view that Freud regarded rebellion as no more than an instance of mania⁹⁷ that could only result in the eventual restitution of patriarchy in an even more consolidated form:

We may insist as often as we like that man's intellect is powerless in comparison with his intellectual life, and we may be right in this. Nevertheless, there is something peculiar about this weakness. The voice of the intellect is a soft one, but it does not rest till it has gained a hearing. Finally, after a countless succession of rebuffs, it succeeds. This is one of the few points on which one may be optimistic about the future of mankind, but it is in itself a point of no small importance. And from it one can derive yet other hopes. The primacy of the intellect lies, it is true, in a distant, distant future, but probably it is not an infinitely distant one. It will presumably set itself the same aims as those whose realization you expect from your god (of course within human limits—so far as external reality, necessity, allows it), namely the love of man and the decrease of suffering. This being so, we may tell ourselves that our antagonism is only a temporary one and not irreconcilable. We desire the same things, but you are more impatient, more exacting, and—why should I not say it?—more self-seeking than I and those on my side. You would have the state of bliss begin directly after death; you expect the impossible from it and you will not surrender the claims of the individual. Our God, logos, will fulfill whichever of these wishes nature outside us allows, but he will do it very gradually, only the unforeseeable future, and for a new generation of men. He promises no compensation for us, who suffer grievously from life.⁹⁸

In *Future of an Illusion*, we thus meet with a strange Freud, one who seems to place himself squarely in the Enlightenment tradition and to indulge unselfconsciously in the thesis of the predestination of historical progress: our God, reason. Of course, one should

⁹⁷ See in conjunction with this point *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego* and “Mourning and Melancholia.”

⁹⁸ *Ibid*, 54

not be too hasty with this conclusion that, in *Future of an Illusion*, Freud prostrates himself senselessly before the altar of teleological history. A reasonable hermeneutical perspective is that Freud's imaginary interlocutor, who remains vociferously unconvinced at the closure of the text, is nothing but Freud's own skepticism in externalized form and thus that he is not so single-minded in his view.

It is but three years later that we find Freud fully sobered, awakened from the dream of progress and the objections of the "opponent" of *The Future* confirmed. Science may be no illusion, but that it can serve as guarantor of the good and just life—"the love of man and the decrease of suffering"—in the way in which Freud outlines above surely is. Read in the afterglow of its immediate predecessor, *Civilization and its Discontents* take on an elegiac appearance and one hears, beneath the stridency of the opening notes by which Freud resumes his war against monotheism, the undertone of lamentation. This text is not the space of battle but a burial ground over which Freud indirectly eulogizes *The Future* and the high price that his thinking has had to pay in the form of the sacrifice of the enlightenment faith in progress so that the psychoanalytic theory of ontogenetic history could give rise to a properly psychoanalytic history of civilization.⁹⁹ In *Civilization and its Discontents*, it is not only religion that is shifted from the category of an illusion (beliefs generated in service of wish-fulfillments) to that of delusion (beliefs of this variety that are in conflict with reality qua experiential evidence), but the notion of progress itself. No gain in civilization, which, in *The Future*,

⁹⁹ While Freud's intention in *Civilization* is "to show that the price that we pay for our advance in civilization is a loss of happiness through the heightening of the sense of guilt" (134), I here intend to call upon—and foreshadow my own treatment of—Benjamin, who attuned towards justice for the collective rather than the happiness of the individual, emphasizes the "high price our customary mode of thought will have to pay for a conception of history that avoids any complicity with the [teleological] concept of history," (SW4: 393; "On the Concept of History," X).

Freud associated with scientific mastery, leads to the satiation of human need or to a transcendence of social antinomies. What appears *prima facie*, in the technologically revolutionized conditions of life, as advancement is merely the effectuation of the same longings in new form and thus the repetition of denial.¹⁰⁰ Freud “observes that this newly-won power over space and time, this subjugation of the forces of nature, which is the fulfillment of a longing that goes back thousands of years, has not increased the amount of pleasurable satisfaction which they may expect from life and has not made them feel happier. From the recognition of this fact we ought to be content to conclude that power over nature is not the only precondition of human happiness, just as it is not the only goal of cultural endeavor.”¹⁰¹ In other words, the work of instrumental, scientific reasoning is indubitably a form of development, but it makes progress only in the direction of the domination of nature, which is in no way correlative to gains in human happiness or in social justice.

That said: it is partial to treat *Civilization and its Discontents* solely in relation to its immediate predecessor, which is to say to pronounce its significance only in terms of the negation of the enlightenment. For *Civilization and its Discontents* has its own positive project, hence a positive tone whose timbre is defined by the return of myth. *Civilization* turns away from *Logos*, the god of the enlightenment invoked within *Future of an Illusion*, so that *Mythos*, in the form of Eros and Thanatos, might be summoned once again.¹⁰² In abandoning the dream of pure political reason, Freud retrieves and

¹⁰⁰ Freud sardonically pronounces (and underplays) the false contentment of the prosthetic God (92) as “the enjoyment obtained by putting a bare leg from under the bedclothes on a cold winter night and drawing it in again,” (88).

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 88

¹⁰² “The fateful question for the human species seems to me to be whether and to what extent their cultural development will succeed in mastering the disturbance of their communal life by the human instinct of aggression and self-destruction. It may be that in this respect precisely the present time deserves a special

places centrally the thought fundamental to *Totem and Taboo*: that society depends upon authority in excess of what can be rationally justified. Yet, where in *Totem and Taboo* the social tie appeared as inescapably violent, *Civilization* attempts to think sociality as a form of mutuality—in terms of an obligation that, while it does not admit of grounding (not even the instrumental grounding of mutual advantage), might nonetheless be sustained solidaristically. “Civilization is a process in the service of Eros, whose purpose is to combine human single individuals, and after that families, then races, peoples and nations, into one great unity, the unity of mankind. Why this has to happen, we do not know; the work of Eros is precisely this. These collections of men are to be libidinally bound to one another. Necessity alone, the advantages of work in common, will not hold them together.”¹⁰³ Such is Freud’s mythic reprisal of what Kant referred to as the unsocial sociability of men: our need of one another matched only by our need to be free of one another.¹⁰⁴

While Freud returns to the normative power of myth-making, redeeming the excess upon which society depends in and as Eros, the question of justice remains at an absolute remove. Civilization holds open the possibility that there might be a life lived in solidarity with others, but this is, for Freud, a material question that can only be answered

interest. Men have gained control over the forces of nature to such an extent that with their help they would have no difficulty in exterminating one another to the last man. They know this, and hence comes a large part of their current unrest, their unhappiness and their mood of anxiety. And now it is to be expected that the other of the two ‘Heavenly Powers’ [p. 96f], eternal Eros, will make an effort to assert himself in the struggle with his equally immortal adversary. But who can foresee with what success and with what result?” (145).

¹⁰³ 108.

¹⁰⁴ “The two urges, the one toward personal happiness and the other towards union with other human beings must struggle with each other in every individual; and so, also, the two processes of individual and of cultural development must stand in hostile opposition to each other and mutually dispute this ground. But this struggle between the individual and society is not a derivative of the contradiction—probably an irreconcilable one—between the primal instincts of Eros and death. It is a dispute within the economics of the libido, comparable to the contest concerning the distribution of libido between ego and objects; and it does admit of an eventual accommodation in the individual, as, it may be hoped, it will also do in the future of civilization, however much that civilization may oppress the life of the individual to-day,” (141).

by the future. Freud will no longer indulge in prophecies of reconciliation, rational or otherwise, for the aspiration to the supersessionist overcoming of antinomies is antipathetic to the *ethos* of psychoanalysis, whose charge is to render ambivalence bearable both in the sense of tolerable and in the sense of articulable; to transform ambivalence from a condition of paralytic ambiguity into the engine of a new form of meaning-making.

Yet, even as psychoanalysis would seem to call for such an emancipatory project of critical mythmaking at the level of the collective action, it is, per Freud, only possible on the part of the individual. For social mythmaking is, as Freud sees it, necessarily oppressive; we must be left to find our own way. It is here that we reach the limits of psychoanalysis as social-political theory, its insight into the on-going attachment to the de-legitimized authority of the past hence the indefeasible fragility of post-absolutist social space calling for a practice that psychoanalysis cannot itself provide. As Freud remarks in the final pages of *Civilization*, which is ultimately a piece of theory and not a piece of therapy:

I hasten to come to a close. But there is one question which I can hardly evade. If the development of civilization has such a far-reaching similarity to the development of the individual and if it employs the same methods, may we not be justified in reaching the diagnosis that, under the influence of cultural urges, some civilizations, or some epochs of civilization—possibly, the whole of mankind—have become ‘neurotic’? An analytic dissection of such neuroses might lead to therapeutic recommendations which could lay claim to great practical interest. I would not say that an attempt of this kind to carry psycho-analysis over to the cultural community was absurd or doomed to be fruitless. But we should have to be very cautious and not forget that, after all, we are only dealing with analogies and that it is dangerous, not only with men but also with concepts, to tear them

from the sphere in which they have originated and been evolved. Moreover the diagnosis of communal neuroses is faced with a special difficulty. In an individual neurosis we take as our starting-point the contrast that distinguishes the patient from his environment, which is assumed to be 'normal'. For a group all of whose members are affected by one and the same disorder no such background could exist; it would have to be found elsewhere. And as regards the therapeutic application of our knowledge, what would be the use of the most correct analysis of the social neuroses, since no one possesses authority to impose such a therapy upon the group? But in spite of all these difficulties, we may expect that one day someone will venture to embark upon a pathology of cultural communities.¹⁰⁵

In the foregoing passage, Freud cites what are, to his eyes, two seemingly insuperable obstacles to the undertaking of a cultural psychoanalysis: the absence of a normative backdrop against which a critical diagnosis could obtain and the absence of an authoritative figure who could, in turn, implement the measures yielded by such a diagnosis. Concerning the first impediment: in the dissipation of the illusion of rational progress upon which the ethico-political hopes of *The Future* hinged, what also evaporates is the image of a better future. The diagnosis of a culture as pathological requires a conception of the good and just life, but, from within the space of mundane history, i.e., the position to which the materialist critic must assiduously restrain herself, the only means of nature's cultivation that we know is that of its mortification. To put this otherwise: the idea of a universal history from a psychoanalytic point of view is that of (patriarchal) domination for this is the only transhistorical condition of humankind.

Concerning the second impediment to cultural psychoanalysis: the provision of group therapy requires that there be someone in the position to offer it. It requires not only epistemological authority—a knowing that, given Freud's repudiation of *The*

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 144

Future's rational hopefulness, would be soothsaying—but political authority as well—the power to impose the therapeutic programme upon the social totality. What cultural psychoanalysis seems to entail is the prophet as political leader, one who could undertake the revolution of the material conditions of life by which oedipal individuality and the fraternal solidarity that is its correlate could be overcome in order to induce a mood of critical self-reflection. But this means that cultural psychoanalysis is not simply, from the outset, a troubled undertaking, but a deeply paradoxical one. Modernity is, according to Freud, unable to free itself from the de-legitimized authority of personal and collective prehistory. To demand the emergence—or rather the reemergence—of a Mosaic figure would be to breathe life into the spectre of sovereign authority, our haunting by which is the crux of our pathology and yet potentially the very condition of our health inasmuch as solidarity only obtains in and through the memory of shared oppression. In short, cultural psychoanalysis would, in its undertaking, violate the very self-authorization—of each individual and so the polis constituted by a plurality of autonomous individuals—that it would aim to support.

We thus arrive, in the psychoanalytic interrogation of democratic modernity, at a stalemate.

CHAPTER III

SEEING PAST THE FREUDIAN PROHIBITION ON CULTURAL PSYCHOANALYSIS: WALTER BENJAMIN'S "WEAK MESSIANISM" & THE CRITICAL REDEMPTION OF HISTORY

In this chapter, I will argue that Walter Benjamin can fruitfully be read as the direct inheritor of the theoretical and methodological *aporias* inherent in the proposition of cultural psychoanalysis. My suggestion is that Benjamin undertakes the therapeutic treatment of culture and, in so doing, shows the way past the bind of modernity at which Freud himself halted. Benjamin's texts, formed at the site where criticism and prophecy meet, enact what Freud's teach.¹⁰⁶ As critical historiography, Benjamin's "weak messianism" attempts to read the text of history against its ideological authorship. As prophetic revelation, Benjamin's writings open, from out of the past, the dimension of futurity that would seem, *prima facie*, to be closed in the cultural writings of Freud.¹⁰⁷ In other words, it is my thesis that Benjamin's poetic-philosophic ambition was to constitute, within his texts, a therapeutic space through which the utopian promise of collective life beyond domination might be renewed in and through the recovery of the history of its betrayals.

Benjamin's strategy in dealing with the Freudian problematic is two-fold, corresponding to Freud's bipartite prohibition, and can be parsed accordingly along both

¹⁰⁶ "The seer's gaze is kindled by the rapidly receding past. That is to say, the prophet has turned away from the future; he perceives the contours of the future in the fading light of the past as it sinks before him into the night of times. This prophetic relation to the future necessarily informs the attitude of the historian as Marx describes it, an attitude determined by actual social circumstances.

"Should criticism and prophecy be the categories that come together in the "redemption" of the past? How should the critique of the past (for example in Jochmann) be joined to the redemption of the past?" (SW4: Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,' 407).

¹⁰⁷ Within *Totem and Taboo*, there is an interesting exception. Freud mentions, in passing, two alternative social forms: a homosexual interim that may have preceded the murder of the father and an archaic matriarchy. As Freud presents it, while we must acknowledge the existence of the latter insofar as there are records of "great mother-goddesses," a society based on the authority of women yet remains unimaginable. Matriarchy is admitted but unincorporated into Freud's conjectural history (149).

theoretical and practical (or methodological) axes. These two issues, the inability to conceive of a political form beyond domination and so proffer a theory of justice, and the (necessary) absence of sovereign authority, which becomes for Benjamin as it was for Freud an issue of method or technique, must ultimately be resolved in tandem.

Nonetheless, we can allow, for a moment, the dialectical unity of diagnosis and treatment to come apart so as to obtain a clear picture of the anti-progressive philosophy of history that abides between Benjamin and Freud and which we will see repeated in the third chapter in Cavell's conception of the ordinary. As I indicated in the introduction, it is this "messianic" philosophy of history grounds Benjamin and Freud's isomorphic practices of allegoresis: the interpretive process of decontextualization by which they seek to undo the unity of texts so that, within a fragmented field, the dialectical image may emerge. By allegoresis, I mean to disambiguate a hermeneutical approach to texts from allegory *qua* mode of textual production. Where allegory manufactures literary symbols, allegoresis regards the literal surface structure of a text as a dissimulation and aims at discovering the hidden meaning that is concealed behind this surface. It was such an approach that I attributed to Freud's dismantling of the discursive structure of fraternity. While the original object of such a hermeneutics is scriptural, Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* secularizes this theological practice. In its secular form, revelation is not the goal. Rather the aim is to understand the motivation behind the work of concealment. Before we can turn to a fuller treatment of allegoresis, it is first necessary to establish the conditions under which Benjamin develops this practice of physiognomic reading and how it is that he deals with the theoretical problem of a lack of a normative backdrop against which to establish a cultural psychoanalysis. I thus

suspend the methodological question of allegoresis till section three of the current chapter, treating first of the historical circumstances of Benjamin's critical hermeneutics and his solution to the Freudian deadlock as well as the philosophy of history that supports his interpretive practice.

Beginning from the theoretical axis and the Freudian prohibition on imagining justice: Benjamin's critical treatment of culture roots itself in a utopianism negative in character. In a fragment from the highly instructive "Paralipomena to 'On the Concept of History,'" Benjamin echoes the Freudian prohibition on investigating the future yet simultaneously identifies the critical force of materialist historiography as precipitated in and by its prophetic regard *for the past*. For Benjamin, prophecy consists not in the revelation of the form of the future, but rather in detecting the revolutionary potential as yet unrealized in the text of "victor history."

The historical materialist who investigates the structure of history performs, in his way, a sort of spectrum analysis. Just as a physicist determines the presence of ultraviolet light in the solar spectrum, so the historical materialist determines the presence of a messianic force in history. Whoever wishes to know what the situation of a "redeemed humanity" might actually be, what conditions are required for the development of such a situation, and when this development can be expected to occur, poses questions to which there are no answers. He might as well seek to know the color of ultraviolet rays.¹⁰⁸

From within the space of profane history, we cannot conceive of a form of life beyond the order of domination. To refuse to help oneself to such normative speculation is simply to take seriously the problem of ideology: that it has no outside, as Althusser put it, or, as Freud said, that we lack an "elsewhere." The concepts of justice to which we have recourse and which form the basis of any positive utopian vision represent the

¹⁰⁸ SW4: "On the Concept of History," 402; Thesis XVIIa

sedimentation of a history of violence and so simultaneously conceal and symbolically re-affirm in their operation the violence by which they came about. The attempt to specify the situation of a “redeemed humanity” and elaborate a theory of justice reiterates, at a higher level, the ideological precepts through which we live.

Given that history is but “one single catastrophe,”¹⁰⁹ which Benjamin defines in the *Arcades* as “having missed the opportunity,”¹¹⁰ justice remains, in itself, unimaginable. Yet any chance of seizing the material of the present as that through which to actualize a life truly befitting humanity depends upon a sensitivity to the particular form of failure that is as-yet on-going in the present. It is in the Marxist concept of “classless society” that Benjamin gains the critical lens by which to bring into view the pathology particular to his modern moment. Hence, Benjamin’s utopianism, while negative in character, is not to be thought, as Agamben does in his *Potentialities*, as an abstract or universal negation. While we are precluded from elaborating a theory of justice, a critical conception of justice can nonetheless be obtained through the determinate negation of the injustice definitive of the present.¹¹¹ In identifying “classless society” as the emblem of life beyond domination, Benjamin registers that which eluded

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 392; Thesis IX.

¹¹⁰ AP, 474; N10, 2.

¹¹¹ The realization of non-absolutist social space as class society is but the betrayal of the revolution in that it reinstates relations of domination through the legal sanctioning of exploitative labor for the sake of private profit. Economic inequality is not incidental to capitalism, but installs a practice of victimization at its very structural core, a fact that liberal ideology dissimulates inasmuch as it obscures the historical genesis of the economic apparatus (primitive accumulation) and the distribution of citizens and goods therein as well as the political fatefulness of one’s positioning within said apparatus. It further conceals the coercive appropriation of surplus value from labor upon which the development of the massive power of contemporary technology, privately owned and existing for the sake of private profit, depends. Where the late Marx devoted himself to the development of political economy, the early Marx was concerned to document not just the systemic injustice of capitalism in which a strata of society is exploited for the sake of another, but the compounding of this injustice in its invisibility both to those who are its victims and those who benefit therefrom. Marx registered the unrepresentability of this structural harm—the unconsciousness of this objective injustice and the attendant distortion of everyday experience in contradistinction to the contradictions of economic theory that he exposed under the heading of commodity fetishism—in the underdeveloped notion of ideology and its “inverting” effect.

Freud even in his revelation of rational progress as bearing in its deepest interior a regressive trend. Freud's devotion to the exposition of individual psychology and the examination of sociological phenomena in terms of this psychology left him blind to the fact that, in the crisis of authority, the social world, emancipated from its ecclesiastical domination, fell under the spell of "another system of doctrines (that)...from the outset took over all the psychological characteristics of religion—the same sanctity, rigidity and intolerance, the same prohibition of thought—for its own defense."¹¹² In the defeat of religious dogma that supplied the ideological support for a network of personal domination, capitalist logic became itself such an authority, gaining interpretive hegemony over the ideals of freedom, equality, and fulfillment. The scientific, technological progress that Freud championed in *The Future* as boundless and inevitable stands as the signature of this new mythology. In the secular religion of progress, worshipped in the image of the novel commodity, the urgency for the revolutionary demand to realize, in this moment, a life truly befitting humanity is stilled, satiated in and by the illusion of the future and its perfections. What could be achieved only through undertaking politics in the present, i.e., through the work of individuals, is displaced onto the field of progressive history, the natural school in which instrumental reasoning receives its tutelage.

However, while it is the case that Benjamin discovers a political orientation in Marx with which he is able to overcome the Freudian prohibition on imaging justice, he nonetheless remains more closely aligned, philosophically and methodologically, with Freud. To the first generation of Critical Theorists it had become apparent that economic analysis was insufficient to account for the intransigence of social institutions and

¹¹² FI, 51

Benjamin himself, although a self-declared Marxist, is uninterested in furthering the concept of class. His method, in other words, is not that of the critique of political economy. Rather, after his exposure to Marxist theory at the close of the 1920's, Benjamin's primary interest is in the "phantasmagoria" of mass culture, i.e., the phenomenon that covers over the reality of class whilst inculcating the kind of subjectivity prone to fascistic fascination. In his theory of the everyday life of capitalism as phantasmagoric, Benjamin transforms the idea of mass life into a critical—rather than a merely descriptive—concept. Where Marx thought that mass production would produce class consciousness, the isolation wrought by the division of labor surmounted by the very mechanism by which it was created, from Benjamin's historical vantage point it is clear that the capitalist production of culture engenders the simultaneous fragmentation of society and the total determination of the individual by exchange-value, resulting in a state of unconscious conformity.¹¹³ It is not that the relations of production appear to Benjamin as irrelevant, but rather that the relations established—suspended, really—in consumption are, on his assessment, the first line of defense in the fight for the oppressed past, the site from which good tidings of a future beyond domination might proceed. Benjamin thus takes it that paramount to the project of emancipation is wresting culture from the grip of capital where capital is understood as a totalizing context of storytelling about the past and its victims, the present in which the weak messianic power is at work, and the future, i.e., the empty time of justice. Thus, if we are to characterize Benjamin's ambitions to expropriate culture from the expropriators as "revolutionary," it is in the attenuated sense of freeing the cultural treasure from its commodity-character

¹¹³ "Capitalism was a natural phenomenon with which a new dream-filled sleep came over Europe, and, through it, a reactivation of mythic forces," (AP, 391; K1a, 8).

and hence disrupting the attitude of consumption in which the individual is attached to the very (economic) force that maintains her in subjugation.¹¹⁴ Benjamin identifies the problem of political modernity as primarily a neurotic failure of self-authorization, i.e., a matter of desire, rather than straightforwardly an issue of domination or, for that matter, of reason.

Having offered this preliminary treatment of the theoretical means by which Benjamin's lifts the ban on psychoanalysis as cultural critique, I turn now to sketch the social conditions under which Benjamin develops and takes up his therapeutic practice. In the last chapter, I argued that, while Freud lacks the theoretical resources by which to offer a normative critique of political modernity, psychoanalysis is nonetheless about authority—that is its topic—and thus that it bears crucially on democratic theory. The problem of psychoanalysis is the paradox of individual self-authorization in which the self is, at its crux, constituted in and through its relation to external authority and thus remains unable to detach itself from this prehistoric authority. In the myth of the primal horde, Freud identifies the essentially ambivalent constitution of post-absolutist social space and shows that, garnered upon and caught within this ambivalent complex, society is prone to deformation in one of two directions: threatened on the one hand, with disaggregation and, on the other, with the absorption of nascent individuality back into the primitive psychology of the horde. In his analysis of the social-world defined by the commodity-form, Benjamin demonstrates that fragmentation and totalization are not opposed but rather the two moments by which modern society is constituted. In other

¹¹⁴ As Benjamin wrote to Scholem in May of 1926: "The task is not to decide once and for all, but to decide at every moment...I am not ashamed of my 'early' anarchism but consider anarchist methods to be useless, Communist 'goals' to be nonsense and non-existent. This does not diminish the value of Communist action one iota, because it is the corrective for its goals and because there are no meaningfully *political* goals," (*The Correspondences of Walter Benjamin*, 300-1).

words, Benjamin, in his politicization of psychoanalysis casts the practice of redemptive criticism in a very particular light: specifically as fascism in reverse.

As Benjamin sees it, the promise of a life through which there could be developed the robust psychic resources definitive of individuality and upon which the constitution of a democratic republic depends has remained unfulfilled and that this is to be accounted for in terms of objective social structures rather than in terms of the private prehistory of individuals. Where Marx saw the alienation and isolation of modern life in terms of the relations of production, Benjamin conversely sees this isolation as effectuated in and through the culture of consumption. Furthermore, the cultural objects upon which the individual sustains herself and which she consumes in isolation are mass products of capitalist firms. Totalization thus occurs automatically in and through this economic mechanism: what is common between individuals occurring as unconscious conformity.

As Marx argued in his concept of commodity fetishism, the exchange-principle deprives objects of their natural (use-) value and instead imposes upon them a false equality, calculating value in terms of the object's fungible worth on the market. What is hidden behind this reductive calculus is the real social inequality that is constitutive of commodity production. Benjamin, defining the commodity from the position of desire, re-thinks this equalization wrought by reification in terms of the suppression of heterogeneity and the occlusion of class domination. Collectives form haphazardly, lacking any principle beyond the procurement and consumption of commodities.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁵ As Susan Buck-Morss writes of Benjamin's conception of mass life: "Here was a fundamental contradiction of capitalist-industrial culture. A mode of production that privileged private life and based its conception of the subject on the isolated individual had created brand new forms of social existence—urban spaces, architectural forms, mass-produced commodities, and infinitely reproduced "individual" experiences—that engendered identities and conformities in people's lives, but not social solidarity, no new level of collective consciousness of their commonality and thus no way of waking up from the dream in which they were enveloped, (*The Dialectics of Seeing*, 361).

Within the mass, equality reigns inasmuch as each individual, defined only in relation to the commodity, is rendered anonymous, stripped of all other qualities that would distinguish her. The mass represents the false reconciliation of social antinomies, preventing the formation of solidarity whilst instating a “repressive” or “malicious egalitarianism.”¹¹⁶ Benjamin thus reformulates the Freudian problem of de-individuation in the following Marxist inflected-way: “a curious paradox: people have only the narrowest private interest in mind when they act, yet they are at the same time more than ever determined by the instincts of the mass.”¹¹⁷

While Freud’s mythic recasting of the primitive social conditions of modernity was focused—and hence restricted—in terms of his interest in the landscape of private experience as established in the detachment of the familial sphere from communally-constituted space, Benjamin takes up the deformation of privatized experience from the perspective of objective social structures. In the era of mechanical reproducibility, the individual’s uptake of social products is isolated from the historical conditions of their production, rendering these objects anonymous and, therefore, mythic. This economic approach to the analysis of the distortion of private experience enables Benjamin to give a historically specific account of the possibility of political tyranny latent in the pathology of the “dreaming-collective” and the phenomenon of fascism that Freud *avant-la-lettre* examined in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*, the companion piece, as it were, to *Totem and Taboo*. Benjamin writes that

Considered apart from the various classes which join in its formation, the mass as such has no primary social significance. Its secondary significance depends on the ensemble of relations through which it is constituted at any one time and

¹¹⁶ See Adorno’s “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda.”

¹¹⁷ SW1: “One Way Street,” 451.

place. A theater audience, an army, the population of a city comprise masses which in themselves belong to no particular class. The free market multiplies these masses, rapidly and on a colossal scale, insofar as each piece of merchandise now gathers around it the mass of its potential buyers. The totalitarian states have taken this mass as their model. The *Volksgemeinschaft* aims to root out from single individuals everything that stands in the way of their wholesale fusion into a mass of consumers. The one implacable adversary still confronting the state, which in this ravenous action becomes the agent of monopoly capital, is the revolutionary proletariat. This latter dispels the illusion of the mass through the reality of class.¹¹⁸

The mass, i.e., the agglomeration of atomistic individuals, is the pivot upon which authoritarianism turns. For capitalist culture breeds the anaesthetized and reactive subjectivity upon which the effectiveness of fascist aesthetics depends and, as Benjamin sees it, fascism is only possible under the inevitable conditions of capitalist economic crisis. Fascism arises, in these moments of socio-economic upheaval, as a counter-revolutionary force, preserving class-society while claiming to overcome it in the renewal of tradition conceived as a homogeneous, ancestral, and organic basis for politics. Nazism, the “revolution from above” and, of course, the form of fascism that Benjamin himself confronted, leaves untouched the exploitative structural core of capitalism and yet unifies the masses through the promulgation of the notion of the “soul” of the nation and a totalitarian politics based on racial purity and cultural conformity.

In other words, fascism synthetically generates bonds between the members of the polis, the *Volksgemeinschaft* standing as the negative image of genuinely democratic solidarity.

¹¹⁸ AP, 370-1; J81, 1a.

The increasing proletarianization of modern man and the increasing formation of masses are two sides of the same process. Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses—but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life. The violation of the masses, whom fascism, with its Fuhrer cult, forces to their knees, has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into serving the production of ritual values.¹¹⁹

The foregoing quotation is pulled from Benjamin's *Artwork* essay, by my lights the only essay in which he attempts to generate an image of political solidarity in the present.

(This effort of the *Artwork* essay is one to which we will return.) The urgency by which Benjamin seeks to politicize cultural objects is a function of this insight that the fate of modern democratic societies is ineluctably bound up with culture, i.e., the customary use of the "apparatus," a term narrowly used in the foregoing quotation to refer to film. Yet culture and economy—artwork and commodity—can no longer, in the era of technological reproducibility, be strictly parsed. In the case of film, the mandarin fantasy of a distinction between culture and economy—i.e., culture as *Kultur*—is definitively displaced. While the initial secularization of art in its bourgeois-era instantiation maintained the artwork's aura and, in preserving its autonomous status, rendered culture a surrogate for the religion that could no longer hold its faith, the second industrial revolution results in the situation in which culture, realized through the machine and subject to mass dissemination, is itself the instrument by which the material arrangement of society is established and, as advertisement, slogan, bluff, etc., replaces religion as the

¹¹⁹ SW4: "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility," 269.

constitutive force and interpreter of the popular imagination. In its commodification and technologization, culture becomes the naturo-historical matter of the everyday. Against the economistic Marxist, Benjamin demonstrates that the culture of late capitalist modernity is simultaneously material and symbolic and cannot be treated undialectically as epiphenomenal. While film is the exemplary instance of culture so transformed, the “apparatus” referred to in the foregoing quotation stands equally for all technologies that establish the dimensions of the modern public sphere. As culture is now the formative milieu through which there is achieved the organization of individuals, the political mobilization of the collective is bound up with the use of this apparatus. Inasmuch as it determines and hence directs the energies of the collective, the tendencies of this apparatus determine the outcome of capitalist crisis: whether or not property relations will be preserved or subject to total transformation.

Culture, now defined by this liberal fusion of art and technology, is, for Benjamin the battleground over which the fate of political modernity must be waged. Inasmuch as culture has an ineliminably historical character, the restoration of which is necessary to its demythification, the question of justice descends to Benjamin, within secularized social space, specifically as a question of tradition, which is to say as an issue of the rightful authority of the past in and for the present. Benjamin turns to a treatment of mass culture not simply to revile it as the utter degradation of subjectivity and hence to pronounce the dark fate of modernity as does Adorno. “Pathos of this work: there are no periods of decline;”¹²⁰ for “overcoming the concept of ‘progress’ and overcoming the

¹²⁰ He continues “Attempt to see the nineteenth century just as positively as I tried to see the seventeenth in the work on *Trauerspiel*. No belief in periods of decline,” (AP, 458; N1, 6). Benjamin’s redemption of the Baroque Mourning Play will figure centrally in the discussion of allegory.

concept of ‘period of decline’ are two sides of one and the same thing.”¹²¹ In contradistinction to his protégé and pre-eminent critic, Benjamin seeks to redeem “low art” by exposing that its oppressive character harbors, at the same time, its emancipatory potential: to show that, inasmuch as we already have everything that we need at our disposal, the achievement of justice is prolonged for no other reason than that we allow it to be. Against fascism’s alleged proletarianization of culture, Benjamin’s revolutionary recasting of the cultural treasure undoes the “‘enshrinement,’ or ‘apologia’ (that) is meant to cover up the revolutionary moments in the course of history,” exposing within the cultural treasure the discontinuity and heterogeneity, “the peaks and crags, which offer footing for those who wish to move beyond this view.”¹²² Posed between the unreflective celebration of the populism of modern mass culture and Adorno’s critical negation of it, Benjamin’s work undertakes the emancipation of the commodity *qua* utopian wish-image of the collective from the ideological network within which it is ensnared. “Every age must strive anew to wrest the tradition away from a conformism that is working to overpower it.”¹²³ Wrestling tradition away from its domination by the status quo—for Benjamin, the divestment of its commodity-character—would be, at the same time, the overcoming of the attitude of consumption or, to invoke the master-metaphor of the *Arcades Project*, the awakening of the collective from its dream-state. For Benjamin as for Freud, there is no futurity without desire and so the possibility of a just social order requires that desire first be liberated from exchange-value.

In shifting the emphasis from production onto consumption; from the scientific discourse of political economy to concrete historical experience; and from consciousness-

¹²¹ Ibid, 460; N2, 5

¹²² SW4: “Central Park,” 162.

¹²³ SW4: “On the Concept of History,” 391; Thesis VI.

raising to the vicissitudes of desire: Benjamin succeeds in expanding the Marxist concept of commodity fetishism into the totality of everyday life. On Benjamin's analysis, not only is the working-day subsumed completely under the capitalist form of production, but the "free-time" of consumption as well. As he writes in the 1921 fragment "Capitalism as Religion:" "Capitalism is the celebration of a cult sans rêve et sans merci [without dream or mercy]. There are no 'weekdays.' There is no day that is not a feast day, in a terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us; each day commands the utter fealty of each worshipper."¹²⁴ Benjamin inverts the platitude that, in capitalism, every day is a workday to that of the permanence of festival in which even our leisure hours are dominated by this mode of production.

The master-metaphor of Benjamin's phenomenology of the unfolding of everyday life in and under capitalism of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries is that of "phantasmagoria" and it is in and through this concept that he develops his micrological brand of social criticism. With the term phantasmagoria, Benjamin invokes the pre-cinematic screen practice popular in nineteenth century Paris. In the magic lantern shadow-play, images were projected onto a wall by means of the illumination of glass plates inscribed with said images and the passage of these beams of light through magnifying lenses. The exhibitors of *fantasmagorie*, prime among them Étienne Gaspar Robert, devised elaborate techniques for producing motion and "special" effects, using several different lanterns at once so as to create composite, moving images. As Charles Musser observes of *fantasmagorie*, its practitioners "played on the simultaneous realization that the projected image was only an image and yet one that the spectator

¹²⁴ SW1: "Capitalism as Religion," 288.

believed was real.”¹²⁵ With the term phantasmagoria, Benjamin designates and elaborates the surrealism of lived experience in commodity culture, a surrealism that was the effect of the divorcement of products from their social sites of production—the decoupling of subjectivity and objectivity, for, as Benjamin saw it, the commodified social products of the nineteenth century (not to mention that of the twentieth) took on a supersensible aspect, not just at the conceptual level, but phenomenologically as well, despite the fact that they were the manufactured products of human labor. The commodity was defined by its “aura,” appearing simultaneously as a mundane object and yet, at the same time, as one whose value and meaning was irreducible to its concrete properties.

The subject of this book [*Arcades Project*] is an illusion expressed by Schopenhauer in the following formula: to seize the essence of history, it suffices to compare Herodotus and the morning newspaper. What is expressed here is a feeling of vertigo characteristic of the nineteenth century’s conception of history. It corresponds to a viewpoint according to which the course of the world is an endless series of facts congealed in the form of things. The characteristic residue of this conception is what has been called the “History of Civilization,” which makes an inventory, point by point, of humanity’s life forms and creations. The riches thus amassed in the aerarium of civilization henceforth appear as though identified for all time. This conception of history minimizes the fact that such riches owe not only their existence but also their transmission to a constant effort of society—an effort, moreover, by which these riches are strangely altered. Our investigation proposes to show how, as a consequence of this reifying representation of civilization, the new forms of behavior and the new economically and technologically based creations that we owe to the nineteenth century enter the universe of a phantasmagoria. These creations undergo this “illumination” not only in the theoretical manner, by an ideological transposition,

¹²⁵ *The Emergence of Cinema*, 24

but also in the immediacy of their perceptible presence. They are manifest as phantasmagorias.¹²⁶

In the use of this term, Benjamin declares his position in a history of allegorical social critique that begins with Plato's cave. However, in theorizing social mystification in terms of a screen-practice, Benjamin, of course, offers a materialist diagnosis of the source of this illusion and also indicates that disillusionment requires a—let us say—spectrology, i.e., a self-conscious engagement with this aesthetic practice rather than turning away from it as but mere illusion and nothing more. Awakening, for Benjamin, occurs dialectically in and through our dreams, which are not to be regarded as pure falsehood, but rather seen as products of material circumstances, their distortions measured as indexes of their truth.¹²⁷

For Benjamin, the phantasmagoria—the fragmented, disordered, and transient nature—of modern experience had its material roots not only in the invisibility of the social conditions of commodity production, but, as well, in the accelerated rate of technological innovation and production in modernity. This acceleration of the rate of production was itself sanctified in enlightenment theology as an inevitable course of progress by which there would be yielded the material abundance and gratification, which we now, having lost our fidelity to another world, could only hope to achieve by ourselves. On Benjamin's analysis, the commodity achieves the status of the icon, embodying and confirming the ideal of progress into which the utopian hopes of the

¹²⁶ AP, 14; "Expose of 1939," Introduction.

¹²⁷ "The new, dialectical method of doing history presents itself as the art of experiencing the present as waking world, a world to which that dream we name the past refers in truth. To pass through and carry out *what has been* in remembering the dream!—Therefore: remembering and awakening are most intimately related. Awakening is namely, the dialectical, Copernican turn of remembrance," (AP, 389; K1, 3). Fascinatingly, Benjamin goes so far as to liken his method, specifically as it is realized in *One-Way Street*, to Palladio's trompe l'oeil *Vincenza* (See his letter to Gershom Scholem from September 18, 1926 in the *Correspondences of Walter Benjamin*).

collective have been diverted. And the unmistakable mark of that icon, of its promise of a full future, is newness. “Newness is a quality independent of the use value of the commodity. It is the source of that illusion of which fashion is the tireless purveyor.”¹²⁸ Commodity culture promises a form of happiness that it cannot deliver in that it is newness itself that is desired; thus what proposes itself as the object of fulfillment condemns us to the hell of repeated unfulfillment. “Novelty (is) an attribute of all that is under sentence of damnation.”¹²⁹ Just as, for Freud, the finding of an object is always the re-finding of it, Benjamin’s “dreaming-collective” is, in the form of novelty, fated to the eternally selfsame.¹³⁰

Benjamin’s appropriation and deployment of Marx significantly alters the field of Marxist social criticism in that it de-couples cultural critique from the teleological project of consciousness-raising. Indeed, it is arguably Benjamin’s central contribution to Marxist theory to have exposed the conceptual complicity between consciousness-raising and capitalist ideology. Both rest on the uncritical acceptance of the idea that history is a field of progress to be measured in terms of the ever-increasing rationalization of the

¹²⁸ AP, 22; “Exposé of 1939,” III

¹²⁹ Ibid, 22; “Expose of 1939,” III. “In the same period [of the collapse of the Second Empire], the most dreaded adversary of this society, Blanqui revealed to it, in his last piece of writing, the terrifying features of this phantasmagoria. Humanity figures there as damned. Everything new it could hope for turns out to be a reality that has always been present; and this newness will be as little capable of furnishing it with a liberating solution as a new fashion is capable of rejuvenating society. Blanqui’s cosmic speculation conveys this lesson: that humanity will be prey to mythic anguish so long as phantasmagoria occupies a place in it,” (Ibid, 15; “Exposé of 1939,” Introduction).

¹³⁰ “It is one of the tacit suppositions of psychoanalysis that the clear-cut antithesis of sleeping and waking has no value for determining the empirical form of consciousness of the human being, but instead yields before an unending variety of concrete states of consciousness conditioned by every conceivable level of wakefulness within all possible centers. The situation of consciousness as patterned and checkered by sleep and waking need only be transferred from the individual to the collective. Of course, much that is external to the former is internal to the latter: architecture, fashion—yes, even the weather—are, in the interior of the collective, what the sensoria of organs, the feeling of sickness or health are inside the individual. And as long as they preserve this unconscious, amorphous dream configuration, they are as much natural processes as digestion, breathing, and the like. They stand in the cycle of the eternally selfsame, until the collective seizes upon them in politics and history emerges,” (AP, 389-390; K1, 5).

world. Where mainstream Western Marxism develops class-consciousness as the counter-concept to ideology, Benjamin dialectically posits “actualization” in dialectical opposition to phantasmagoria. Where phantasmagoria is an elaboration of everyday experience under and in capitalism, actualization designates the disruption of such experience qua totalizing context of storytelling in which the past (the victims), the present (the switch point in which the weak messianic power is always at work), and the future (the horizon on which empty time and justice are in context). Actualization designates an interpretive mode in which the oppressed past becomes legible in its interpenetration with and disruption of the present symbolic and political order. Benjamin shifts the terms of Marxist criticism from the register of consciousness to that of a hermeneutics in which the unconscious utopian aspirations of the collective are only to be read indirectly off of concrete cultural objects.¹³¹ Max Pensky elegantly articulates this methodological turn.

Even in its inversion of Hegel’s idealism, Marx’s materialist historical theory preserves Hegel’s insistence on the logical structure of development, and therefore generates the significance of historical appearances without any real engagement with those appearances themselves. To realize the critical power of

¹³¹ As Habermas has argues in his lecture “Consciousness-Raising and Redemptive Criticism,” Benjamin’s method and goal cannot be characterized in terms of consciousness-raising.¹³¹ Benjamin indeed synonymizes phantasmagoria/actualization in terms of the “awakening of the dreaming-collective,” but, like Lynn Hunt’s references to the “political unconscious,” the notion of a collective unconscious/consciousness is merely a metaphorical shorthand, an abstraction, for what is read off of culture, low and high, discursive and not. Benjamin’s practice is, like Freud’s, ultimately hermeneutical in nature, all the world seen as a text as is made clear in essays such as “On Language as Such and on the Language of Man” and “The Mimetic Capacity.” Where ideology critique moves in the medium of self-reflection and has, as its goal, political revolution, Benjaminian redemptive criticism aims at the recovery of, what Habermas deems “semantic potential,” i.e., its release from the cultural products in which it is crystallized, a release that is simultaneously the destruction of false immediacy. While Habermas regards this semantic potential as a metaphysical property with which humans are imbued at the beginning of creation and which, while not subject to augmentation, is prone to decay, I interpret “semantic potential” psychoanalytically in terms of the desiderative capacities/work of the imagination. Such an interpretation is available to Habermas, who nonetheless insists on reading Benjamin as a failed metaphysician even as he defines “semantic potential” as “the power to interpret the world in terms of human needs” (50), a phrase that indirectly registers that thinking is itself powered by unfulfilled desire.

Marx's basic insight – the primacy of the material dimension of history, and the ideological occlusion of just this fact in capitalist modernity – Benjamin proposes a methodology entirely alien to Marxist political economy...borrow(ing) an aesthetic technique of the literary avant-garde, the French Surrealists, and to apply that method beyond the aesthetic sphere, into the practice of critical historiography.¹³²

While I will make argument with this claim that Benjamin's methodology is "entirely alien" to Marx, Pensky's analysis of Benjamin's phantasmagoria as the concretization of Marx's theory of ideology and the basis for a micrological analysis of the social physiognomy. And it is here that we begin to approach Benjamin's methodological solution to the second prong of Freud's bipartite prohibition against cultural psychoanalysis. As Dora taught Freud, the emancipation of desire from its melancholic consignment in and to the everyday cannot be accomplished abstractly through the provision of more or better knowledge, but instead requires working-through. De-reification must be performed on the concrete particulars in which desire is sedimented and through which it receives its hallucinatory gratification. Only thereby can the illusion of progress be dispelled and the collective awoken from the dream-filled sleep of capitalism. It is such a liberation of the imagination that Benjamin undertook in the *Arcades Project*, the controlled fragmentation of which was meant to both mimetically capture the transient, dissociative, and disordered experience definitive of the Paris of the 19th century and hence of the European world and to demonstrate the "commodity" as the totalizing form of this otherwise anarchic condition.

¹³² "Time and Method," 185

Benjamin's re-purposing of Marxist theory is undertaken for the sake of such liberation, activating or, to use Benjaminian terminology, actualizing the abstract, which is to say empty, concept of justice that he takes over from Marx.

A central problem of historical materialism that ought to be seen in the end: Must the Marxist understanding of history necessarily be acquired at the expense of the perceptibility of history? Or: In what way is it possible to conjoin a heightened graphicness [Anschaulichkeit] to the realization of Marxist method? The first stage in this understanding will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moments the crystal of the total event.¹³³

In this conviction that the graphicness of history is paramount to the project of emancipation abides Benjamin's deep kinship with Freud. The impetus to render the past legible and hence to particularize historical failure in the mosaic form of the *Arcades* is a function of the insight that, while nothing less than the demand for absolute justice is adequate to the preservation or actual achievement of a life lived in freedom, equality, and solidarity with others, such a project requires content. The systemic injustice of class society must not simply be known speculatively; if overcoming it is to become the basis for social practice in the present, it must be felt as an injustice, visible in and at the level of everyday life. Benjamin's methodological innovation, which he refers to in the foregoing passage as that of "montage," linking himself to Freud, is meant to address this problem of how to make the concept of "classless society" concrete and hence to render it an imperative in and for the present.

So we reach our first conclusion: Benjamin, whose vision exceeds the Freudian focus upon the bourgeois interior to take in the character of objective social structures

¹³³ AP, 461; N2, 6.

and yet is fine-grained enough to retain, against the logical structure of development emphasized by Marx, the physiognomic details constitutive of culture, is able to push past the Freudian prohibition on imagining justice and offer not a theory of the neurosis endemic to civilization *per se*, but that specific to democratic, secular modernity, a specificity without which there can be no genuine diagnosis and hence no possibility of a therapeutic address of culture. Benjamin generates a political “psychoanalysis” in securing, through the Marxist critique of capital, an orientation towards justice understood as classless society. The reading that I will offer of Benjamin’s unique contribution to democratic theory could be put thus: it is not that the Marxist understanding of liberation from capitalist modernity requires enrichment through a Freudian sensitivity to the robust and multifarious nature of desire, but rather that, if the psychoanalytic hermeneutics and its mythic reconstruction of modernity is to gain normative grip, it requires a supplement in the form of a Marxist pre-occupation with the oppressive structures of capitalist modernity. Hence the accomplishment of this chapter needs to be three-fold: (1) to approach Benjamin as himself a systematic thinker in a redemptive vein; (2) to offer a viable form of Freudo-Marxism; (3) to forward the aim of this dissertation to offer a model of democratic solidarity that is consonant with the essentially paradoxical nature of democratic community.

The State of Emergency

It may be considered one of the methodological objectives of this work [*The Arcades Project*] to demonstrate a historical materialism which has annihilated within itself the idea of progress. Just here, historical materialism has every reason to distinguish itself sharply from bourgeois habits of thought. Its founding concept is not progress but actualization.¹³⁴

¹³⁴ AP, 460; N2, 2.

Having provided this preliminary sketch of Benjamin's diagnosis of the pathology that has overtaken post-absolutist social space, I now turn to elaborate the theoretical basis upon which Benjamin undertakes his treatment of the dreaming collective, the "technique of awakening" expressed in the foregoing quotation as the "actualization" which "ignites the explosive materials that are latent in what has been."¹³⁵ If the ideal of "classless society" is to make a claim on us in the present, it must be rendered concrete. Given that the material of its embodiment is that which descends to us from out of the past and this material represents but the crystallized remains of a history of violence, the problem that we confront is how to inherit and transmit a tradition tainted by barbarism such that it serves the purposes of overcoming injustice in the present. It is thus a theory of history that underlies Benjamin's interpretive practice. This theory achieves its most mature articulation in "On the Concept of History," a critique of historicism, enlightenment teleology, and Western Marxism in one. While each thesis monadologically encapsulates the meaning of the essay as a whole, Thesis VII, in particular, provides a clear picture of the central problematic of Benjamin's philosophy of history:

Addressing himself to the historian who wishes to relive an era, Fustel de Coulanges recommends that he blot out everything he knows about the later course of history. There is no better way of characterizing the method which historical materialism has broken with. It is a process of empathy. Its origin is the indolence of the heart, the *acedia*, which despairs of appropriating the genuine historical image as it briefly flashes up. Among medieval theologians, *acedia* was regarded as the root cause of sadness. Flaubert, who was familiar with it, wrote: "*Peu de gens devineront combien il a fallu être triste pour ressusciter Carthage.*" The nature of this sadness becomes clearer if we ask: with whom does historicism

¹³⁵ Ibid, 392; K2, 3.

actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers. The historical materialist knows what this means. Whoever has emerged victorious participates to this day in the triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate. According to traditional practice, the spoils are carried along in the procession. They are called “cultural treasures,” and a historical materialist views them with cautious detachment. For in every case these treasures have a lineage which he cannot contemplate without horror. They owe their existence not only to the efforts of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the anonymous toil of others who lived in the same period. There is no document of culture which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is never free of barbarism, so barbarism taints the manner in which it was transmitted from one hand to another. The historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from this process of transmission as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.¹³⁶

Historicism is guilty of the naïve presumption that one can simply shed their historically determined vantage point to enter into the spirit of an earlier age. But as there is no unmediated access to the world, past or present, the seeming receptivity of historicism accomplishes but the unreflective imposition of its concepts on the matter of history. Denying the situatedness of its own perspective, the historicist method unwittingly yields the past as the inchoate form of the present. “Historicism rightly culminates in universal history”¹³⁷ in which the unruly and heterogeneous material of the past is gathered under the concept of progress, i.e., taken up from the allegedly higher vantage point of the present. While enlightenment teleology renders explicit what remains latent in the medieval approach, it is, to Benjamin’s eyes, no less pernicious. In totalizing the material

¹³⁶ SW4: “On the Concept of History,” 392; Thesis VII.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 369; Thesis XVII.

of the past as the narrative reconstruction of the condition of possibility of this present, teleological history exists as an *apologia*, confirming the rights of the status quo and excusing historical injustice. With this promotion of the present as the apogee of civilization thus far, the teleological perspective justifies the sufferings of the past as necessary casualties in the educative process of humankind's self-realization and further suggests that any inequality that persists in this moment is an unfortunate but inescapable necessity for an even better future. Such forgiveness of past barbarism through its instrumentalization is a form of complicity. Furthermore, in taking up the past from the self-vindicating perspective of the present, that which does not cohere with the logical structure of development is dismissed as a meaningless aberration, senseless "natural" suffering. The imposition of teleological order upon the matter of the past extrudes from the field of history precisely that element that could contest the dominant powers of the present, dismissing that which fails to cohere with the logical structure of development. What results is the doubling of the occlusion of the already anonymous victims of history.

If the thesis of rational progress is one in which Freud momentarily indulged but which remains, nonetheless, anathematic to psychoanalytic thinking, it appears to play a constitutive role for Marx. Or, it does so, at least, for a certain Marx, as his social ontology contains a perspective alternative to that of the progressivist one. This tension in Marx's philosophy of history is from whence the strange situation that his inheritors include those such as Habermas, who maintains a deep commitment to the idea of social evolution, and, at the same time, by those such as Adorno and Benjamin, who reject such

enlightenment progressivism as part of the bourgeois ideological formation.¹³⁸ This doubling of the Marxist identity is an issue to which we will have to return, but which, for now, I bracket to elaborate the predominant character of the Marxist philosophy of history against which Benjamin develops his own critical hermeneutics. As Matthias Fritsch has argued in his book, *The Promise of Memory: History and Politics in Marx, Benjamin, and Derrida*, Marx's philosophy of history, as it is articulated in "The Eighteenth Brumaire," conforms to the basic teleology schema.¹ While, for Marx, the struggle against and the perpetual reinstitution of oppressive political structures determines the movement of history, this movement is essentially progressive. That said: the history of class struggles appears as a history of progress only retrospectively in and through its fulfillment in the communist revolution. As in the Hegelian philosophy of history, it is solely from the vantage-point of its completion that the slaughter-bench of history and its piecemeal content receives the rational form of a narrative drama of the self-creation of humankind. Hence the claim that, in the concept of classless society, Marx secularized messianism.

As Fritsch argues, while Marx, still operating under the ban on prophecy, provides no content to the notion of classless society, he does stipulate one essential condition: that of an active forgetting. It would be false to assert that Marx is himself forgetful of the history of violence by which capitalism came about. In the midst of the economic analysis of *Capital*, "The Working Day" arises as a massive monument upon which is etched a chronicle of suffering. Marx inscribes, in these pages, case after case of archival research attesting to the atrocities of industrialization and undertaking the

¹³⁸ As Susan Buck-Morss points out, in *The Dialectics of Seeing*, the idea of natural history is "a montage" as is "expressed far more concretely in the German Language which itself builds words by montage," (160).

impossible memorialization of the anonymous and so ungrievable laborers whose toil made possible the plentitude of the present. Yet, in treating the proletarian revolution as the culmination of the historical dialectic, Marx vindicates this history of suffering inasmuch as it is treated as part of the necessary educative process by which humankind reached the level of historical consciousness and technological development necessary for the establishment of a just social order. The past is ultimately to be left behind and revolutionary action depends upon an active form of forgetting in which the materials of the past are superseded in their incorporation into present consciousness. In an ironical appropriation of the biblical adage, Marx claims that the communist revolution will only be so in severing itself from the “dead”—or the de-authorized—spiritual—or spectral—authority of the past. Revolutionary action is intrinsically future-directed even if this future by which it gains its orientation is held in suspension on the horizon as empty time. Hence, like Kant and Hegel before him, Marx instrumentalizes the sufferings of the past as unavoidable casualties of progressive history.

If, for this Marxism, the proletarian revolution accomplishes the business of the past and so settles its accounts, the dead left to bury the dead, for Benjamin, conversely, there can be no justice in a present that ceases to mourn the violence of history. The debt that we owe to the anonymous others of history is one that cannot be repaid in full and so our accounts with and for the past do not admit of satisfaction. For Benjamin, our debt to the dead is one of remembrance and in such consists the “weak messianic power...on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply”¹³⁹ for what it requires is the withdrawal of our investment in the future; the sacrifice of our faith in progress and so the hopefulness intrinsic to a future-oriented life. This is the “high price

¹³⁹ SW4: “On the Concept of History,” 390; Thesis II.

that our thinking has to pay.”¹⁴⁰ For non-absolutist social space, there is no basis for community save in the memory of oppression: solidarity can only be had with and through the dead and so the past can never be laid to rest. Where, for idealist ethics, an ethical position in the present cannot be obtained without faith in progress, Benjamin, in a reversal of this position, argues that such faith is tantamount to an invidious forgetfulness in which we willfully render ourselves deaf to the complaints of the past, left unable to undertake the burden of injustice that is our inheritance. “It is only for the sake of the hopeless ones that we have been given hope.”¹⁴¹ In this light, Benjamin issues an ethico-political imperative, charging the present with the task of redeeming the sufferings of history.

History is not simply a science but also and not least a form of remembrance. What science has ‘determined,’ remembrance can modify. Such mindfulness can make the incomplete (happiness) into something complete, and the complete (suffering) into something incomplete. That is theology; but in remembrance we have an experience that forbids us to conceive of history as fundamentally atheological, little as it may be granted us to try to write it with immediately theological concepts.¹⁴²

In this way, Benjamin attempts to restore a “genuinely messianic face...to the concept of classless society.”¹⁴³ Yet it is expressions such as these that contribute to the general aura of mystification and hushed cultishness in which Benjamin’s corpus and the scholarly meditations upon it remain submerged.¹⁴⁴ Even perspicuous readers of Benjamin such as

¹⁴⁰ Ibid, 390; Thesis II.

¹⁴¹ SW1: “Goethe’s Elective Affinities,” 356.

¹⁴² AP, 471; N8, 1.

¹⁴³ SW4: “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” 403.

¹⁴⁴ Arendt’s introduction to *Illuminations* is here a primary example. Jürgen Habermas, for his part, offers, in his “Consciousness-Raising and Redemptive Criticism” a ludicrously literal-minded interpretation of the famously frustrating 1st Thesis, charging that Benjamin took upon himself the impossible task of synthesizing the opposed doctrines of mysticism and Marxism, a project which could not but fail.

Pensky insist on a literal reading of Benjamin's epigrammatic 1st Thesis in which he images a philosophic device in which the dwarf of theology secretly guides the puppet of historical materialism.¹⁴⁵ Such literalism has lead readers, Habermas perhaps foremost amongst them to interpret Benjamin's philosophy as staked on the synthesis of the opposed doctrines of messianism and Marxism, a project that could not but fail.¹⁴⁶ Such readings are insufficiently attuned to Benjamin's allegorical mode of expression as well as to the tension native to Marx's philosophy of history and from whence its critical potential. This practice of actualization by which the sufferings of history come to propose themselves as incomplete, as still on-going hence still in need of redress, can and should be de-theologized (although perhaps it does not, for that, amount to a method in the scientist sense of the term). It is in this de-theologization of Benjamin's weak messianism that there opens up an alternative Marxist legacy and the one which converges with Freud's practice of redemptive reading.

While much Marxism secularizes eschatology though the ideal of classless society, in placing this utopia as the culmination of an ineluctable natural-historical process, it assigns to history a task that rightly devolves upon a politics of memory. According to Benjamin, revolution should not be conceived as the outcome and

¹⁴⁵ "The elimination of theory in favor of method, a project that is utterly distinctive of Benjamin's intellectual trajectory over the course of the *Arcades Project*, has more behind it than Benjamin's views on the objective nature of historical truth and his distrust of the distorting effects of the intentional subject. There is, of course, no real method without theory; no possible rule for proceeding with the historical material without some intellectual commitments that determine in advance the overall significance of the historical material, the possibility of their recovery, the purpose of their construction into images, and the shocking effect that images are intended to deploy. In fact the 'theory' that Benjamin had in mind, and that he was anxious to conceal behind the historical material itself, was in fact 'theory' in its oldest sense: theology," ("Time and Method," 181).

¹⁴⁶ "(Benjamin) attempts to integrate this doctrine [i.e., his theory of experience] with the basic assumptions of historical materialism... This attempt must fail, because the materialist theory of social development cannot be simply fitted into the anarchistic conception of *Jetztzeiten* which intermittently come crashing through fate as if from above... My thesis is that Benjamin did not realize his intention to bring together enlightenment and mysticism," ("Consciousness-Raising," 51).

consummation of a process of development, but rather as the breaking open of the continuity of homogeneous time. A genuinely revolutionary moment would not amount to a contribution to or a completion of the progressive succession of historical epochs; it would consist in the interruption and dispersion of its triumphal procession. “Marx says that the revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake.”¹⁴⁷ The criticality of Benjamin’s historiography is garnered in and through approaching the field of history as a scene not of ineluctable progress but of the catastrophic repetition of the failure of the revolution. Benjamin’s weak messianic remembrance does not totalize and render whole; it aims instead to divest the past—and hence the present—of the coherence that reason, comprised of the “concepts of the ruling class,” retrospectively imposes upon it, shattering the false unity of the text of victor history so that we might remember otherwise:

The course of history, seen in terms of the concept of catastrophe, can actually claim no more attention from thinkers than a child’s kaleidoscope, which with every turn of the hand dissolves the established order into a new array. There is profound truth in this image. The concepts of the ruling class have always been the mirrors that enabled an image of “order” to prevail.—The kaleidoscope must be smashed.¹⁴⁸

Reason functions here, as in Freud’s theory of secondary revision, not as a critical agency but as a force of censorship that imposes order upon material intrinsically disparate, fragmented, at odds with itself, thereby silencing or repressing that which exists in conflict with present authority. Both Benjamin and Freud, in the face of unforgivable suffering, cannot confirm the present as the unavoidable outcome of a self-developing

¹⁴⁷ SW4: “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” 402.

¹⁴⁸ SW4: “Central Park,” 164.

entelechy. They argue instead that what appears from the hegemonic self-understanding of the present as a linear process of growth and self-transformation, is, in reality, a series of catastrophes. History abandoned by eschatology and religious guarantee has proven itself to be but the compulsive repetition of the ever self-same—not the space of the achievement of human aspirations but rather the site of their perpetual denial.

This is the fundamental methodological insight hence the characteristic definitive of redemptive criticism. It is only from taking up history as catastrophe, which is to say from the perspective of the element that but suffers history's weight, that critical traction within the present can be gained. The hermeneutics of Freud and Benjamin (and, as we shall see, of Cavell, as well) arise in and through the attunement to that which, from the dominant perspective appears as senseless and hence that which, in its becoming legible, has the power to disorder the foreclosed field of experience. That which cannot be incorporated into the logic of development remains as a crack within the totalized field of history in which the historical materialist can gain a foothold in the otherwise impenetrable terrain of ideology. It is from this marginal and precarious position that the materialist critic is able to brush history against the grain, standing simultaneously in and against her own time.

In this vision of history in which the unrealized futures of the past jut into and disrupt the self-evidence of the present, there is an essential homology between the philosophies of history held by Benjamin and Freud, which, in turn, engenders their shared methodology. In the last chapter, I was able to elicit Freud's philosophy of history through the discussion of the family romance and its disclosure of the archaic-utopian character of desire. Desire unsatisfied gives rise to fantasy, which, in turn, exists as a

secret record of unfulfillment. Benjamin, however, provides the context in which this insight can be generalized in and as a principle of historical understanding. As I see it, the philosophy of history that Freud posited at the ontogenetic level, for which the concept of *Nachträglichkeit* (deferred understanding) is determinative, and which served as the basis for his critical hermeneutics, is rearticulated by Benjamin, given application to the collective, in and as *Vergegenwärtigung*, meaning literally “to make present” and translated as “actualization.” The concepts of deferred action and actualization condense philosophies of history in which the present and the past are not self-enclosed, isolated moments within the continuum of empty time, but rather are locked in material struggle with one another, dialectically co-determinative. “Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each ‘now’ is the now of a particular recognizability.”¹⁴⁹ The past is not safely behind us. Rather “the facts are something that just happened to us; to establish them is the affair of memory.”¹⁵⁰ While the text of history has ideological authorship, this narrative construction of the past as a teleologic process aimed at the provision of our historical now, carries within itself its constitutive outside, i.e., the “toil of anonymous others” whose obscurity is the very condition of the present order of representation, politically and symbolically, and which the historical materialist aims to redeem.

“Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger.”¹⁵¹ For Benjamin and Freud, what of the past rightly exercises authority over the present accedes to legibility not when the present is shoring up its identity—as in Kant’s idea of universal

¹⁴⁹ AP, 463; N3, 1.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid, 389; K1, 2.

¹⁵¹ SW4: “On the Concept of History,” 391; Thesis VI.

history—but rather in the crisis in which political and symbolic forces heterogeneous to the prevailing powers emerge. This is what Benjamin calls “the state of emergency.”

The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule. We must attain to a conception of history that accords with this insight. Then we will clearly see that it is our task to bring about a real state of emergency, and this will improve our position in the struggle against fascism. One reason fascism has a chance is that, in the name of progress, its opponents treat it as a historical norm.—The current amazement that the things we are experiencing are “still” possible in the twentieth century is *not* philosophical. This amazement is not the beginning of knowledge—unless it is knowledge that the view of history which gives rise to it is untenable.¹⁵²

In this ironic appropriation of Carl Schmitt, Benjamin argues that the critical moment is that in which the *status quo* of history itself threatens to be preserved. For as the principle of history and of historical order is domination, the barbarism that is fascism is not out of synch with the present in which it appears, but is simply the latest instantiation of the tradition of oppression that is humankind’s patrimony. The materialist critic attunes herself to those moments of emergency in which the present fails to coincide with itself not so that the conflict can be resolved and the self-identity of the text or history re-established (as in, say, Gadamerian hermeneutics), but so that crisis can be preserved and intensified into paradox, rupturing the easy self-evidence of common understanding. “Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts, but their arrest as well. Where thinking suddenly comes to a stop in a constellation saturated with tensions, it gives that constellation a shock, by which thinking is crystallized as a monad. The historical materialist approaches a historical object only where it confronts him as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a messianic arrest of happening, or (to put it

¹⁵² Ibid, 392; Thesis VIII.

differently) a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past.”¹⁵³ In the disruption of the identity of the present, there is gained a glimpse of an alternative order. The legibility of these heterogeneous, revolutionary elements that emerge in the present depends upon their coming into connection with images of the oppressed past: the prior moments of crisis in which the revolution was upon us but was nonetheless betrayed. Just as Benjamin defines the dialectical image through which the truth of history is visible “as the involuntary memory of redeemed humanity,”¹⁵⁴ Freud describes the *nachträglich* temporal structure of historical understanding in the Wolf Man case study:

At the age of one and a half the child receives an impression to which he is unable to react adequately; he is only able to understand it and to be moved by it when the impression is revived in him at the age of four; and only twenty years later, during the analysis, is he able to grasp with his conscious mental process what was going on in him. The patient justifiably disregards the three periods of time, and puts his present ego into the situation which is so long past.¹⁵⁵

“No state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It becomes historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years. The historian who proceeds from this consideration ceases to tell the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. He grasps the constellation into which his own era has entered, along with a very specific earlier one.”¹⁵⁶ That which was, at the time of its occasion, illegible falls outside the domain of history; yet, as the absence through which conscious history erects itself—unincorporated precisely for the sake of unified experience—it is integral to this history. In this orientation to the pre- or a-historic, Freud and Benjamin coincide, for, while non-narratable, it persists nonetheless

¹⁵³ Ibid, 396; Thesis XVII.

¹⁵⁴ SW4: “Paralipomena,” 403.

¹⁵⁵ “From the History of an Infantile Neurosis,” 45n.

¹⁵⁶ SW4: “On the Concept of History,” 397; Thesis A.

as a memory-trace, latent in the present. “Nothing that has ever happened should be regarded as lost to history.”¹⁵⁷ It is paramount to the materialist critic to “overcome the error of supposing that the forgetting we are familiar with signifie(s) a destruction of the memory-trace...in mental life nothing which has once been formed can perish—that everything is somehow preserved and that in suitable circumstances (when, for instance, regression goes back far enough) it can once more be brought to light.”¹⁵⁸ In the repetitive structure of history, a repetition to which we are doomed by our very failure to ‘react adequately,’ the repressed past will find its reoccurrence and activation within the present moment of emergency. What is emergent in this moment is the “*memoire involuntaire*” of the dialectical image.

It is only in its activation of the threat of the repetition of catastrophe, i.e., the failure to achieve revolutionary fulfillment, that the past becomes traumatic—or, as Benjamin says, causal. This is the retrospective origination of the repressed, an insight essential to psychoanalysis but perhaps the point upon which it is most often misunderstood. The repressed is not a pre-existent positivity that emerges once the veil of amnesia has been ripped off; the “tradition of the oppressed” has no content that could subsequently be integrated into the text of victor history. But what then precisely is redeemed? It is but the knowledge of the on-going failure to achieve fulfillment; that our past has not been overcome; that what we take as progress is but the repeated failure of desire; that we have not yet entered history. “The dialectical image is an image that flashes up...The redemption enacted in this way and, solely in this way, is won only

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 390; Thesis III.

¹⁵⁸ CD, 69

against the perception of what is being irredeemably lost.”¹⁵⁹ In the dialectical image, fulfillment shows itself only under the sign of its negation just as, for Freud, infantile desires, as prehistoric, do not admit of direct representation, but interlay themselves in the matrices of the dream-work, causing its fragmented, mosaic structure. In a highly eroticized passage from the *N convolute*, reprised as well in “On the Concept of History,” Benjamin offers what stands, for me, as an emblematic expression of the dialectical image:

It is one of the most noteworthy peculiarities of the human heart...that so much selfishness in individuals coexists with the general lack of envy which every present day feels towards its future.” This lack of envy indicates that the idea we have of happiness is deeply colored by the time in which we live. Happiness for us is thinkable only in the air that we have breathed, among the people who have lived with us. In other words, there vibrates in the idea of happiness (this is what that noteworthy circumstance teaches us) the idea of salvation. This happiness is founded on the very despair and desolation which were ours. Our life, it can be said, is a muscle strong enough to contract the whole of historical time. Or, to put it differently, the genuine conception of historical time rests upon the image of redemption.¹⁶⁰

Happiness receives its (imaginary) form only in and through the experience of loss; it thus has an intrinsically retrograde “orientation,” gaining its embodiment through its very failure to obtain. Desire calls us back to the mournful scene of the betrayed past even as it strives for the correction of this past in and through its very reproduction. The Benjaminian image of happiness, as in Freud’s family romance, is eminently dialectical in character; in the determinate negation of past denial, there is indicated the non-space of the edenic whose impossible restoration drives life forward. The past is both an object of

¹⁵⁹ SW4: “Central Park,” 183.

¹⁶⁰ AP, 479; N13a, 1.

condemnation and from whence issues the promise of fulfillment, the oppressed past demanding the redemption by which it could be made whole. This on-going human failure to realize justice is itself the melancholy truth of history and this mournful knowledge is the basis of Benjaminian solidarity: from whence “the strength to shake off the burden [of the cultural treasure accumulating on the back of humanity] so as to take control of it.”¹⁶¹

Naturgeschichte and the Allegorical Intention

Allegorical intention is, as natural history, as the earliest history of signifying or intention, dialectical in character.¹⁶²

For Benjamin, the realization of a just relation between the present and the past and, by implication, the relevance of the Marxist tradition in and for his own era, occurs in and is determined by—and itself dialectically determines—the present “critical moment” in which the “status quo threatens to be preserved.”¹⁶³ The appropriation of the material of the past is properly undertaken only in relation to and for the sake of overcoming that which imperils justice in the present. In the “Copernican revolution in historical perception” performatively undertaken in Benjamin’s work, the past is not a “fixed point” over which the present “concentrates the forces of knowledge.”¹⁶⁴ “Politics attains primacy over history”¹⁶⁵ in that the truth of history is not something static and eternally assured. Rather, the truth of history is inextricably bound up with the perilous critical

¹⁶¹ SW3: “Edward Fuchs,” 268.

¹⁶² OGT, 166.

¹⁶³ “Definitions of basic historical concepts: Catastrophe—to have missed the opportunity. Critical moment—the status quo threatens to be preserved. Progress—the first revolutionary measure taken,” (AP, 474; N10, 2).

¹⁶⁴ Ibid, 389; K1, 2.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid, 389; K1, 2.

moment in which it is read. While Benjamin inherits the Marxist problem of the formation of political agency in and against the totalizing context of capital, he nonetheless roots solidarity, the commitment to the discovery of what, in practice, emancipatory politics might mean and require, in the development of a critical practice of remembrance.

I accordingly take myself to have fulfilled the first of my three aims: to demonstrate that Benjamin is a thinker in a redemptive vein. Benjamin has a normative theory of modernity and this theory dictates his approach to the past as a whole. Having contextualized and motivated Benjamin's departure from canonical Marxism, I will now proceed to show that Benjamin's philosophy of history is not antinomic to Marxism, but rather represents the realization of an alternative Marxist legacy and one which is in essential consonance with Freudian analysis. Latent within Marx's social ontology, as it is articulated in "The Labour Process," chapter 7 of *Capital*, as well as *The German Ideology*, is a philosophy of history radically opposed to the progressivist view that Marx, at times, also endorsed. Those readers of Benjamin that interpret the first thesis literally and hence view the gambit of Benjamin's philosophy as abiding in the synthesis between the two opposed doctrines of messianism and Marxism, are insufficiently attuned to Benjamin's allegorical mode of expression as well as insensitive to the tension that defines Marx's own conception of natural-history. It is from out of this under-developed dimension of Marxist theory that arises Benjamin's practice of montage, citationality, and allegoresis: the techniques by which he handles the material past such that the dialectical image is actualized within its field. The allegorical concept of *Naturgeschichte*, in which the opposing concepts of nature and history are treated in their dialectical co-constitution,

has, as its deepest implication, the “eddy in the stream of becoming,”¹⁶⁶ that, for Benjamin is the proper understanding of origin (*Ursprung*), a phenomenon that we have just examined through the grammar of “On the Concept of History” and under its *Arcades Project* title of “actualization.”

My concern here is not to adjudicate between differing interpretations of Marx, but rather to establish a “mono-Benjaminianism” by means of the demonstration that, in the modern world as framed by Marx, Benjamin found a natural object for the materialist hermeneutics that he had already developed in his early examination of Baroque allegory. Establishing this affinity between the Marxist assessment of historical experience under capital and what Benjamin discovered in the German Baroque will, at the same time, show from whence the possibility of a marriage, not of mysticism and a late-won Brechtian political consciousness,¹⁶⁷ but rather between the redemptive criticism of Freud and the normative sociology of Marx thus allowing me to fulfill the second of my promissory notes.

¹⁶⁶ “Origin [*Ursprung*], although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis [Entstehung]. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis. That which is original is never revealed in the naked and manifest existence of the factual; its rhythm is apparent only to a dual insight. On the one hand it needs to be recognized as a process of restoration and re-establishment, but, on the other hand, and precisely because of this, as something imperfect and incomplete. There takes place in every original phenomenon a determination of the form in which an idea will constantly confront the historical world, until it is revealed fully, in the totality of its history. Origin is not, therefore, discovered by the examination of actual findings, but it is related to their history and their subsequent development. The principles of philosophical contemplation are recorded in the dialectic which is inherent in origin. This dialectic shows singularity and repetition to be conditioned by one another in all essentials,” (OGT, 46).

¹⁶⁷ As Habermas writes, “(Benjamin) attempts to integrate this doctrine [i.e., his theory of experience] with the basic assumptions of historical materialism... This attempt must fail, because the materialist theory of social development cannot be simply fitted into the anarchistic conception of *Jetztzeiten* which intermittently come crashing through fate as if from above... My thesis is that Benjamin did not realize his intention to bring together enlightenment and mysticism,” (“Consciousness-Raising,” 51).

Part I: Naturgeschichte in Marx, Lukács, and Benjamin

Marx's social ontology offers a philosophy of history not just alternative to but radically opposed to the progressivism of eschatological Marxism. This argument internal to Marx's own thinking fully emerges in the intensification of the already dialectical relation at play in his concept of *Naturgeschichte*. Fundamental to Marx's philosophy was a dispute with the undialectical binarism by which the tradition handled the categories of the natural and the social, categories integral to the identity of modern philosophy and as well as to modern institutions. Against this binary framing, Marx erected his own social ontology in which labor, at the same time thoroughly natural and thoroughly social, was the central structuring concept.

Labour is, first of all, a process between man and nature, a process by which man, through his own actions, mediates, regulates and controls the metabolism between himself and nature. He confronts the materials of nature as a force of nature. He sets in motion the natural forces which belong to his own body, his arms, legs, head and hands, in order to appropriate the materials of nature in a form adapted to his own needs. Through this movement he acts upon external nature and changes it, and in this way he simultaneously changes his own nature. He develops the potentialities slumbering within nature, and subjects the play of its forces to his own sovereign power... A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax. At the end of every labour process, a result emerges which had already been conceived by the worker at the beginning, hence already existed ideally. Man not only effects a change of form in the materials of nature; he also realizes his own purposes in those materials.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁸ *Capital*, 283-4.

For Marx, the social is but nature that exists in excess of itself, this surplus taking the form of human intentionality. Driven by need and able to represent the means of its fulfillment, the human being purposefully sets to work upon the world. Labor or “productive consumption” is undertaken so as to produce, from out of the “raw” material at hand, new materials suited to the needs of a specific historical moment. In this needy laboring in the present, the human being alters the conditions under which her future labor will take place. In the re-fashioning of outer nature, the human being effectuates a transformation in her own nature. This is because, while external nature appears as the passive basis of human labor, it nonetheless conditions human activity. Thus, in self-consciously transforming the outer environment and establishing new conditions, the human being also changes the means by which her need can and will be satisfied. For Marx (as for Freud), the alteration of the aims and objects of need is tantamount to the transformation of our own inner nature insofar as it alters the way in which we perceive and represent our needs hence our fundamental character. The experience of need is bound up with the representation of the means of its gratification and so is determined by the specifics of the world in we find ourselves and the instruments that we have at our disposal. It could be said that, inasmuch as the transformations of outer nature are dialectically bound up with changes in inner nature, the human being and her world grow up together. Therefore, need—that which, as the “most natural,” would seem to be the most intransigent, the most unresponsive, hence non-negotiable aspect of human existence—sets into motion this dialectic of enrichment, serving as the source of its own transformation. As Cavell remarks, a remark which evidences the materialist dimension of Cavell’s thinking and which we will re-visit in some detail in the upcoming chapter, “it

should not be surprising that what is necessary is contingent upon something.

Necessaries are means.”¹⁶⁹

Nature, the ever selfsame, is not strictly opposed to the historical, but rather, in the form of its human surplus, opens the dimension of history which betokens the intentional transformation of social conditions. Furthermore, outer nature, as the material upon which the human being sets to work, is itself saturated with the labor of past generations.¹⁷⁰ History qua human labor merges into the setting.¹⁷¹ The past is yet present in and as the naturo-historical landscape of the everyday, and, in setting to work upon this terrain, human labor activates the past at the same time as it molds its future. At the site of present labor, the past and the future are wedded together.

This alchemy of the labor process by which nature is transformed into history and history is crystallized in and as nature is from whence Marx’s formulation of the commodity as “dead labor,” commodity fetishism the concealment of the social processes by which commodities are produced. Under capitalism, the network of activity in which individuals are embedded and through which commodities are produced is obscured and, accordingly, value takes on the illusory appearance of being a natural attribute. Moreover, the socio-economic system, which is nothing more than the effect of our own collective effort, appears as an independent natural reality over which we have no

¹⁶⁹ CR, 119-120

¹⁷⁰ As Marx develops his social ontology and consequent philosophy of history to comprehend the vicissitudes of external nature, Freudian psychoanalysis is concerned to comprehend the transformations that inner nature exacts upon itself when the external world cannot be made to produce its satisfaction. It investigates this denial and subsequent modification of need not as the result of the blind operations of the impersonal power of capital, but rather as it occurs within the bourgeois private sphere.

¹⁷¹ “The nature of the creation which absorbs history back into itself, is quite different from the nature of Rousseau... what is peculiar about the baroque enthusiasm for landscape is particularly evident in the pastoral. For the decisive factor in the escapism of the baroque is not the antithesis of history and nature but the comprehensive secularization of the historical in the state of creation. It is not eternity that is opposed to the disconsolate chronicle of world-history, but the restoration of the timelessness of paradise. History merges into the setting,” (OGT, 91-2).

control. Marx thus likens, in *The German Ideology*, consciousness under the material conditions established by capitalism to the “animal consciousness” of pre-scientific man. In this discussion of “animal consciousness,” the natural has an entirely negative character, defined as the other of reason, and, as that which remains incomprehensible, it exists beyond human control as a fearsome and fatal force. Unable to gain rational mastery over elemental forces, animal consciousness instead “masters” natural phenomenon through the work of the imagination. Through myth and fetish, the human finds a means by which to relate to this otherwise indifferent and terrifying force. For ideological consciousness, on the other hand, that which is a piece of history—*socially* produced—comes to appear as a non-negotiable fact of nature to which we can merely submit. While fully historical, the products of our own labor are, like a piece of nature, non-narratable: simply given. In our ignorance of the history of labor by which the stuff of our world is produced, we come to be oppressed by the objects and economic system that we ourselves have created. Hence Marx claims that, at the very apogee of enlightenment, there occurs the ferocious resurgence of myth.

It is in the work of Lukács, in particular his concept of “second nature” that serves as the basis of what he comes to articulate as reification, that this Marxist insight into the tendency of history to become as if nature receives more direct thematization. “Second nature” names the ossification of history whereby it becomes the pre-reflective, “natural” attitude in and at the level of daily life. It names social establishments the origins and history of which have been forgotten and which, consequently, appear as and accordingly exercise all the authority of what is by nature. For Lukács, under capitalist conditions of production, the space of history has become one of fateful repetition; it has passed

entirely into the sphere of nature in the negative sense that Marx articulated in *The German Ideology*. In the occlusion of the history by which our current practices have come about hence represent the solidification of human interest and effort over time, these practices take on the false appearance of pregiven reality: self-standing, self-evident, and non-negotiable. Unable to see the historical origins of the conventions constitutive of our culture, they exercise an absolute but meaningless authority over us and we submit to them as to fate. These structures “form the world of convention...it is a world that does not offer itself either as meaning to the aim-seeking subject or as matter, in sensuous immediacy, to the active subject. It is a second nature, and, like nature (first nature), it is determinable only as the embodiment of recognized but senseless necessities and therefore it is incomprehensible, unknowable in its real substance.”¹⁷² As Lukács saw it, under capitalism, humankind was fated to such forgetfulness hence the social world became but petrified history, “a charnel house of rotted interiorities.”¹⁷³

In this concept of second nature, Lukács succeeds in articulating a dialectical concept of history. History, in its proper human sense, nominates the intentional transformation of naturo-social conditions for the sake of better life. In its negative sense, history names the unthinking reproduction of the social world; history stagnates in and as nature—a force of unfreedom and domination. However, while Lukács furthers this dialectical conception of history, the criticality of this concept is undone in his rendering of (first) nature as wholly negative in character, a set of “senseless necessities...incomprehensible, unknowable.” For Lukács, nature stands as the other of human reason and freedom, hence that the mastery of which is the progressive task of

¹⁷² *Theory of the Novel*, 62

¹⁷³ *Ibid*, 64

history. Lukács, in treating nature undialectically as opposed to the human, weds himself to precisely the idealist teleology and instrumentalism that Benjamin discovers at the heart of capitalist ideology. What Lukács fails to see is that the will to the domination of nature is itself a form of barbarism and that the instrumental exploitation of the natural world is grounded in the same logic that justifies and undertakes the exploitation of men. The Lukácsian glorification of instrumental reason amounts to the unwitting vindication of precisely the social domination the overcoming of which provides the ethical orientation of his philosophizing. As Benjamin writes:

The savoir of modern times is called work. The...perfecting...of the labor process constitutes the wealth which can now do what no redeemer has ever been able to accomplish.” This vulgar-Marxist conception of the nature of labor...recognizes only the progress of mastering nature, not the retrogression of society; it already displays the technocratic features that later emerge in fascism. Among these is a conception of nature which differs ominously from the one advocated by socialist utopias prior to the Revolution of 1848. The new conception of labor is tantamount to the exploitation of nature, which, with naïve complacency, is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat.¹⁷⁴

While Benjamin is not referring here specifically to Lukács, the criticism holds. A properly critical theory is one that maintains nature and history in their dialectical tension. In its negative aspect, nature designates that which is the ever selfsame; unchanging and beyond human control. It is a fatal force to which we are subjected both in the form of external nature and the suffering of our own mortal vulnerability. However, nature names, as well, the individual, existent being—the desiring body—and that primal element of the world—that kernel of the human and the non—which both grounds and resists full incorporation by the social totality. It is this nature—the material

¹⁷⁴ SW4: On the Concept of History,” 393-4; Thesis, XI.

in which history violently instantiates itself—that provides the ethical orientation of the materialist and libidinal critic. For, as the source of suffering, it is the source of pleasure and happiness as well. Furthermore, insofar as it belies reason and, in its intransigence, undercuts history, it stands as the site from which there continues to issue the hope for an order beyond domination. Nature indeed names our fatedness to repetition, hence is a source of despair, but it stands simultaneously as the source of hope: in the repetition of catastrophe, there abides the possibility of the redemption of the failed matter of history. It is from out of this very archaic, “natural” cycle that a genuinely new moment might emerge.

To develop a properly critical theory, Benjamin thus had to move beyond Lukács and, as Adorno argues in his 1932 lecture, “The Idea of Natural History,” Benjamin had, prior to his Marxist-turn, found the resource by which such a move could be made. In his early study of the *Trauerspiel*, Benjamin had already articulated a dialectical conception of nature as itself historical, providing, albeit unawares, the Marxist-Lukácsian insight into second nature with its dialectical counterpart.¹⁷⁵

In his 1925 rejected *Habilitationsschrift* on mourning plays, Benjamin described German Baroque allegory as rooted in “natural history,” employing the same term that Marx had used in his social ontology. In this early encounter with the Baroque, Benjamin’s materialist tendencies are already clearly in outline. The *Trauerspiel* had

¹⁷⁵ “Lukács envisioned the metamorphosis of the historical qua past into nature; petrified history is nature or the petrified life of nature is a mere product of historical development. The reference to the charnel-house includes the element of the cipher: everything must mean something, just what, however, must first be extracted. Lukács can only think of this charnel-house in terms of a theological resurrection, in an eschatological context.

“Benjamin marks the decisive turning-point in the formulation of the problem of natural history in that he brought the resurrection of second-nature out of infinite distance into infinite closeness and made it an object of philosophical interpretation...If Lukács demonstrates the retransformation of the historical, as that which has been, into nature, then here is the other side of the phenomenon: nature itself is seen as transitory nature, as history,” (“The Idea of Natural History,” 119).

been dismissed by Benjamin's forerunners and contemporaries as but a failed renaissance of the Greek tragic form; allegory itself discounted as a debased and arbitrary aesthetic. Benjamin, however, maintained that the German play of lamentation could not be adequately assessed from a purely aesthetic perspective, but rather required a historico-philosophic explanation. Benjamin, in his materialist treatment of Baroque allegory as the literary expression of the material conditions of its time, redeemed this repudiated aesthetic, showing that the characteristic "deformation" of the genre was an index of its historical truth. On Benjamin's analysis, the dramatic structure and the allegorical mode of expression constitutive of the form was not arbitrarily chosen but rather necessitated in and by the theologico-political crises of the 17th century. Having stood witness to the Thirty Year War, the Baroque allegorists could no longer maintain an eschatological view of history. The impermanence and instability of the civil order disclosed the essence of human history to be nothing more than endless catastrophe—the continual re-enactment of the same political failures. Yet, while "the Baroque (knew) no eschatology,"¹⁷⁶ the allegorists remained thoroughly entrenched in a theological context. History no longer appeared as a road to salvation, but it was still regarded as created, i.e., divinely ordained. History was thus reduced to the status of profane nature, viewed as fatedness to ruination and death. As Benjamin writes, "fate is not a purely natural occurrence—any more than it is purely historical. Fate, whatever guise it may wear in a pagan or mythological context, is meaningful only as a category of natural history in the spirit of the restoration theology of the Counter-Reformation. It is the elemental force of nature in historical events, which are not themselves entirely nature, because the light of

¹⁷⁶ OGT, 66

grace is still reflected from the state of creation. But it is mirrored in the swamp of Adam's guilt."¹⁷⁷

It was this natural history that was the subject of the German Mourning play. "The events of history shrivel up and become absorbed in the setting"¹⁷⁸ just as, in Lukács, the unthinking repetition of social practices results in their sedimentation in and as a form of second nature. History appears, in the Baroque plays, in the form of a

...petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the very beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful is expressed in a face—or rather a death's head... This is the form in which man's subjection to nature is most obvious and it significantly gives rise not only to the enigmatic question of the nature of human existence as such, but also of the biographical historicity of the individual. This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world. The greater the significance, the greater the subjection to the power of death, because death digs most deeply the jagged line of demarcation between physical nature and significance. But if nature has always been subject to the power of death, it is true that it has always been allegorical. Significance and death both come to fruition in historical development, just as they are closely linked as seeds in the creature's graceless state of sin.¹⁷⁹

The skull simultaneously offers itself to be read in two counterposed directions. On the one hand, it is the appearance of the human spirit in petrified form. The fossil is hollowed out nature and, as nature evacuated of its life, the skull simultaneously signifies an individual history. On the other, the skull is nature in decay—mere matter—and, as death incarnate, it is the apotheosis of the fact of human beings subjection to nature.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷⁷ Ibid, 129

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 178

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 166

¹⁸⁰ For a more extensive treatment of Benjamin's Baroque inheritance, see Susan Buck-Morss' excellent discussion in Chapter 6 of *The Dialectics of Seeing*.

Through such allegorical signification, emblemized in the skull, the Baroque allegorists provide the counterpoint to Lukács's second nature. Where Lukács reads history *qua* convention as a form of nature, the allegorists of the German Baroque treated nature-in-decay as a sign for history and for history specifically understood as ruination and failure. They turned to a nature the mute melancholy of which testified to a former repleteness of meaning as an allegorical representation of human history in its evident futility. For nature, too, had, in its time, undergone this disenchantment in the Christian triumph over the pagan gods, which reduced nature to the condition of mere matter (the profane). So evacuated of its animating spirits, left hollow, and the sign of humankind's graceless mortal state, nature was seen primarily not in terms of its generative capacities but in its over-ripeness as matter-in-decay.

If Lukács argued that, under capitalism, history has become but the field of fateful repetition hence a form of nature, Benjamin, in his redeployment of Baroque allegory, forwards this insight to show that the concept of nature, opens itself, at a certain juncture, onto the dimension of history. Time within the concept of nature appears as the repetition of the process of origination, maturation, decay, and finally death. Yet, inasmuch as time is at play in nature in the element of change, nature *qua* transitory being is itself already historical. Nature is the eternality of transience: "The word 'history' stands written on the countenance of nature in the characters of transience."¹⁸¹

Where Lukács comprehended the redemption of the world petrified under the Medusan-gaze of capital within an eschatological context, rendering nature the degraded marker of the sphere of enslavement and imbuing the proletarian revolution with all the salvific power of the future, Benjamin's philosophy of *Naturgeschichte*, formed in his

¹⁸¹ OGT 177

study of and thus saturated in the melancholy of Baroque allegory, rests upon a non-salvific concept of redemption, wholly immanent and wholly critical. For nature and history conceived in their dialectical interrelation provide the key to one another's demythification. In the disclosure of what we take to be given reality—a piece of indefeasible nature—as history, these structures open themselves to interrogation and thus, potentially, to transformation. Conversely, showing the primitive in that which presents itself as the most historically advanced constitutes a decisive intervention within the ideology of progress by which the present maintains itself in its authority.

As I argued in the last chapter, Freud's *Totem and Taboo* aims to render precisely such a natural-historical perspective available. While Freud's treatment of the Australian aboriginal tribes has been read as an instance of colonialism and primitivism, this undialectical interpretation fails to see the criticality of Freud's investment in the concept of the natural or prehistoric. For Freud does not ethnocentrically hold up bourgeois conventions as an historical achievement and norm against which to measure the practices of tribalism. Freud's effort is to show that what is taken to be primitive—*mere* nature—in these tribes is yet at play in what we identify as the most civilized and rational of institutions—hence the provocative reference in his preface to the categorical imperative. Nature has not been overcome by us, it has simply been beaten farther back, a fact that Freud neither celebrates nor precisely mourns. Rather the mortification of nature is an abiding source of ambivalence for Freud: an impetus to dialectical criticism. Likewise, Benjamin, in *The Arcades Project*, aims to show that what, under capitalism, presents itself as progress hence as normatively justified is but the hell of perpetual unfulfillment—the ongoing oppression of nature both inner and outer.

The Baroque's crucial contribution to Benjamin's emancipatory practice of remembrance can be formulated thus: as Lukácsian-Marxism is able to read the commodity and the constitutive conventions of a social world as the ossification of social activity hence as a sign for history, restoring the subjective valence to the reified world, Benjamin is, as in the "baroque cult of the ruin,"¹⁸² able to discover nature hiding within the ruins of civilization. For ruins are, like the death's head, to be read dialectically: both historical and natural. It is in his attention to "the fallen nature that bears the imprint of historical progression,"¹⁸³ the rags and the refuse of early capitalism, that Benjamin is able to correct the uncritical progressivism of Lukácsian-Marxism. We thus arrive again at the dialectical image, but now with an account in hand that will ground an analysis of the critical method of allegoresis by which Benjamin redeems "the rags, the refuse" of capitalism. Benjamin evokes from the failed matter of the immediate past, i.e., history in decay, a protest against the form of life in which such once treasured objects are thrown onto the trash-pile of history, their utopian promises of fulfillment unmet.

*Part II: Benjamin's critical method of allegoresis
(Between the vision of the baroque and the world created by capital)*

"The events surrounding the historian, and in which he himself takes part, will underlie his presentation in the form of a text written in invisible ink. The history which he lays before the reader comprises, as it were, the citations occurring in this text, and it is only these citations that occur in a manner legible to all. To write history thus means to *cite* history. It belongs to the concept of citation, however, that the historical object in each case is torn from its context."¹⁸⁴

In its disclosure of the material conditions that give rise to the natural-historical viewpoint and hence to the allegorical mode of expression, the *Trauerspiel* study

¹⁸² Ibid, 178

¹⁸³ Ibid, 180

¹⁸⁴ AP, 476; N11, 3

anticipates Benjamin's ambitious *Arcades Project* in which he sought, through the decaying matter of the 19th century, to expose what presented itself as progress as but the continuation of history's violent subjugation of nature. Benjamin found, in his study of capitalist culture as refracted through Marx, a world subject to the same crisis in meaning already fit to the interpretive method of allegoresis developed in light of his early confrontation with the *Trauerspiel*.

As Benjamin describes the antinomies of the allegorical:

Any person, any object, any relationship can mean absolutely anything else. With this possibility a destructive, but just verdict is passed on the profane world: it is characterized as a world in which the detail is of no great importance. All of the things which are used to signify derive, from the very fact of their pointing to something else, a power which makes them appear no longer commensurable with profane things, which raises them onto a higher plane, and which can indeed sanctify them. Considered in allegorical terms, then, the profane world is both elevated and devalued. This religious dialectic of content has its formal correlative in the dialectic of convention and expression. For allegory is convention *and* expression; and both are inherently contradictory. However, just as baroque teaching conceives of history as created events, allegory in particular, although a convention like every kind of writing, is regarded as created, like holy scripture. The allegory of the seventeenth century is not convention of expression, but expression of convention.¹⁸⁵

On Benjamin's analysis, the allegorical intention is rooted in the subjective condition of melancholia, the loss of one's pre-reflective practical orientation in and to the world. Such a crisis in perception was the corollary of the theological-political upheaval of 17th century. In this loss of practical orientation and the melancholic withdrawal from the everyday, we are left to confront a world the objects of which have been divested of their

¹⁸⁵ OGT, 174

natural meaning hence a world that is but a scene of fragments. Yet, it is precisely in the shattering of the coherence of the mundane that the world comes to take on the aspect of the phantasmagoric, its hollowed out objects reduced to the condition of mere appearance at the same time as they take on an auratic quality, imbued with a supersensible meaning. Brokenness implies the possibility of unification and the experience of disintegration calls upon the thought of wholeness. In bespeaking the possibility of a new, heretofore unanticipated order into which these pieces might fit and by which the appearance of fragmentation might be explained, the allegorist devalued the mundane world at the same time as she elevated it to the order of the divine, natural images treated as a hieroglyphic code through which God's intentions were secreted and which awaited human decipherment. Thus, under the melancholic gaze of the allegorist, the material world is both denigrated and sanctified.

This dialectic of devaluation and elevation is precisely the dynamic that Marx developed in his concept of commodity fetishism and which Benjamin registers in and at the level of everyday life through his concept of phantasmagoria. As Benjamin observes in "Central Park," an essay of fragments that presents Baudelaire as the modern allegorist of Paris, "the devaluation of the world of things in allegory is surpassed within the world of things itself by the commodity."¹⁸⁶ Under the regime of capital, Benjamin argues, there occurs the economic literalization of the poetic movement of allegory. Objects are alienated from their use-value (natural meaning), hollowed out and reduced to the common denominator of exchange-value. They thus become bearers of mysterious, non-natural significance. For Benjamin, the Parisian *Exposition Universelle*, a lavish industrial show that had its first iteration in 1855 and recurred approximately once a

¹⁸⁶ SW4: "Central Park," 164

decade through to the end of the century, exists as the emblematic early instance of the dialectic of alienation and fetishization that congeals in the 20th Century in and as the framework of the entertainment industry. The world exhibitions appear retrospectively as the schoolhouse in which individuals are first trained in the attitude of consumption and thus inducted into what becomes the 20th century cult of the commodity, a cult that, Benjamin maintains, is the same as that of the *Fuhrer* cult.¹⁸⁷

World exhibitions are places of pilgrimage to the commodity fetish... World exhibitions glorify the exchange value of the commodity. They create a framework in which its use value becomes secondary. They are a school in which the masses, forcibly excluded from consumption, are imbued with the exchange value of commodities to the point of identifying with it: 'Do not touch the items on display.' World exhibitions thus provide access to a phantasmagoria which a person enters in order to be distracted. Within these *divertissements*, to which the individual abandons himself in the framework of the entertainment industry, he remains always an element of a compact mass. This mass delights in amusement parks—with their roller coasters, their 'twisters,' their 'caterpillars'—in an attitude that is pure reaction. It is thus led to the state of subjection which propaganda, industrial as well as political, relies on.¹⁸⁸

¹⁸⁷ As Benjamin writes in a fragment from 1921: "Capitalism is a purely cultic religion, perhaps the most extreme that ever existed. In capitalism, things have meaning only in their relationship to the cult... This concretization of cult is connected with a second feature of capitalism: the permanence of the cult. Capitalism is the celebration of a cult sans reve et sans merci. There are no "weekdays." There is no day that is not a feast day, in a terrible sense that all its sacred pomp is unfolded before us; each day commands the utter fealty of each worshipper," ("Capitalism as Religion," 288). Benjamin so inverts the platitude that, in capitalism, every day is a workday to that of the permanence of festival in which the worship of the commodity is ceaseless.

¹⁸⁸ AP, 18; "Expose of 1939, section B. Benjamin's description of the formation of the consumer subject through "exclusion from consumption" is highly reminiscent of the Freudian cannibalistic dialectic of desire and being in which desire denied results in the object's volatilization into a psychic—an ideal—form. Where the physical assimilation of the object—practical mastery of it—cannot be obtained, psychic introjection arises as a substitute, the unattainable thing translated into the psychic economy. Object-choice cedes to identification and idealization. The framework of the World Market is one in which the individual, as a member of the mass, withheld from material interactions with the object and restrained to the passive position of spectatorship, is compelled to take up a new attitude to the objects whose self-display defines the experiential context. A new appetite is engendered through the very suspension of gratification. In the space of this suspension, what emerges is an "artificial" desire for the thing as an appearance of an appearance; what the individual is left to "consume" is an image-symbol: the ideal of pure

The world exhibitions are the hyperbolic instance of goods-on-display in which the commodity is aggrandized as a spectacle, divorced from the context of its use hence stripped of its practical character. “Do not touch the items on display.” In the alienation of the object from its purposefulness and its material relation to the individual, it is elevated to the status of an icon.

Just as nature evacuated of meaning becomes the vehicle for the subjective intentions of the melancholic Baroque allegorist, Benjamin maintains that, in the capitalist present, the commodity becomes the object into which the utopian aspirations of the collective are displaced. Only in the lapse of a given commodity’s hold over the social imagination, i.e., the diminution of its aura of novelty that constitutes its desirability, can it be read in its phantasmagoric aspect. In the object’s extrusion from the system of circulation, it becomes legible as the wish-image that it once was just as the skull signifies in and through the very fact of its decay that it was once the site of life.¹⁸⁹ The capitalist world is replete with such ciphers. In an entry from the *N convolute*, Benjamin writes, quoting a letter from Adorno:

‘With the vitiation of their use value, the alienated things are hollowed out and, as ciphers, they draw in meanings. Subjectivity takes possession of them insofar as it invests them with intentions of desire and fear’... With regard to these reflections, it should be kept in mind that, in the nineteenth century, the number of ‘hollowed out’ things increases at a rate and on a scale that was previously

value bodied forth by the enthroned commodity. Of course, as we have already seen, for Benjamin, this pure value, i.e., exchange-value, is, in the society of consumption—ultimately, as Debord would later argue, the society of the spectacle—a function of the thing’s novelty. “Newness is a quality independent of the use-value of the commodity. It is the source of that illusion of which fashion is the tireless purveyor.”¹⁸⁸ The novel commodity in its self-advertisement gains prestige, arrogating to itself the personality that its human counterpart lacks.

¹⁸⁹ For an exhaustive reading of Benjamin’s theory of the legibility of the wish-images of the collective, see Buck-Morss’ *The Dialectics of Seeing*.

unknown, for technical progress is continually withdrawing newly introduced objects from circulation.¹⁹⁰

The ideology of endless newness that reigns in modern mass culture receives its material instantiation and its confirmation in the constant production of novelty. Yet the incessance of newness is, at the same time, the rapidity with which what, in one moment was the most novel and so the most valuable, becomes outmoded, primitive, and dismissed as detritus. Capitalism requires, for its preservation, the constant production of novelty—novel objects and, through them, seemingly novel desires.¹⁹¹ Directly proportional to the ever-increasing rate of development is the rate at which existent reality is subject to devaluation, the rate at which the commodity “degrades” and is subsequently thrown onto the trash-pile of history.¹⁹² In this acceleration of what proposes itself as progress, the objects and architectural structures that give public life its definition become relics prematurely, appearing archaic after just a generation. This accelerated rate of innovation thus corresponds to a quickening of temporality itself and the disintegration of the capacity to remember even the most immediate past. History that is not subject to remembrance becomes prehistory, becomes nature all over again.

And so we return to our main theme: within the ruins of civilization, Benjamin discovers nature. Benjamin thus finds himself in the position of the Baroque allegorist: in a denatured and fragmented world. However, between Benjamin and the Baroque is the difference of the materialist diagnosis of this disordered state of affairs. Where the

¹⁹⁰ AP, 466; N5, 2

¹⁹¹ Marx and Engels noted this phenomenon at the level of production. “The bourgeoisie cannot exist without continually revolutionizing the instruments of production....The continual transformation of production, the uninterrupted convulsion of all social conditions, a perpetual uncertainty and motion distinguish the epoch of the bourgeoisie from all earlier ones. All the settled, age-old relations with their train of time-honoured preconceptions and viewpoints are dissolved; all newly formed ones become outmoded before they can ossify,” (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*, 4).

¹⁹² SW4: “On the Concept of History,” 392; Thesis IX.

Baroque saw the fatality of human history through a theological lens, ontologizing catastrophe, Benjamin sees the workings of capital. On Benjamin's reading, the Baroque playwrights, unable to escape the deadlock of the formal antinomy of the allegorical abandoned their materialist commitments in favor of a theological resolution. Benjamin describes this formal antinomy in terms of the dialectic of convention and expression intrinsic to the allegorical meaning-making of the German Baroque. The Baroque practice of allegory grew out of the Renaissance study of Egyptian hieroglyphs, in which these pictograms were treated as a divinely ordained, universal language, the decipherment of which would yield the meaning of the created world.¹⁹³ Yet, the Baroque allegorist could not escape the fact that this "theology of writing" was, at the same time, thoroughly conventional. For allegorical signification developed over time and, in the course of this development, "Egyptian, Greek, and Christian pictorial languages became intertwined."¹⁹⁴ Within the Baroque world, there were multiple, competing religious traditions hence multiple, incompatible cosmologies. The natural world to which they looked for divine signs became plurivocal, overladen with a plethora of irreducible and contradictory meanings. The practice of emblematics thus arrived to the poets of the Baroque completely over-determined and the individual allegorist was left to choose arbitrarily which convention to follow, which meaning to adopt for a given natural image. Thus the very hermeneutic that promised to unveil the divine intention within and through the objects of the profane world resulted in a profusion of meaning: a condition of "demonic" ambiguity. The allegorists were thus left to "pile up fragments ceaselessly, without any strict idea of a goal, and in the unremitting expectation of a

¹⁹³ OGT, 169

¹⁹⁴ Ibid, 172

miracle.”¹⁹⁵ When no miracle occurred, the allegorists instead opted to read fragmentary, transient and death-dealing creation as itself an allegorical signification of its opposite: divine resurrection. In this, they betrayed the materialist insight that served as the basis of their philosophical hermeneutics.

Ultimately in the death-signs of the baroque the direction of allegorical reflection is reversed; on the second part of its wide arc it returns, to redeem....For even this time of hell is secularized in space, and that world, which abandoned itself to the deep spirit of Satan and betrayed itself, is God’s world. In God’s world the allegorist awakens....Allegory, of course, thereby loses everything that was most peculiar to it: the secret, privileged knowledge, the arbitrary rule in the realm of dead objects, the supposed infinity of a world without hope. All this vanishes with this *one* about-turn, in which the immersion of allegory has to clear away the final phantasmagoria of the objective and, left entirely to its own devices, re-discovers itself, not playfully in the earthly world of things, but seriously under the eyes of heaven. And this is the essence of melancholy immersion: that its ultimate objects, in which it believes it can most fully secure for itself that which is vile, turn into allegories, and that these allegories fill out and deny the void in which they are represented.¹⁹⁶

On Benjamin’s analysis, the Baroque poets thus abandoned their commitment to the material world—for committed they were insofar as they mourned the violence of history—and dismissed the objective world as itself a phantasmagoric deception to be spiritually defeated. Unable to bear the catastrophe and unable to believe in the human capacity for overcoming this violence, they dismissed material suffering as an illusion, sealing the melancholic outlook through their denial of loss. The allegorists retreated from the world into the pure subjectivism of faith.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid, 178

¹⁹⁶ Ibid, 232-3

To the Baroque allegorists' "faithless leap to resurrection," Benjamin juxtaposes the interruptive force of the dialectical image, "hold(ing) fast to the ruins."¹⁹⁷ The challenge of Benjamin's philosophy is whether his materialist sensibility is sufficient to rescue the allegorical technique from the arbitrariness, subjectivism, and nihilism that beset and overcame his predecessors: whether or not allegoresis can serve as a means of entering into and undoing from within the phantasmagoric logic of capital.

At this juncture, I would like to reintroduce Benjamin to Freud. Here, as in so many other places, Benjamin and Freud serve to mutually illuminate one another. In the *Arcades*, Benjamin set himself the task of reconstructing the dream-life of the nineteenth century so as to awaken the collective in and to the present. In this, Benjamin shows his essential affinity with the therapeutic methods and goals of Freud, who sought to reconstruct the processes of dream-formation, mirroring its logic, so as to free the individual to the waking world. Furthermore, having returned to the *Traumdeutung* through the *Trauerspiel*, Freud's dream hermeneutics, which provides the template for the psychoanalytic method as such, is itself legible as a form of allegoresis in which the surface structure—the immediate meaning—of a text is approached as both the work of desire and the means of desire's dissimulation. In his critical re-apprehension of the meaning of dream-life, Freud took up a phenomenon that was dismissed by his contemporaries as below the level of the attribution of meaning; no more than senseless excrescence. Against this dismissal, Freud redeemed dreaming as a form of emblematics in which prehistoric nature was figured in and through the very form of its historical denial.

¹⁹⁷ SW4: "Central Park," 169

The dream-content...is expressed as it were in a pictographic script, the characters of which have to be transposed individually into the language of the dream-thoughts. If we attempted to read these characters according to their pictorial value instead of according to their symbolic relation, we should clearly be led into error. Suppose I have a picture-puzzle, a rebus, in front of me. It depicts a house with a boat on its roof, a single letter of the alphabet, the figure of a running man whose head has been conjured away and so on. Now I might be misled into raising objections and declaring that the picture as a whole is nonsensical. A boat has no business to be on a roof of a house, and a headless man cannot run. Moreover, the man is bigger than the house; and if the whole picture is intended to represent a landscape, letters of the alphabet are out of place in it since such objects do not occur in nature. But obviously we can only form a proper judgment of the rebus if we put aside criticisms such as these of the whole composition and its parts and if, instead, we try to replace each separate element by a word that can be represented for that element in some way or other. The words which are put together in this way are no longer nonsensical but may form a poetical phrase of the greatest beauty and significance. A dream is a picture-puzzle of this sort.¹⁹⁸

Freud approaches the dream as though it were a medieval emblem, a syncretic image of pictorial and linguistic symbols, the decipherment of which requires that each element be read independently and in conjunction with the whole. As Benjamin ultimately concluded that what lay behind the phantasmagoric work of allegory was the impulse to simultaneously express and deny historical catastrophe, so too Freud determines the dream to be an attempt to express repudiated infantile desire. The individual, withdrawn from the demands of the everyday, takes up, in her dreams, the stuff of the world, specifically the immediate past, and creates, through the motley material of the “day’s residues,” a picture puzzle of desire. Whatever apparent coherence abides between the dream-thoughts is the effect of secondary revision; thus the dream must be divested of the

¹⁹⁸ Interpretation of Dreams, 277-278

false unity that consciousness retrospectively imposes upon it, each element sundered from the context of the whole—cited—and allowed to signify independently of it.¹⁹⁹ Through this process of decontextualization, Freud discovered “that the child and the child’s impulses still live on in the dream;”²⁰⁰ unfulfilled, the desires of the past remain and continue, in secret, to shape the patient’s present. Foreclosed, primitive desire—read: nature—unconquered yet unfigurable gives rise to the phantasmagorias of sleep, secreting itself in the very matrices of the dream. For “thought is after all nothing but a substitute for a hallucinatory wish; and it is self-evident that dreams must be wish-fulfillments, since nothing but a wish can set our mental apparatus at work.”²⁰¹ It is here important to keep in mind that what was decisive for Freud was not the discovery that the dream had a secret meaning—the latent content that hid behind its manifest imagery. Rather the major theoretical discovery of the *Traumdeutung* was the secret of the dream-work (displacement, condensation, and secondary revision). It was this secret of the primary processes that gave rise to psychoanalysis proper, i.e., to psychoanalysis as a critical mode of reading through which allegorical significance is not produced, but undone, the phantasmagoric structure of desire dissolved.

How does this bear on the *Arcades Project* and its dialectic of ruination and redemption? Benjamin discovered in the nineteenth century a graveyard replete with fossilized remains that serve him as the material to allegorically represent and, in so representing, undo the phantasmagoric spell under which his own era languished. As

¹⁹⁹ “Our procedure consists in abandoning all those purposive ideas which normally govern our reflections, in focusing our attention on a single element of the dream and in then taking note of whatever involuntary thoughts may occur to us in connection with it. We then take the next portion of the dream and repeat the process with it,” (*Interpretation of Dreams*, 527).

²⁰⁰ *Ibid*, 191

²⁰¹ *Ibid*, 567

Freud performed this work in the analytic scenario, exposing the present as but the repetition of the failed past for the sake of putting the patient's love freely at her disposal, Benjamin constructs a text that mimetically reflects the phantasmagoric structure of 19th century Paris so that the truth of these wish-images could be seen and, through them, the truth of our own time. For the present is but the dream of the past—not in the sense of its fulfillment, but of its repetition.²⁰² As Benjamin remarks, citing Michelet, “each époque dreams the one to follow it.”²⁰³ Benjamin's philosophy of history transposes, from the individual to the collective, Freud's theory of dreaming as a fantastic form of recollection in which the immediate and mundane past serves as the vehicle for the secret communication of primal, utopian desire.

Corresponding to the form of the new means of production, which in the beginning is still ruled by the form of the old (Marx), are images in the collective consciousness in which the new is permeated with the old. These images are wish-images; in them the collective seeks both to overcome and to transfigure the immaturity of the social product and the inadequacies in the social organization of production. At the same time, what emerges in the wish images is the resolute effort to distance oneself from all that is antiquated—which includes, however, the recent past. These tendencies deflect the imagination (which is given impetus by the new) back upon the primal past. In the dream in which each epoch entertains images of its successor, the latter appears wedded to the elements of primal history <*Urgeschichte*>--that is, to elements of a classless society. And the experiences of such a society—as stored in the unconscious of the collective—engender through interpenetration with what is new, the utopia that

²⁰² “And the value of dreams for giving us knowledge of the future? There is of course no question of that. It would be truer to say instead that they give us knowledge of the past. For dreams are derived from the past in every sense. Nevertheless the ancient belief that dreams foretell the future is not wholly devoid of truth. By picturing our wishes as fulfilled, dreams are after all leading us into the future. But this future, which the dreamer pictures as the present, has been moulded by his indestructible wish into a perfect likeness of the past,” (Ibid, 621).

²⁰³ AP, 4: “Expose of 1935,” section I.

has left its traces in a thousand configurations of life, from enduring edifices to passing fashions.²⁰⁴

Benjamin here describes the same *nachträglich* temporality of the dream as understood by Freud, the present existing as the short-circuit between the primal past and the utopian future. According to Freud, a desire in the present, in awakening an unconscious (primal) wish, instigates the dream, which takes up the day's residues, i.e., what of the immediate past was undeserving of attention, as the innocuous vehicle that can carry the affective charge of the repudiated wish. It is such disregarded, meaningless material that is available to represent that which cannot, in itself, be represented and, in so doing, to provide the veiled, hallucinatory gratification of repressed desire so that sleep may continue, undisturbed. Freud sees, in dreaming, the work of natural history and thus the need for a critical form of allegorical reading. So, too, Benjamin reads the dream-state of capitalism in which its novel commodities promise the overcoming of the "immaturity of the social product," the failure of the immediate past to yield the promised utopian gratification. Through the re-presentation of obsolescent commodities as the wish-images that they once were, Benjamin sought to wrest these imaginative productions from the totalizing context of capital, constructing through them an alarm-clock by which to awaken the contemporary and as-yet dreaming collective.²⁰⁵

And here, at last, we arrive at the Benjaminian resolution of the second prong of Freud's bipartite prohibition on cultural psychoanalysis: that erected in light of the paradox of authority that defines modern community. The psychoanalytic encounter is designed to navigate this paradox of authority as it occurs at the ontogenetic level. The

²⁰⁴ Ibid, 4-5; "Expose of 1935; section I. Freud, of course, for his part claims that "paradise itself is no more than a group phantasy of the childhood of the individual," (*Interpretation of Dreams*, 245).

²⁰⁵ "We construct here an alarm clock that rouses the kitsch of the previous century to "assembly," (AP, 205; H1a, 2).

therapeutic space, liminal—exempted from the everyday and thus protected from its practical pressures—consists of the synthetically generated pathology of neurosis, i.e., in the transferential/counter-transferential relation between analyst and analysand. This relation is re-activated within the hermetic space of analysis only so that it can become the topic of critical self-questioning and that through which the unending project of self-authorization finds its initiation. The success of this undertaking requires the analyst to embody prehistoric authority only to systematically cede upon it, the analysand's expectations, in their frustration, becoming visible. My contention is that, in his *Traumdeutung*, Benjamin set himself the task of constituting a therapeutic space in which the reader, i.e., the individual in her public role as a consumer of culture, meets, not with the authority of the author, but with that of the cultural treasure itself. As Benjamin writes in an entry in the *N Convolute*: “Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall purloin no valuables, appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse—these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them.”²⁰⁶ This desire of Benjamin's to “merely show” through the ceaseless accumulation of fragments stems from his conviction that the impositions of subjectivity upon the matter of history could but result in the pacification of its unruly and heterogeneous elements. And, what's more, in the pacification of the reader.

Thus, with the ultimate failure of Baroque allegory in mind, Benjamin sought to cede entirely upon his subjectivity, arranging the ruins of the nineteenth century in such a way that the reader would be able to see through this material the “invisible ink” of the present. Benjamin, in a critical appropriation of the model of the World Exhibition, puts

²⁰⁶ AP, 460; N1a, 8

the commodity on display, reproducing it linguistically in the text, a space reflective of but excepted from the everyday. Where the World Exhibitions constituted a space in which the alienation of the use-value of the commodity (“do not touch”) instills within the masses the attitude of consumption to the Benjaminian text “falls the Sisyphean task of divesting things of their commodity character.”²⁰⁷ Within the *Arcades Project*, the reader confronts the authoritative cultural treasure only to stand witness to its disintegration. I so interpret the oft-remarked upon “objectivity,” the seeming absence of theoretical subjectivity, of Benjamin’s texts as his strategy for avoiding the danger to which Freud alerted us in his ban on cultural psychoanalysis. Benjamin refuses the exertions of theoretical subjectivity, attempting to create a context in which the reader can herself undertake the interpretive labor necessary to the disclosure of the truth of her own political era.²⁰⁸ Cast in this light, I can restate my earlier assertion that the challenge of Benjamin’s philosophy is whether his materialist sensibility is sufficient to rescue the allegorical technique from the arbitrariness, subjectivism, and nihilism that beset and overcame his predecessors: Benjamin’s ambition was to re-cast allegorical expression such that it gained a self-critical form in and as allegoresis. Benjamin sought to reproduce the material of the nineteenth century in such a way that it became visible to the reader as a phantasmagoria, as a hieroglyphic code requiring deconstruction, authorizing the individual in the work of critical interpretation.

²⁰⁷ AP, 19

²⁰⁸ In this respect, my interpretation is proximate to Susan Buck-Morss’ reading.

The Limits of Benjamin's Weak Messianism for the Purposes of Democratic Theory

Through the process of secularization, solidarity is rendered vagabond and it is the task of the redemptive critic to discover it secretly lodged in the discarded and discounted images of the past. Only in hearing the command to “read what was never written”²⁰⁹ can the power of the past arrive to the present in the dimension of its rightful authority. That solidarity depends upon a critical practice of remembrance means that the problem of democracy descends to Benjamin as one of inheritance: how to receive the past such that its “true picture...which flashes up its final farewell in the moment of its recognizability” can be “held fast” in and against the totalizing context of capital.²¹⁰ Central to thinking through the prospect of justice in secularized social space is the fate of tradition qua living medium, i.e., a material collective form of remembrance in which the transmission of the shared past is at stake.

It is such a mode of myth-making—of collective storytelling—that, according to Freud, has lost what was its heretofore central place and, according to Benjamin, the redemption of which represents the fundamental task of secularized modernity. The loss of tradition is, for Benjamin as well as for Freud, simultaneously liberatory and melancholic. Emancipation is necessarily emancipation from authority in its traditional, patriarchal form, that of church and family, but, at the same time, its disappearance leaves

²⁰⁹ Benjamin quoting Hofmannsthal in *The Now of Recognizability* section in “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History,’” (SW4, 405).

²¹⁰ SW\$, 391; Thesis VI. “Articulating the past historically does not mean recognizing it “the way it really was.” It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in a moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast that image of the past which unexpectedly appears to the historical subject in a moment of danger. The danger threatens both the content of the tradition and those who inherit it. For both, it is one and the same thing: the danger of becoming a tool of the ruling classes. Every age must strive anew to wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it. The Messiah comes not only as the redeemer; he comes as the victor over the Antichrist. The only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious.”

us with no other binding authority upon which to rely. In the breakdown of the social matrix through which objectivity is formed and its stability guaranteed, we are left on our own with no certain criterion of judgment and no secure basis by which to connect to the world and those within it. Thus, in being liberated from tradition, we appear to be abandoned to private fantasy. Correlative to the process of disenchantment and the transformation of material conditions, which are both its precondition and its result, is a ferocious resurgence of myth. “The momentum of primal history in the past is no longer masked, as it used to be, by the tradition of the church and family—this at once the condition and consequence of technology. The old prehistoric dread already envelops the world of our parents because we ourselves are no longer bound to this world by tradition. The perceptual worlds break apart more rapidly; what they contain of the mythic comes more quickly and more brutally to the fore.”²¹¹ Secularization does not dissolve mythic consciousness; rather it institutes the era of its solitary sufferance.

As Freud saw it, modern individuality was defined by this task of privatized meaning-making. Lacking intersubjective support but still under the onus to find fulfillment in the renunciations requisite to sociability, desires for which there is no scene of acknowledgment are, insofar as they are incapable of being heard, inexpressible and, per Freud, the unconscious fantasies and compulsive behaviors they produce as a result represent the secret afterlife of myth and religious ritual. “The neuroses are social structures; they accomplish what is effected in society by other means.”²¹² Yet, Freud rejects the idea that what is thus called for is the reinstatement or rediscovery of a public practice of myth-making. For Freud, there is no form of collective cognition and

²¹¹ AP, 461-2; N2a2

²¹² TT, 73

experience that would not be oppressive. The right to think for oneself and find one's own way to salvation remains unimpeachable for Freud, and the rest is religion, which, "by forcibly fixing (individuals) in a state of psychic infantilism and by drawing them into a mass-delusion...succeeds in sparing many people an individual neurosis. But hardly anything more."²¹³ Confronted with this bind between the unjustified and infantilizing authority of tradition and the plight of modern isolated individuality, Freud concluded that the only solution lay in the direction of the development of internal resources adequate to the burden of privatized myth-making and to the sustainment of the individual against the public sphere of anonymous—indifferent or hostile—others.

It is thus on the question of who or what is the subject of emancipatory memory, which is, at the same time, the question of how to properly conceive of individuation, that Benjamin diverges most markedly from Freud. For Benjamin, the individual capacity for critical remembrance cannot be sustained in a form of life in which collective practices of storytelling are threatened with extinction. In the increasing withdrawal of the individual into the private interior and capital's increasing domination of public space, what disappears is a habitat hospitable to the integrative discursive process in and through which communities are created, sustained, and transformed. The result is an impoverishment of experience.²¹⁴ As he writes, in the first entry of the K convolute of *The Arcades Project*: "Whereas the education of earlier generations explained (their) dreams for them in terms of tradition, of religious doctrine, present-day education simply amounts to the distraction of children. Proust could emerge as an unprecedented

²¹³ CD, 84-85

²¹⁴ "Where there is experience [*Erfahrung*] in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine in the memory [*Gedächtnis*] with the material of the collective past," ("On Some Motifs on Baudelaire," 316).

phenomenon only in a generation that had lost all bodily and natural aids to remembrance and that, poorer than before, was left to itself to take possession of the worlds of childhood in a merely isolated and pathological way.”²¹⁵

For Benjamin, tradition is not to be overcome, but to be redeemed: to be realized in a new form consonant with the normative demands of non-absolutist social space in which the fragments of tradition can be made to dance. For tradition nominates, at the most general level, an intergenerational social education: “who would trust a cane wielder who proclaimed the mastery of children by adults to be the purpose of education? Is not education, above all, the indispensable ordering of the relationship between generations and therefore mastery (if we are to use this term) of that relationship and not of children?”²¹⁶ Only through the self-conscious and collective uptake of the conditions of injustice that are our inheritance does there abide the possibility of the renewal of experience and, with it, the promise of a world worthy of human inhabitation.

Thus, it would appear that, for Benjamin, there is no salvation from the powers of prehistory that would not be social in nature. The “weak messianic force” of which the present is in possession is a form of social praxis and only by attenuation can it be said to be possible for the private individual. Yet, if this is, in fact, correct, how then are we to understand Benjamin’s own critical enterprise, which has as its avowed ambition the actualization of the forgotten futures of the oppressed past? What is the relationship between the “immediate messianic intensity of the heart of the inner man in isolation”²¹⁷ and the collective reception and realization of the good tidings that emerge from out of the catastrophic past? What makes the difference between private conviction and

²¹⁵ AP, 389; K1, 1

²¹⁶ SW4: “One-Way Street,” 487

²¹⁷ SW1: “Theologico-Political Fragment,” 306

prophecy? To state this otherwise: when does private fantasy rightfully attain to public acknowledgment? When does it achieve the condition of philosophy?

With these questions, we reach the limit of Benjamin's brand of redemptive criticism, which uses the tools of private experience for the sake of its overcoming. Let me return to the performative effort of the *Arcades*. The *Arcades* is not itself a piece of philosophy; rather, as I have argued, it is an attempt to preserve its promise, establishing the conditions under which thinking might become possible once again. As Cavell puts it in his little essay, "Remains to be Seen," the piece through which I introduced this dissertation: "if Benjamin is here staking his claim to a certain afterlife of philosophizing, his *Arcades Project* may be taken as establishing the conditions (of memory as thinking, of thinking as explosion, of perception as allegory, of the chances of concurrence in Poe's crowd) under which philosophy is still possible."²¹⁸ Or rather, we should say, might yet be possible. For the *Arcades Project* calls for conditions that it cannot itself produce. Benjamin's subject is and remains the anonymous reader to whom he addresses himself in his texts, sending his missives—his good tidings—out into the void.²¹⁹ As he writes in the opening lines of "The Storyteller," in the death of the oral tradition dealt by the rise of modern print technology, it is "as if a capability that seemed inalienable to us, the securest among our possessions, has been taken from us: the ability to share experiences."²²⁰ Benjamin's therapeutic philosophy is an attempt to renew this capacity in and through the very medium that destroyed it. The ambition of his work is, in part, to be described as that of transforming the privacy of literary consumption into a basis of

²¹⁸ 260.

²¹⁹ "The good tidings which the historian of the past brings with throbbing heart may be lost in a void the very moment he opens his mouth," (*Illuminations*, 255; "Theses on the Philosophy of History," V).

²²⁰ 141.

shared social practice through inducing, in the individual, a mood of critical self-reflection and cultivating the hermeneutic sensibility necessary to community formation in post-absolutist social space.

That said, there is one place, in Benjamin's corpus, where he ventures an image of solidarity amongst the living: the *Artwork* essay. In his attempt to identify the conditions under which industrial modernity might be redeemed—the conditions of private fantasy transformed into those of collective perception—Benjamin alights, cautiously but hopefully, upon the movies because they have all the essential elements for which he is searching: mechanization; the proletarian mass; shared experience; the critical allegorization of the mundane world. Yet, it is precisely in this attempt to specify a properly modern form of community, that the limits of his weak messianism as socio-political theory are cast into relief.

Benjamin writes in the second thesis of the final version of the *Artwork* essay:

What withers in the age of the technological reproducibility of the work of art is the latter's aura. The process is symptomatic; its significance extends far beyond the realm of art. *It might be stated as a general formula that the technology of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the sphere of tradition. By replicating the work many times over, it substitutes a mass existence for a unique existence. And in permitting the reproduction to reach the recipient in his or her own situation, it actualizes that which is reproduced.* These two processes lead to a massive upheaval in the domain of objects handed down from the past—a shattering of tradition which is the reverse side of the present crisis and renewal of humanity. Both processes are intimately related to the mass movements of our day. Their most powerful agent is film. The social significance of film, even—

and especially—in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic side: the liquidation of the value of tradition in cultural heritage.²²¹ Here we see the dialectical dynamic with which, at this point, we should be thoroughly familiar. The commodification of culture and the decay of the aura is for Benjamin, an entirely ambivalent development. For while auratic experience in which nature returns the gaze²²² is precisely the kind of experience the loss of which Benjamin mourns, at the same time, this revolution in the domain of objects is liberatory. For the withering of the aura signifies the loss of tradition's *de facto* authority. Whether or not the shattering of tradition will be incapacitating or enabling is a matter, for Benjamin, of the fate of the now liquidated value of cultural heritage: whether it will be simply invested in and consumed as the commodity or whether it will be used to fund the project of emancipation.

The Artwork essay is written in service of the latter, attempting the redemption of the movies, which Benjamin's essay treats as the mass culture commodity *par excellence*. In it, Benjamin develops new concepts of art criticism, concepts both called for specifically by the new medium and that break decisively with the Romantic tradition, which, with its central concepts of "creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery," is not just implicitly anti-democratic, but complicit with fascism.²²³ While technological reproducibility is what allows for the privatized consumption of cultural products, in the form of the movies, this same technology extends the possibility of a reconstitution of public experience and, as well, a democratic—or at least populist—aesthetic

²²¹ 254.

²²² "Derivation of the aura as the projection of a human social experience onto nature: the gaze is returned," (SW4: "Central Park," 173).

²²³ SW4: "Work of Art," 251.

experience.²²⁴ The disaggregated proletarian mass comes together, in the movie-theater, for an event of public reception. Furthermore, this collective reception is of the mundane. Before the silverscreen, the collective is offered an allegorical (fragmentary) re-presentation of the naturo-social landscape: the matter of our shared lives. “Our bars and city streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories seemed to close relentlessly around us. Then came film and exploded this prison-world with the dynamite of the split second, so that now we can set off calmly on journeys of adventure among its far-flung debris...It is through the camera that we first discover the optical unconscious, just as we discover the instinctual unconscious through psychoanalysis.”²²⁵ Film, in manufacturing unhinged images of the world and bestowing foreign animation upon them, achieves the de-familiarization of the everyday. The ordinary and the conventional, that which, in its very invisibility, conditions our behavior, is suddenly rendered an object of interest, imbued unexpectedly with significance.

Benjamin, in the twelfth thesis, goes so far as liken the movies to epic poetry, which is to say to storytelling in its *Ur*-form:

The technological reproducibility of the artwork changes the relation of the masses to art. The extremely backward attitude toward a Picasso painting changes into a highly progressive reaction to a Chaplin film... With regard to the cinema, the critical and uncritical attitudes of the public coincide. The decisive reason for this is that nowhere more than in the cinema are the reactions of individuals, which together make up the massive reaction of the audience, determined by the imminent concentration of reactions into a mass. No sooner are these reactions manifest than they regulate one another...Painting, by its nature, cannot provide an object of simultaneous collective reception, as

²²⁴ “It is inherent in the technology of film, as of sports, that everyone who witnesses these performances does so as a quasi-expert,” (262).

²²⁵ Ibid, 265-6

architecture has always been able to do, as the epic poem could do at one time, and as film is able to do today... While efforts have been made to present paintings to the masses in galleries and salons, this mode of reception gives the masses no means of organizing and regulating their response. Thus, the same public which reacts progressively to a slapstick comedy inevitably display a backward attitude toward Surrealism.²²⁶

Benjamin identifies film as solidaristic, maintaining that a genuinely collective experience occurs in that individual reactions are pre-determined by the mass reaction that they are about to produce and that, at the same time, control one another. Benjamin is not only willing to consider, but embraces the idea of pre-discursive “communication,” a “conversation” of sorts that occurs wordlessly in the theater before and about what unfolds onscreen.

While Benjamin’s analysis suggests that film is in possession of all the necessary constituents for revolutionary class-consciousness, he nonetheless remains agnostic. “The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one.”²²⁷ As I see it, the Benjaminian audience is posed on the verge; on the one side, there lies the mob, and, on the other, the revolutionary collective. Just as its distractibility holds the audience from a genuine consciousness of their shared condition, so too it prevents them from becoming the fascistic mass.²²⁸ Taking Benjamin’s agnosticism up in the sociological register in which

²²⁶ 264.

²²⁷ 269.

²²⁸ “Even the distracted person can form habits. What is more, the ability to master certain tasks in a state of distraction proves that their performance has become habitual. The sort of distraction that is provided by art represents a covert measure of the extent to which it has become possible to perform new tasks of apperception. Since, moreover, individuals are tempted to evade such tasks, art will tackle the most difficult and most important tasks wherever it is able to mobilize the masses. It does so currently in film. *Reception in a state of distraction—the sort of reception which is increasingly noticeable in all areas of art and is a symptom of profound changes in apperception—finds in film its true training ground.* Film, by virtue of its shock effects, is predisposed to this form of reception. It makes cult value recede into the background, not only because it encourages an evaluating attitude in the audience but also because, at the movies, the evaluating attitude requires no attention. The audience is an examiner, but a distracted one,” (Ibid, 268-9).

it is earned: this is at it should be. For nothing guarantees that community will, in fact, be achieved. Philosophy's power is not predictive. However, it seems to me that Benjamin stalled at this sociological assessment, otherwise alien to his aesthetics, because his is an insufficiently dialectical conception of community. Benjamin is unable, at the end of the day, to think of modern privacy as anything but the enemy to shared social life. As is indicated by his alarming suggestion that the inarticulate mass reaction represents a form of critical reception, his conception of community is one in which privacy is not transformed, but rather overcome. As he writes in the recently published "On Foundations of Philosophy: Theses on Brecht:" "thought should be impoverished, it should only be permitted in so far as it is socially realizable. Brecht says: At least once people no longer need to think on their own, they are unable to think on their own anymore. But to attain an effective social thought, people must give up their false and complicating wealth, namely the wealth of private assessments, standpoints, world-views, in short the wealth of opinions."²²⁹ For Benjamin, community is not experience shared, but experience that is non-private.

Benjamin thus asks the movies "to do, or prove, what can only be done socially,"²³⁰ i.e., in conversation and through the development of reflectively endorsable secular norms. In this indistinction between horde psychology, as Freud would call it, and revolutionary class-consciousness in the cinematic audience, we reach the limits of Benjamin's cultural psychoanalysis. The redemption of privacy is, for Benjamin, its dissolution. Thus, there remains something about privacy and its role and relevance to

²²⁹ 28.

²³⁰ This is to quote, in anticipation, Cavell's *the World Viewed* (14).

modern secularized society that is neither exhausted in Freud's treatment of it nor fully comprehended by Benjaminian cultural psychoanalysis.

What then remains? I would like to suggest that, in "The Storyteller" essay, Benjamin articulates a partial answer to this question even if it remains ultimately unelaborated in his work. In providing a melancholic self-portrait of sorts via the figure of the novelist, Benjamin writes that

[The novel] neither comes from oral tradition nor enters into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has secluded himself. The birthplace of the novel is the individual in his isolation, the individual who can no longer speak of his concerns in exemplary fashion, who himself lacks counsel and can give none.²³¹

Benjamin's work is motivated by, expresses the need for, and attempts to make possible a new self-critical practice of myth-making, a solidaristic practice by which private experience can stake its claim on public life. In other words, it is precisely a concern over, as Benjamin says, exemplarity: the ability to embody one's private conviction in a publically shareable form—open to all and thus potentially criticizable by all.²³² It is here, at this juncture, that we must turn from Benjamin to Cavell, who supplies that which is both extruded from and which grounds Benjamin's work: the hope for a solidaristic practice of critical meaning-making. Or, to put this in terms mutual to

²³¹ 146.

²³² See as well "Some Motifs on Baudelaire," in which Benjamin articulates exemplarity in the following way: "A story does not aim to convey an event *per se*, which is the purpose of information; rather, it embeds the event in the life of the storyteller in order to pass it on as experience to those listening. It thus bears the trace of the storyteller, much the way an earthen vessel bears the brace of the potter's hand," (SW4, 316).

Benjamin and Cavell: an image of solidarity capable of overcoming the isolation or skepticism of modern experience.

CHAPTER IV

THE DIALECTIC OF PRIVACY AND PUBLICITY IN THE WRITING OF STANLEY CAVELL AND THE CRITICAL REDEMPTION OF THE MOVIES

The epistemological problem is the first problem of justice: when we know our position we will know what ought to happen, whether or not we then choose to find out what may forward it or what may not, decide that it is worth trying or that it is not. Rousseau's discovery is less a discovery of new knowledge than a discovery of a new mode of knowledge, a way to use the self as access to the self's society. It is consequently the discovery of a new mode of ignorance. Marx and Freud will call this ignorance unconsciousness, the former of our social present, the latter of our private pasts; but these will prove not to be so different. (Both speak of this ignorance as the result of repression.)²³³

I turn now to Cavell and the project of acknowledgment. The aim of this chapter is to demonstrate not only that Cavell stands as the inheritor of the modernisms of Freud and Benjamin, but moreover that his work represents the dialectical marriage of their respective redemptive enterprises. Where Freud activated private fantasy so that its power could redeem the world as one deserving of desire and Benjamin activated public fantasy in the form of the commodity in order to release its utopian dimension, Cavell's uptake of ordinary language philosophy renders thematic this division of labor. Freud and Benjamin directed their critical efforts at the resolution of the rift between private desire and public life, but could only stop short at this divide, running up against the limits of their own projects. These limits are the explicit subject of Cavell's work, which charts the intertwinement and the irresolution of the autobiographical (or private) and the representative (or public) dimensions of speech.

²³³ CR, 26

For Cavell, “the relation between self and community (because they are composed of one another) is an undying dialectic;”²³⁴ hence they provide mutual access to one another. That our position is not already known, but always to be discovered and that this discovery depends on the capacity to make ourselves intelligible to ourselves and so to others means that the identification and articulation of the private self is, at the same time, the pronouncement of what one takes to hold as a general truth; it is to arrogate the authority to speak for all and to prescribe for all, an authority based on nothing but trust in one’s own experience and one’s ability to give this experience its proper weight. Speech is, per Cavell, necessarily representative and philosophical speech, in particular, proclaims overtly its right to speak in a universal voice. Simultaneously, in speaking authoritatively—on behalf of and for the sake of all—the condition that I ultimately point to is myself: the experiences that I have had and so the ways in which things matter to me. In other words, philosophy implicates itself in autobiography and autobiography, the undertaking of self-representation hence the cultivation of self-knowledge, is thoroughly imbricated in philosophy’s attempt to draw the measurements of the human as such. “The autobiographical dimension of philosophy is internal to the claim that philosophy speaks for the human, for all; that is its necessary arrogance. The philosophical dimension of autobiography is that the human is representative, say, imitative, that each life is exemplary of all, a parable of each; that is humanity’s commonness, which is internal to its endless denials of commonness.”²³⁵

Thus we see that, in treating the public and the private not as isolable spheres, but rather as voices that we use, Cavell establishes an essential convergence between

²³⁴ WV, 138

²³⁵ PP, 11

philosophy and democratic politics. On Cavell's "philosophy of language," if it can so be called, the private and the public cannot be categorically distinguished from one another and it is at the site of their indistinction that politics arises.²³⁶ Cavell maintains that secularized culture must become, in a certain qualified sense, philosophical if the aspiration to democracy is to be preserved. I will argue that this is a sense of philosophy as redemptive criticism, Cavell's uptake of ordinary language philosophy providing the foundation for the allegorical practice of meaning-making that we have seen at work in the texts of Benjamin and Freud. Cavell thus stands as our American redemptive critic, which is to say a critic of democracy where democracy is understood as egalitarian and secular. In this, the argument of this dissertation finds its summation, showing that democracy is the proper scene of redemptive criticism and that redemptive criticism names the culture capable of bearing a genuinely democratic politics.

The argument of this chapter proceeds in four stages. I begin by way of Cavell's redemptive re-casting of the problem of skepticism. In his signature essay, "Knowing and Acknowledging," Cavell re-apprehends the meaning of the anti/skeptical debate beyond its epistemological confinement. In so doing, he develops the central normative concept of his work: that of acknowledgment, in which mutual intelligibility is shown to be, not an epistemic problem, but rather a matter of solidarity. This initial foray into Cavell's distinctive conception of skepticism will serve to align the project of acknowledgment with the redemptive hermeneutics of Freud and Benjamin. After this preliminary establishment of Cavell's methodological affinity with his two predecessors, I then make the case that, in his conception of the ordinary, i.e., the everyday formed in

²³⁶ I am here particularly indebted to Andrew Norris' article "Political Revisions: Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy."

and through the skeptical denial of it, Cavell reveals himself as a dialectical materialist in the sense in which, following Benjamin and Freud, I have been using the term. Cavell's insistence on the "conventionality of human society," that the tenuous bonds of community are based on nothing but our agreement with one another, is met equally by his insistence on the "conventionality of human nature itself,"²³⁷ that our nature is produced in and through historical practices. It is in this oscillation between the conventional and the natural that Cavell's dialectical materialism—his "anthropological, or anthropomorphic, view of necessity"²³⁸—abides. Through my examination of Cavell's conception of convention as the form of second nature, I am able to go on to demonstrate that Cavell's activity of philosophizing is undergirded by the same philosophy of history that supports the critical-redemptive efforts of Freud and Benjamin. Finally, I will turn to the exposition of acknowledgment as it occurs within the context of the Cavellian cinema. Cavell discovers, in the movies, modernity's pre-eminent form of allegorical meaning-making, what Benjamin glimpsed, but remained unable to grasp. The redemption of history must become social practice and the movies, as the site of the public's gathering before the re-collected material of historical experience, represents just such a practice.

Skepticism, Anti-skepticism, & the Dialectic of Privacy and Publicity

Cavell's methodological kinship with Benjamin and Freud and hence his membership in the hermeneutical tradition of redemptive criticism can be established through the elaboration of the ethic that defines their work. In speaking of an "ethic," I

²³⁷ CR, 111

²³⁸ Ibid, 118

intend the general comportment that all three bring to bear on the subjects of their respective studies and the *telos* that determines the character of their hermeneutical procedures, namely the re-apprehension of the quotidian. I have already sketched the significance of this attunement as it is at play in Freud's redemption of dreaming as a graphic art and Benjamin's redemption of mass culture as the expression (and denial) of the utopian desires of the collective. Undertaken on these terms, I defined the approach of this interpretive practice as the predisposition to the everyday as the site of awakening—what Cavell would describe as the return of—or the turn to—the ordinary, where the mundane exists in and as a state of unknownness, fallenness, or neglect.

Within Cavell's work, as in Freud's and Benjamin's, redemption has many occasions and hence the "ordinary," the Cavellian object of critical-redemptive scrutiny, has many forms. Yet, even in its multiplicity, the ordinary is always defined in relation to skepticism. As Cavell remarks, referring to the originality of Wittgenstein but equally providing a characterization of the guiding insight of his own work: "he takes the drift toward skepticism as the *discovery* of the everyday, a discovery of exactly what it is that skepticism would deny."²³⁹ The ordinary is a discovery of the skeptic, the one who either willfully suspends or suffers the interruption of her natural relation to the world, what "under normal circumstances" she would say or do. It can be inferred on the basis of Cavell's articulation of skepticism as "a place, perhaps the central secular place, in which the human wish to deny the condition of human existence is expressed," as a discovery of modernity more generally. What Cavell knows as skepticism is autochthonous to modernity and essential to his concept of it. Cavell's philosophizing arises from out of the insight that secularized social space has no assurance of integrity other than

²³⁹ QO, 170

convention, i.e., our coming together as a public, and that, while the groundlessness of these practices is not something of which we are constantly or necessarily aware, it is a fact that can, at any moment, become available. In this light, the skeptic stands as the emblematic figure through whom the ground (and groundlessness) of a specifically secular modernity articulates itself.

That the ordinary is so easily missed and then, when it appears, so readily questionable, means that the quotidian is oddly both powerful (nothing is stronger, anyway) and yet entirely fragile.²⁴⁰ Skepticism is, we could say, the permanent price—and promise—of a secular form of life in which there is no transcendent authority to which to make appeal. Whatever good reasons that we have for acting, those will have to be discovered immediately before us, but, for the claim of the quotidian to be rightly heard, it must first be subject to re-apprehension. The everyday, the matter that we find immediately before us, is already authoritative in the sense of appearing as self-evident and, in this mute obviousness, not liable to further interrogation. But to find oneself before a *de facto* authority such as this, however, is to be confronted with one wholly anathematic to secular, democratic politics in which no authority can be taken for granted, i.e., on faith alone. Hence, each person must prove in each instance her right to our recognition, each assertion its validity, each object its interest. In this, the notion of the secular intersects with the profane in which a world abandoned by God is one in which nothing is sacred, each thing as meaningful (or meaningless) as the next.

My three redemptive critics undertake the work of cultural interpretation in the thorough-going awareness of what secularity demands and it is from out of this

²⁴⁰ “The ordinary is discovered not as what is perceptually missable, but as what is intellectually dismissable, not what may be but what must be set aside if philosophy’s aspirations to knowledge are to be satisfied” (“Something Out of the Ordinary,” 26).

knowledge that arises their shared affinity for the marginal, the obsolescent, and the overlooked: those phenomena that are reflexively dismissed by scientific or philosophic authority as having no claim to our attention.²⁴¹ In his handling of skepticism, Cavell takes up a discourse that is criticized by his fellow ordinary language critics as senseless or unintelligible and shows it as not only deserving of, but requiring specifically philosophical address even if the redress of this condition might lie significantly beyond the capacities of the discipline.²⁴² As Cavell sees it, the repudiation of the skeptic on the grounds that her position is unintelligible or obviously insincere represents an explicit betrayal of the ethos of this philosophy, which advances “a new claim to philosophy’s old authority, one whose power reside(s) in a certain systematic abdication of authority.”²⁴³ That ordinary language philosophy maintains that disputes over meaning, i.e., philosophical disputes, are to be resolved in terms of recalling actual criteria for intelligibility, i.e., what we ordinarily say and do in specific circumstances, means that, in these socio-linguistic matters, the only recourse is “autobiographical;” one must, in trying to substantiate one’s sense of how word and world find their alignment, call upon one’s own experience. In this, all native speakers are equally ordinary speakers. Hence the ordinary language philosopher who reflexively condemns the skeptic as incapable of meaning what she says exerts a claim to expertise to which she has no right, her repudiation no more than a piece of abuse. Moreover, she undercuts the ground of any authority she might have, which can rest on nothing other than the identification and

²⁴¹ “[The essay *Must we Mean What We Say?*] is explicitly a defense of the work of my teacher Austin against an attack that in effect dismissed that work as unscientific, denied it as a contender in the ranks of philosophy at all. (Since a response to some denial was part of my cue in taking up Thoreau and Emerson, even in thinking about Shakespeare and then about film, there is the sense of a pattern here, perhaps of further interest),” *Pitch of Philosophy*, 9.

²⁴² In the essay “Knowing and Acknowledging,” Cavell refers explicitly to Malcolm and Cook.

²⁴³ PP, 9-10

publicization of her private sensibility—her capacity to take stock in and master in an exemplary way the experience that she has at her disposal.

Because the way you must rely upon yourself as a source of what is said when demands that you grant full title to others as sources of that data—not out of politeness, but because the nature of the claim you make for yourself is repudiated without that acknowledgment: it is a claim that no one knows better than you whether and when a thing is said, and if this is not to be taken as a claim to expertise (a way of taking it which repudiates it) then it must be understood to mean that you know no better than others what you claim to know. With respect to the data of philosophy our positions are the same. This is scarcely a discovery of ordinary language philosophy; it is the latest confirmation of what the oracle said to Socrates. The virtue of proceeding from ordinary language is that it makes (or ought to make) this message inescapably present to us.²⁴⁴

Thus, according to Cavell, the procedures of this new philosophy are democratic, in the sense that no one is or can be granted authority over anyone else, and egalitarian, in the sense that all have an equal right to speak and be heard, upon which follows the equal obligation to listen. Not only is this the ethos of Cavell's philosophy, but, moreover, this philosophy aims to enable such conversation. It takes, as its therapeutic task, the recovery of the human voice, the sense of the self as authorized to speak which is at the same time the hope that it can be heard. Accordingly, Cavell is able to see that the *ordinary* (typical) ordinary language philosopher's dismissal of the skeptic is illegitimate, a performative contradiction that undoes the ethic upon which this philosophy is grounded.

It is Cavell's position that "philosophy's task is not so much to defeat the skeptical argument as to preserve it, as though the philosophical profit of the argument

²⁴⁴ MWMW, 240

would be to show not how it might end but why it must begin and why it must have no end, at least none within philosophy, or what we think of as philosophy.”²⁴⁵ For Cavell, skepticism gives distorted expression to a genuine insight and hence what this discourse requires is not philosophical refutation, but rather elaboration or working-through, the re-comprehension of the meaning of the skeptic’s terms and the point in her using them thus. The insight that abides in the skeptic’s position is that, when it comes to knowledge of another, certainty is not enough; rather knowledge of another is bound up fundamentally with the acknowledgment of the other’s freedom. What I can know of the other depends upon the freedom of her expression, what she is able or willing to disclose to me, and upon the extent and limits of my responsiveness to her. Skepticism, in this way, secretly rehearses the modern tragedy of the disarticulation between the public and the private. According to Cavell, the skeptic’s insight into the limits of intelligibility is the insight from which secular philosophy must begin and to which it must always recur.²⁴⁶ Skepticism thus holds the same position in Cavell’s thinking as dreams do in the work of Freud and the *Trauerspiel* in the late work of Benjamin. As Freud and Benjamin redeemed these phenomena for the purpose of gaining new critical access to the present, Cavell treats the discourse of skepticism on the model of the elaboration of a fantasy, transfiguring its meaning in such a way that a narrowly epistemological problem shows itself as a reflection of the diremption between the public and private spheres.

Cavell’s redemptive reading of skepticism is predicated upon and evinces his anti-criterial reading of Wittgenstein’s understanding of the significance of “agreement in

²⁴⁵ QO, 5

²⁴⁶ Cavell refers to this as his “conception of philosophy as the achievement of the unpoetical, of the refusal to take sides in metaphysical positions, of my quest to show that those are not useful sides but needless constructions,” (PP, 22).

judgments.”²⁴⁷ When Cavell advanced this anti-criterial reading in his doctoral dissertation, which was to become the *Claim of Reason*, this was in contrast to the foundationalism that had dominated Wittgenstein studies and that read Wittgenstein as advancing the view that criteria constituted a highly systemized set of specifications for the use of terms. On the, let us call it, flatly anti-skeptical reading, the possession of a native tongue consists in the mastery of abstract principles of grammar and mutual intelligibility is assured insofar as individuals speak and listen from within this grammatical framework. This is to say that their use of words in a given instance must conform, if they are to be intelligible, to a pre-existing linguistic structure conceived of as a neutral middle term of sorts.²⁴⁸ Read in this way, Wittgenstein’s interpretation of criteria constitutes his decisive and certain refutation of skepticism. As Cavell sees it, however, the entire pathos of Wittgenstein’s text is set against just such a view in which language, of itself, takes care of meaning. Such a reading not only suppresses the critical insight of the *Philosophical Investigations* into the necessary opacity of language, but further, in so doing, countermands the therapeutic labors of the text.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Cavell’s particular brand of anti-criterialism is from whence his originality as an ordinary language philosopher and that which unexpectedly positions him within the tradition of dialectical materialism. I will return to this point in the following section of this chapter to argue that Cavell’s treatment of the Wittgensteinian idea that, between native speakers, there is “agreement in judgments” represents a critical allegorization of the myth of contract.

²⁴⁸ See, in particular, Baker and Hacker.

²⁴⁹ Readers such as Diamond, Conant, and (more often than not) Mulhall refer to Wittgenstein’s methods as therapeutic in that they aim to show that what appears to be substantial nonsense, i.e., that which, in its violation of grammatical rules indicates the negative space of inexpressible metaphysical profundities, is but mere nonsense or what Mulhall refers to as “distinctive psychological kind of nonsense, one that has a certain kind of appeal to us,” (*Wittgenstein’s Private Language Argument*, 5). Wittgensteinian therapy, on this view, aims to cure us of our attachment to the mystical notion that there is some realm of extra-linguistic insight that, while not subject to direct articulation, can be indicated through the construction of determinately unintelligible propositions. In coming to recognize this as an illusion, we are, at the same time, cured of our disappointment with the limits of language: the sense that there is something that we cannot say or do. As will become clear, Cavell’s conception of therapy differs radically from this “resolute” reading of Wittgenstein. For, as I will, of course, argue, Cavell conceives of therapy in a redemptive vein.

As is relentlessly played out through the pages of the *Philosophical Investigations*, the learning of a word does not consist in the mastery of a set of rules for the condition of its use; rather mastery is demonstrated in the language learner's ability to use a word in unanticipated contexts. Involved in mutual intelligibility is an ineliminable element of individual judgment. In being able to carry on with a word, to see how far it will take us, we must rely upon our own sense of what is appropriate and trust that what is for us a natural extension will be a usage intelligible to others: one to which they can give their consent. Mutual intelligibility depends, on the one hand, upon our capacity for self-authorization and our ability and/or willingness to find the words capable of bearing our meaning and, on the other, on the flexibility to follow others in their linguistic ventures down paths of significance as yet unexplored. Cavell captures the former requirement in his concept of "voice."²⁵⁰ Voice registers the fact that, in speaking, if I am to make sense, I must take or reveal a specific position and my ability to do this can be lost or stolen, stifled in doubt. The significance of our speech is not merely an effect of the words that we speak; rather "what they mean, and whether they mean anything, depends solely upon whether I am using them so as to make my meaning."²⁵¹ Cavell, rather than maintaining that the specificity and normativity of our language is the effect of a framework of rules, holds that the intelligibility of what we say depends upon whether or not we, in that saying, achieve the articulation of that which *conditions* our speech where those conditions are understood as what counts for us, why we say what we do when. The challenge of speaking, of having or finding one's voice, is to discover whether or not we can mean what we say. Intending our words—making a point with

²⁵⁰ See in particular *The Pitch of Philosophy*.

²⁵¹ MWMW, 269

them and so projecting the ground of our speech into the language that we use—means that we take responsibility for them—are willing to make ourselves understood—which means, further, that we are willing to go on, to elaborate our meaning. Intelligibility is incompletely thought as simply an issue of *what* one says, i.e., the intelligibility of an assertion. Rather, integral to the intelligibility of what one says is the point of saying it: why *these* words here and now?—To what end? “To know what a person has said you have to know that he or she has *asserted* something, and know what he or she has asserted. What difficulty is there in that? No difficulty, nothing is easier. But what is easy, then is to understand the point of his words; for that is essential to knowing that he has asserted something and knowing what he has asserted.”²⁵² In other words, mutual intelligibility concerns the way in which we are attuned to one another: the specificity of the positions that we hold *vis-à-vis* one another and the context of this particular interaction within, perhaps, the greater context of our relationships. In attempting to make sense of what the other says, we are always compelled to go beyond what is merely asserted and, conversely, in our own efforts at self-expression, our words always go further than intended. This imaginative dimension—this openness in the face of the other’s opacity—is what Cavell means to capture in the idea of acknowledging another. In acknowledging another person, we accept her independence from us and this acceptance is the basis upon which mutual understanding is not guaranteed, but through which it unfolds.

Through developing mutual intelligibility in terms of voice and acknowledgment, Cavell means to de-emphasize criteria, demonstrating that criteria do not prospectively

²⁵² CR, 208

determine the full range of a word's application; they cannot.²⁵³ A word would not be a symbolic token if it could not be projected into new circumstances and find application in a variety of distinct instances. Its meaning is therefore general enough to allow this projection, but this generality cannot be exhaustively articulated in advance as a strict rule of usage. The definition of a word, the range of what it comprehends, is to be discovered through its unfolding in and across diverse contexts, its center of gravity (re)discovered in and through the on-going examination of the particular instances in which it finds meaningful employ. This flexibility—a word's identity constituted through its iterability or self-othering—is as fundamental to meaning as the stability of language. As Cavell writes, we must “keep in balance two fundamental facts about human forms of life, and about the concepts formed in those forms: that any form of life and every concept integral to it has an indefinite number of instances and directions of projection; and that this variation is not arbitrary. *Both* the ‘outer’ variance and the ‘inner’ constancy are necessary if a concept is to accomplish its tasks.”²⁵⁴ So, while Cavell rejects the reading of criteria as impersonal norms that strictly govern linguistic exchange, neither does he subscribe to a voluntarism in which meaning is arbitrary, significance secured upon nothing other than mutual consent. For while criteria cannot determine all the circumstances in which a concept might find application—“though language—what we call language—is tolerant, allows projection, not just any projection will be acceptable, i.e., will communicate.”²⁵⁵ Rather “an object or activity or event onto

²⁵³ This impossibility is constitutive of what Derrida has referred to as the signifying form. See in particular “Signature, Event Context” in which Derrida engages with ordinary language philosophy as accomplished by the work of Austin.

²⁵⁴ CR, 185

²⁵⁵ Ibid, 182

or into which a concept is projected must *invite* or *allow* that projection.”²⁵⁶ How do we know when a projection is invited or authorized? All we can do is see how a word means or fails to mean. And our senses here may differ—and are free to do so. As Cavell writes, “the only source of confirmation here is ourselves. And each of us is fully authoritative in this struggle. An initial disagreement may be overcome...but if the disagreement persists, there is no appeal beyond us, or if beyond us two, then not beyond some eventual us. There is a thing such as intellectual tragedy. It is not a matter of saying something false.”²⁵⁷

As Cavell sees it, while criteria serve as the potential means of negotiating such disagreements, they do not negate the openness of our linguistic practices. This constitutive incompleteness of language is from whence the threat or fantasy of a private language. While skepticism and anti-skepticism appear as opposed positions, Cavell’s analysis in “Knowing and Acknowledging” shows that both express the fantasy of a condition of intelligibility that occurs independent of my investment in these words and my sense of the world that is at stake in communicating them—or hearing them—here and now.

[Skepticism] begins with a full appreciation of the decisively significant facts that I may be suffering when no one else is, and that (no one) else may know (or care?); and that others may be suffering and I not know it, which is equally appalling. But then something happens, and instead of pursuing the significance of these facts, he is enmeshed so it may seem—in questions of whether we can have the same suffering, one another’s suffering. But whether or not one senses that the issue has become deflected in the course of his investigation, his

²⁵⁶ Ibid, 16

²⁵⁷ Ibid, 19

motivation in it is still stronger, even more comprehensible, than that of the anti-skeptic.²⁵⁸

Cavell treats skepticism not as a purely epistemological problem, then, but as a plight of mind that is primarily existential or ethical in nature. Cavell characterizes the skeptical problematic as a concern over the way in which my existence is implicated in the existence of others and yet how our lives, nonetheless, may pass one another by. This is why other-minds skepticism takes as its natural topic the concept of pain, since the concern of the skeptic is the helplessness that passes for privacy. Cavell reads other-minds skepticism as a response to the frightening yet undeniable fact of our dependence upon one another and the world and the difficulty of properly honoring, acceding to, that vulnerability. What the skeptic maintains is that, when it comes to knowledge of another, certainty is not enough and, in this, the skeptic is right. Knowledge of another cannot be secured by means of the objectivating attitude.²⁵⁹ Knowing another requires that I put myself in relation to her and actively engage with her. It is a matter of self-revelation and responsiveness. Hence what is decisive in so-called “knowledge of other minds” is not what I know, but what I *do* in the presence of the other and what she does in mine. Our knowledge of one another is ultimately relational, fundamentally a matter of praxis. It is this practical dimension of mutual intelligibility to which Cavell means to draw our attention in shifting the emphasis from knowledge to acknowledgment.²⁶⁰

²⁵⁸ Ibid, 247

²⁵⁹ “There are special problems about our knowledge of another; *exactly the problems the skeptic sees*. And these problems can be said to invoke a special concept of knowledge, or region of the concept of knowledge, one which is not a function of certainty,” (MWMW, 258).

²⁶⁰ “But why is sympathy expressed in this way? Because your suffering makes a *claim* on me. It is not enough that I *know* (am certain) that you suffer--I must do or reveal something (whatever can be done). In a word, I must *acknowledge* it, otherwise I do not know what “(your or his) being in pain means. Is. (This is the “acknowledging it to you.” There is also something to be called ‘acknowledging it *to* you,’” (MWMW, 263).

According to Cavell, the skeptic is right to recognize and insist upon the possibility of our unknownness and our unknowingness inasmuch as this is a possibility internal to the workings of human language and communication. But then, as he says, something happens and this ethical line of inquiry into the meaning and consequences of human separateness finds itself derailed, framed as a narrowly epistemological quandary. Cavell diagnoses the philosophical position of skepticism as a defense against the facts of human solidarity, facts that should be read simultaneously in terms of the ungraspability of our dependence and the depth of our separateness and which mean that, in our dealings with others, nothing assures that mutuality will be achieved. Because we are independent from one another, we may remain alone, unable to make ourselves understood or lacking the company that would care to help us discover what we mean. This is a possibility that cannot be foreclosed, separateness standing as both the condition of isolation and the ground of our mutuality. Yet the skeptic continues to insist on certainty and, in so doing, produces a criterion for knowing another that cannot be fulfilled. In her insistence that nothing less than feeling what another feels constitutes genuine knowledge of them, she recuses herself from the responsibility (and the peril) of actively engaging with the other.

This means that, according to Cavell, anti-skepticism, which counters the skeptic's claim of strict privacy with the insistence upon full publicity, does not represent a solution to the skeptical problematic. Rather, it cements the narrowly epistemological form in which the philosophical problem of privacy is trapped and condemns the skeptic's insight into the ground(lessness) of community to go unrecorded. As Cavell indicates, this is even more perverse than skepticism in that it not only maintains the

wrong-headed criterion of unmediated access to the other's inner life—knowledge of the other as if despite her otherness—but further claims that this criterion can, in fact, be met.

The head on effort to defeat skepticism allows us to think that we have explanations where in fact we lack them. More important, in fighting the skeptic too close in, as it were, the anti-skeptic takes over—or encourages—the major condition of the skeptic's argument, viz., that the problem of knowledge about other minds is the problem of certainty. At the same time, he neglects the fundamental insight of the skeptic by trying to single-mindedly prove its non-existence—the insight, as I wish to put it, that *certainty is not enough*.²⁶¹

The skeptic sees that language cannot, of itself, assure mutuality yet refuses the responsibility that thereby devolves upon her to project herself into her words. She frees herself from this obligation by rendering privacy an absolute barrier to intimacy rather than acknowledging it as the condition of mutuality. The anti-skeptic, on the other hand, insists that, with respect to the other, there is nothing that I cannot be said to know or fail to know. Provoked by the skeptic's "scary conclusion" that we can never know what another undergoes,²⁶² the anti-skeptic insists that the "descriptive identity" of our pain represents sufficient ground to assert that we do indeed feel the same thing and hence that we can be certain. In so doing, he effaces the specificity of the other. Through the fantasy of language as a grammatical framework that mechanically assures our alignment with one another, the anti-skeptic denies the difference that renders mutuality and my own powers of self-representation intrinsically fragile. Such a fantasy amounts to an instrumentalization of language and effectively prevents us from recognizing the fact that intelligibility requires our giving ourselves to our words and trusting that they will be able to bear the specificity of our meaning.

²⁶¹ Ibid, 258.

²⁶² Ibid, 246.

Skepticism, which interprets the uniqueness of my existence as its incommunicability, and anti-skepticism, which effaces the personal dimension of speech in claiming that intelligibility depends upon the conformity of our talk to an abstract set of linguistic rules, are, per Cavell, of a piece. Through their polarization of the personal (the autobiographical) and the representative (the philosophic) dimensions of speech, they constitute a framework that effectively forecloses the possibility of acknowledging that it is precisely the depth of our separateness that constitutes the unity of our condition. Only through acknowledging the individuality of others can I turn to face them, allow them to reveal themselves, and, in turn reveal my own position. Both skepticism and anti-skepticism evince a desire for pure intelligibility, for a language free from the contaminating effect of particularity and the responsibilities of both honoring and broaching our distance from one another.

The discourses of skepticism and anti-skepticism are internally related and they incite and sustain one another, standing equally as hysterical denials of the mundane fact that it is only in our attunement to one another, our willingness to make ourselves known and our wish to know the other, that community abides.²⁶³ Thus, while Cavell develops the figure of the anti-skeptic from out of his engagement with the writings of Malcolm and Cook, the “skeptic” and the “anti-skeptic” are, at the end of the day, to be read not as referring to specific persons or positions. Rather, as in Wittgenstein, the anti/skeptical debate represents the internal, animating argument of modernity with and over itself. As Cavell remarks, “it is not as if the problem is for opposed positions to be reconciled, but for the halves of the mind to go back together. This ambition frequently comes to grief.

²⁶³ The antiskeptic maintains that “the wish for it (feeling what another feels) is not a real wish. But why isn’t this hysterical?” (MWMW, 248.)

But it provides the particular satisfaction as well as the particular anguish, of a particular activity of philosophizing.”²⁶⁴ In other words, the goal of Cavell’s therapeutic endeavor is not to synthesize these antitheses nor to expose either as baseless, but rather to restore awareness of the dialectical interrelation (or involution) between the public and the private.

Skepticism as fantastic discourse

What is actively repressed by the anti/skeptical framework is that mutual understanding requires, on the one hand, voice, and, on the other, acknowledgment. The retrieval of voice and the possibility of acknowledgment require the redemption of the skeptical insight from out of which this dilemma arises and which provokes the reactive anti-skeptical stance. Whereas the anti-skeptical picture of language arises in the denial of the need for individual judgment in language-use, the skeptical view acknowledges the personal dimension of speech yet takes it as proof of the arbitrariness of meaning as though individuality were no more than idiosyncrasy. Hence, Cavell sees the skeptical impulse as deeper: arising from a more honest assessment of the straits upon which interrelationality is founded. On Cavell’s reading, the skeptic’s absolutization of privacy as incommunicability both expresses and denies a “wish for a *response* to my expressions.”²⁶⁵ The other-minds skeptic, worried over the basis of her connection to others, is motivated by the want of community. Yet, in her attempt to discover the certain ground of mutuality, what she finds is that no such ground exists: that what we can know of others always depends upon their expressiveness and our willingness and

²⁶⁴ MWMW, 241

²⁶⁵ Ibid, 253

ability to read the meaning of these equivocal expressions. Cavell's skeptic is appalled by her insight that our privacy is, at the same time, potentially our sentence to unknowness and unknowingness.²⁶⁶ The skeptic thereby transforms the always tenuous basis of community into the impossibility of publicity, inoculating herself from the threat of isolation through her preemptive withdrawal. For Cavell, this amounts to an ethical recusal, a flight from the responsibility of actively revealing oneself through speech. Cavell claims that what motivates the skeptical stance, in which human finitude is transformed into an irredeemable epistemic failure, is a fear of inarticulateness. But this desire for a response to one's separateness must, insofar as it results from the repressed knowledge that the significance of one's expressions and experience is not wholly a matter of one's intentions but dependent upon its reception and uptake by others, simultaneously be read as a terror of unmitigated exposure: that my voice will not be heard, my meanings remain unacknowledged .

“The fantasy of a private language, underlying the wish to deny the publicness of language, turns out...to be a fantasy, or fear, either of inexpressiveness, one in which I am not merely unknown, but in which I am powerless to make myself known; or one in which what I express is beyond my control”—so a fantasy of suffocation or of exposure...Accordingly, I am led to stress the condition that I find to precede, to ground the possibility and the necessity of, ‘the desire to express at all,’ namely the terror of absolute inexpressiveness, suffocation, which at the same time reveals itself as a terror of absolute expressiveness, unconditioned exposure; they are the extreme states of voicelessness.²⁶⁷

On the one hand, the idea of the privacy of language expresses a sense of incapacitation, as though the instrument of language, the medium in which we are granted intimacy,

²⁶⁶ “Our concept of my knowledge of another is bound up with the concept of my freedom, an independence from the other, from all others—which I may or may not act upon. What is this ‘knowing a person,’” (Ibid, 253)?

²⁶⁷ *Contesting Tears*, 43

were what rendered us lame and prevented us from ever reaching one another. On the other hand, the insistence on privacy as unknowability stands as an attempt to deny the fact of human vulnerability, that I am exposed the world in ways that are beyond my control. Privacy is transformed into a confinement that is simultaneously protective and suffocating. Skepticism, taken up from the side of this aspect, appears as a fear of exposure to the other's penetrating, objectifying gaze, as though my subjectivity were not my own to be mastered and expressed, but something that escaped me entirely. Taken "positively" then, skepticism is a fantasy of self-sufficiency (that only I can know what I mean) and so of assured authority. Individuality here is not something to be discovered in relation to others, but rather safeguarded, the inexpressible singularity of one's existence the only proof that one can have of its worth. At the same time, this fantasy solves the problem of self-knowledge, as though the exclusive ownership of sensations amounted to their intelligibility. The fantasy of a private language is of the inner life of the individual as transparent to that individual and so of the lack of need for the mediating and interpretive work of language.

Cavell reads skepticism as a compromise-formation of sorts—as Benjamin read the commodity—which is to say as a text that expresses and partially satisfies a repudiated desire as it simultaneously constitutes a defense against it. Motivated by a deep ambivalence, which must itself be denied, the skeptic's words are "the only words (they are the *right*) words for meeting the situation he has found himself in."²⁶⁸

Skepticism, as Cavell sees it, is a rationalization of an all too common disappointment with human relations, a fear of my own inscrutability to myself, and an attempt to inoculate myself against the anxiety over the ways in which we are unintentionally and

²⁶⁸ MWMW, 249

indeterminately expressively linked to one another in our daily life. Cavell, in acknowledging the skeptic (and the anti-skeptic) in himself, transcribes this philosophical dilemma such that it becomes legible as a plight of mind that is latent to the structure of modern selfhood understood as the site or product of a post-theological loss of authorization (god, too, was a solution to the problem of the insufficiency of criteria to settle meaning). Against resolute Wittgensteinians who would treat the skeptic as one enslaved to philosophical emptiness, Cavell reveals the skeptic's position as expressing anxiety over the inescapable fact that, in our efforts to make ourselves known and to know others, there is and ought to be no guarantee. In other words, Cavell redeems skepticism, transforming the negation of the concept of community into an occasion for its re-formation.

Criteria & Convention—or, Cavell's Natural History

For me the uncanniness of the ordinary is epitomized by the possibility or threat of what philosophy has called skepticism, understood (as in my studies of Austin and of the latter Wittgenstein I have come to understand it) as the capacity, even desire, of ordinary language to repudiate itself, specifically to repudiate its power to word the world, to apply to the things we have in common, or to pass them by. (By 'the desire of ordinary language to repudiate itself' I mean—doesn't it go without saying?—a desire on the part of speakers of a native or mastered tongue who desire to assert themselves, and despair of it. . . (My conception of the ordinary) responds to the fantastic in what human beings will accustom themselves to, call this the surrealism of the habitual—as if to be human is forever to be prey to turning your corner of the human race, hence perhaps all of it, into some new species of the genus of humanity, for the better or for the worst. I might describe my philosophical task as one of outlining the necessity, and the lack of necessity, in the sense of the human as inherently strange, say unstable, its quotidian as forever fantastic. . .²⁶⁹

²⁶⁹ QO, 154

While the skeptic endorses a grammatical anarchism, viewing language-use as ungoverned and ungovernable and so any appearance of intersubjective order or coherence to be but an illusion, the anti-skeptic takes up Wittgenstein's conception of criteria as a cudgel by which to beat back the skeptic, disallowing her insight into the essential indeterminacy of language hence further repressing the fact that mutuality is not prospectively assured but must be achieved from out of our respective privacies. In opposition to the skeptic's insistence that the rules of language do not suffice for the task of knowing other minds, the anti-skeptic conceptualizes criteria as a framework regulating linguistic exchange that constitutes a prior contract of understanding to which we can refer back to definitively settle disputes over meaning.²⁷⁰ On Cavell's reading, while criterial elaboration may have the power to restore us to our natural habituation of the everyday, this ability is not vindicatory. It is, as I will show, redemptive.

In this section, I step back from Cavell's engagement with skepticism as it appears in the essay "Knowing and Acknowledging" so as to re-traverse his reading of our "agreement in judgments" in terms of the conventionality of criteria. In re-treading this ground, I aim to show that, despite his seeming a-historicism, Cavell's philosophical practice is undergirded by the same philosophy of history that serves as the theoretical basis of the redemptive operations of Benjamin and Freud. In this section, I will argue that Cavell should himself be read as a dialectical materialist, i.e., as one who writes from and aims to make available the perspective of natural history. Cavell's non-historicist understanding of the power of history leads him to view convention mythically, which is to say, as simultaneously conservative and revolutionary. As we have seen, there is no fact of the matter that grounds our mutuality. Rather, the harmony of our collective

²⁷⁰ See Jonathan Lear's "On Reflection: the Legacy of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy."

practices, what Cavell calls “the ordinary,” only emerges as some identifiable *thing* in the breakdown of the (seemingly) intersubjective weave of everyday communication. In establishing this, I will, as well, begin to more decisively develop the claim that Cavell’s uptake of Wittgenstein’s “philosophy of language” offers itself to be read as a critical allegorization of the myth of contract and that, in general, Cavell’s conception of acknowledgment offers an alternative interpretation of the possibility and promise of democracy, an argument that will find its completion in my reading of Cavell’s anarchic cinema.

In his reading of Wittgenstein, Cavell places central emphasis upon the notion that community depends upon an agreement that is immemorial in character. While, according to Cavell, communication is only possible because there is “agreement in judgments” and this agreement is prior to linguistic exchange, he nonetheless maintains that criteria do not pre-date the semantic emergency that calls them forth. Rather criteria arise in and through a moment of crisis and their evocation is meant to restore the sense of the everyday that has been thrown into skeptical disorder or suffered philosophical derangement. Hence the ordinary field of understanding to which we are returned only ever emerges in a moment of crisis; our pre-reflective “agreement” showing itself in its failure to obtain. The ordinary receives retrospective constitution and community is discovered belatedly, if at all. This means that what is taken as Cavell’s conservatism as a thinker or, in an extreme instance as his totalitarianism, is a mistaking.²⁷¹ Cavell’s emphasis on the ordinary does not represent a plea for or defense of the way we do things around here, as though the evocation of the ordinary represented the end rather than the beginning of the conversation over the shared matter of our lives. Nor does the solution

²⁷¹ See Ewa Płonowska-Ziarek’s troubling essay, “Stanley Cavell and the Economy of Skepticism.”

come in the form of a Romantic individualism, the problem of meaning transcended through the will alone. Rather, Cavell forwards a view of convention as second nature—neither arbitrary nor absolute, but rather a matter of historical settlement and so available for excavation and re-building.

In his idea of the “ordinary,” Cavell registers the harmony of our collective practices, i.e., what we all say and do, and simultaneously that there is no additional fact of the matter that anchors this world of shared meanings and activities. A form of life is only held together insofar as there exists a pre-reflective trust that we do, in fact, occupy the same community and so are comprehensible to one another, this confidence both shored up by and preserving the stability of our shared practices. As in our preliminary discussion of the concepts of voice and acknowledgment, it is nothing more—and nothing less—than our willingness for conversation that assures human intercourse. Fundamental to mutual intelligibility is the desire to practically engage with one another. This is the insight that Cavell retrieves from the skeptic that “our fundamental relation to the world is not one of knowing.” Rather knowledge is itself predicated on and shaped in terms of on-the-ground practical engagements—everydayness—a tacit form of knowledge that is a “knowing-how” rather than a “knowing that.” Such is the radicality and dialectical nature of Cavell’s materialism: on his assessment, we are only given a world in and through language, the withdrawn foundation of human communication nothing other than this mutual attunement, this fellow feeling or accord, without which neither agreement nor disagreement would be possible. The nature of this agreement, how deep it runs and how far it can take us, is not subject to direct scrutiny and so cannot be known beforehand. Rather it is expressed and open to discovery in the intercourse of

daily life. In a gloss on Wittgenstein's suggestion that individuals who occupy the same linguistic community share "agreements in judgments," Cavell writes

The idea of agreement here is not that of coming to or arriving at an agreement on a given occasion, but of being in agreement throughout, being in harmony, like pitches or tones or clocks, or weighing scales, or columns of figures...It is meant to question whether a philosophical explanation is needed, or wanted, for the fact of agreement in the language human beings use together, an explanation, say, in terms of meanings or conventions or basic terms or propositions which are to provide the foundation of our agreements. For nothing is deeper than the fact, or the extent, of agreement itself.²⁷²

To say that "nothing is deeper" is to bestow upon Wittgensteinian grammatical investigations and the criteria elicited thereby, i.e., the "schematism of a word,"²⁷³ a quasi-transcendental status in which asking what we call a thing and querying the modalities and implications of such a calling (establishing the nature or parameters of the language-game in which such a calling is at home) is the discovery of the conditions of possibility of said phenomena.²⁷⁴

Simply put: we are agreed (or not) in the language that we use. The intelligibility of the world hangs upon our customs and concepts, the investigation of our linguistic practices aimed at uncovering the specific attunements tacitly at play in our discursive shaping of phenomena. This is to say that, while it is the case that, for Cavell, the limits of the known and knowable world are drawn by the limits of our grammar, criteria are not invariant. Rather this primal orientation is gained through our habituation into a form

²⁷² CR, 32

²⁷³ Ibid, 32

²⁷⁴ Espen Hammer's book, *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*, offers an exemplary reading of this dimension of Cavell's thought. As he writes, "While being tempted to call (criteria) a priori, Cavell's suggestion is that they should be viewed as a species of transcendental knowledge. The usefulness of Kantian terminology reveals itself in the analogy between Kant's effort to uncover the conditions of possibility of knowledge and the ordinary language philosopher's attempt to explore the conditions of possibility of phenomena in general," (10).

of life, which is to say, into a particular culture. That our grammar is as it is—that we call a thing what we do and, in so calling it, delimit its nature—is a matter of convention. It could have been otherwise. To say that our *a priori* is purely a matter of convention is not to say that it is *merely* conventional as though, because of human devising, it is less complete than that which is by nature. “*What* I take as a matter of course is not itself a matter of course. It is a matter of history, a matter of what arrives at and departs from a present human interest. I cannot *decide* what I take as a matter of course, any more than I can decide what interests me. I have to find out.”²⁷⁵ To speak of what occurs without human decision—what is beyond our control—is to invoke necessity, but, according to Cavell, what is beyond our control is what we, you and I, take or have as self-evident, as obviously—inarguably—an instance of something. This acceptance of or acquiescence to the self-evident—the obviousness of the obvious, as Althusser would call it—upon which the effectiveness of our conventions is secured must be recognized as a historical precipitate. Cavell treats this bedrock of thinking as a form of inheritance, the present moment as the incurrence of the accumulated effect of the temporal unfolding and accretion of human interest. Because this pre-reflective acceptance of the everyday represents the sedimentation of history, convention is not to be understood as arbitrary, as having no rightful claim to our recognition, nor is its compulsory nature tyrannical, as though convention’s power were not a consequence of our complicity.

What Cavell discovers in his examination of Wittgensteinian criteria is “the depth of convention in human life; a discovery which insists not only on the conventionality of human society but, we could say, on the conventionality of human nature itself, on what Pascal meant when he said “custom is our nature” (*Pensees*, 89); perhaps on what an

²⁷⁵ CR, 122-123

existentialist means by saying that man has no nature.”²⁷⁶ And, one could add, what Marx meant, in a passage significant to Benjamin, in claiming that “the labor-process... is the everlasting nature-imposed condition of human existence, and therefore is independent of every social phase of that existence, or rather, is common to every such phase.”²⁷⁷ The question of human nature is, for Cavell as for Marx, properly taken up as the question of human capacity, our needs realized through and hence interpreted by the means—the customs and technologies—of their fulfillment and their representation. The social practices that constitute the basic phenomenological fabric of the everyday are established and continue to develop through the way in which individuals come together (and come apart) in the attempt to realize and/or fulfill their need. In this way, the appearance of our own nature is contingent upon the historical development of our capacities. For Cavell and for Marx, what is at stake in the issue of convention—the questioning of our conventions—is the discovery of where and how those capacities stand in a given moment and this is methodologically fundamental to them both. Cavell and Marx maintain that nature is discoverable only indirectly through the way in which it finds expression in the projects and projections of culture. In a striking passage on baseball that exemplifies the conservative-revolutionary nature of his thinking, Cavell writes that

Very little of what goes on among human beings, very little of what goes on in so limited an activity as a game, is *merely* conventional (done *solely* for convenience). In baseball, it is merely conventional for the home team to take the field first or for an umpire to stand behind the catcher rather than behind the pitcher (which might be safer). In the former instance it is convenient to have

²⁷⁶ *Ibid*, 111

²⁷⁷ *Capital*, 290

such a matter routinely settled one way or the other; in the latter instance it must have been found more convenient for the task at hand, i.e., it permits greater accuracy in calling pitches, and positions an official so that he is on top of plays at home plate and faces him so that his line of sight crosses those of the other umpires. More or less analogous advantages will recommend, say, the Gerber convention in bridge. But it can seem that really *all* the rules of a game, each act it consists of, is conventional. There is no necessity in permitting three strikes instead of two or four; in dealing thirteen cards rather than twelve or fifteen. – What would one have in mind here? That two or four are just as good? Meaning what? That it would not alter the essence of the game to have it so? But from what position is this supposed to be claimed? By someone who does or does not know what ‘the essence of the game’ is?—e.g., that it contains passages which are duels between pitcher and batter, that ‘getting hit’, ‘drawing a walk’, and ‘striking a batter out’ must have *certain* ranges of difficulty. It is such matters that the ‘convention’ of permitting three strikes is in service of. So a justification for saying that a different practice is ‘just as good’ or ‘better’ is that it is *found* just as good or better (by those who know and care about the activity).

The “depth of convention” is to be read not just in terms of the profundity of our need for it as though it were merely a function of our helplessness and vulnerability. Rather convention is deep in that the nature of the agreement upon which it is established is not such that it can simply be withdrawn or given in a moment. We find or recognize certain things as necessary: as having to be the case. Furthermore, while it is undeniable that our practices are contingent in the sense that not every species of humanity will employ or even have a need of these particular practices, the conventions or rules that give shape to and govern these practices have an internal necessity called on by the very nature of the activity, which is to say the way in which that activity reveals or cultivates human nature:

But is the *whole* game in service of anything? I think one may say: It is in service of the human capacity, or necessity, for play; because what *can be played*, and

what play can be watched with that avidity, while not determinable *a priori*, is contingent upon the capacities for human play, and for avidity. (It should not be surprising that what is necessary is contingent upon something. Necessaries are means.) It is perhaps not derivable from the measurements of a baseball diamond and of the average velocities of batted baseballs and of the average times human beings can run various short distances, that 90 feet is the best distance for setting up an essential recurrent crisis in the structure of a baseball game, e.g., at which the run and the throw to first take long enough to be followed lucidly, and are often completed within a familiar split second of one another, but seeing what happens at just these distances will sometimes strike one as a discovery of the *a priori*. But also of the utterly contingent. There is no necessity that human capacities should train to just these proportions; but just these proportions reveal the limits of those capacities. Without those limits, we would not have known the possibilities.²⁷⁸

In short: conventions, the means by which human nature manifests itself as self-made yet unknown, are contingent but not arbitrary. Conventions exist in service to human need hence articulate and fulfill human nature. And, if they do not, then *that* is a fact to be established and the conventions in question subject to change. They are open to such change because they are open to interrogation. From whence Marx's call for the radical reformation of our conventions, having discovered that our practices represent but vested interests. "It is worth saying that conventions can be changed because it is essential to a convention that it be in service of some project, and you do not know *a priori* which set of procedures is better than others for that project. That is, it is internal to convention that it be open to change *in convention*, in the behavior of those subject to it, in whose behavior it lives."²⁷⁹

²⁷⁸ CR, 119-120

²⁷⁹ Ibid, 120

Necessity, as conceptualized by Cavell, is then anthropomorphic in the sense that (1) it represents the sedimentation of history and so human interest and (2) our acceptance can always come under scrutiny and so its terms are open to re-negotiation, potentially subject to our future choice. Cavell treats convention as the form of second nature and, as nature reveals itself in and through the history of convention, also treats culture as the hieroglyphic code off of which we may read and undertake to transform the human character. In a passage that emphasizes that the forgetting of the history of our conventions is the condition by which we are granted a home within them, Cavell writes:

Wittgenstein's appeal to criteria is meant, one might say, exactly to call to consciousness the astonishing fact of the astonishing extent to which we *do* agree in judgment; eliciting criteria goes to show therefore that our judgments *are* public, that is, shared. What makes this astonishing, what partly motivates philosophizing on the subject, is that the extent of agreement is so intimate and pervasive; that we communicate in language as rapidly and completely as we do; and that since we cannot assume that the words we are given have their meaning by nature, we are led to assume they take it from convention; and yet no current idea of 'convention' could seem to do the work that words do—there would have to be, we could say, too many conventions in play, one for each shade of each word in each context. We *cannot* have agreed beforehand to all that would be necessary.²⁸⁰

The efficacy and extent of our linguistic procedures cannot be by nature but neither can we think of them as secured through a deliberate consensus. "We *cannot* have agreed beforehand;" nonetheless, we find ourselves in just such a state of accord—as having always already consented to these particular terms. In this sense, my relationship to the conventions that I embody, linguistic and otherwise, is mythic: this history antedates my lived experience and orients it. The language that I speak and the logic of the world that I

²⁸⁰ Ibid, 31.

inhabit precede me radically and, moreover, precede my own agreement, my acceptance and discovery of a native tongue. Language devolves upon me as a form of inheritance, not so much willed by me—something to which I have pledged my consent—as willed to me. For Cavell then, our state of agreement in regards to the terms that we use and the way in which we use them is not primarily or not immediately an enactment of freedom; rather, as Benjamin knew, hiding within our easy acceptance of the everyday is the burden of inheritance.

Cavell maintains the prehistorical status of attunement both at the anthropological level and at the level of the private individual. We find him, accordingly, concerned with the burden of inheritance in the double-sense that was at work in Freud, the unconsciousness of history constitutive of the social (primal horde) as well as the personal (primal scene) present. The motivation for Cavell's claim as to the radical priority of convention lies in the simple fact that language is something that human beings *acquire* and that we only gain this capacity for representation—of the self, of the world, of the collective past—through being in attunement with particular others. The learning of language hinges, as does its present use, upon mutuality. The words that a child says must be consequential to the adults that have undertaken to teach her (or do so despite themselves) and this mattering must be demonstrated in encouragement or correction. In turn, the words of her elders must count for her, the responses to which her linguistic ventures give rise making a difference in how she goes on.

If I am to have a native tongue, I have to accept what 'my elders' say and do as consequential; and they have to accept, even applaud, what I say and do as what they say and do. We do not know in advance what the content of our mutual acceptance is, how far we may be in agreement. I do not know in advance how deep my agreement with myself is, how far my responsibility for the language may run. But if I am to have my

own voice in it, I must be speaking for others and allow others to speak for me. The alternative to speaking for myself representatively (for *someone* else's consent) is not speaking for myself privately. The alternative is having nothing to say, being voiceless, not even mute.²⁸¹

The mutuality of language—its ability, which is to say, *our* ability to communicate—only comes in the form of appeal and acceptance. In speaking, I am asking for or assuming your consent not to any particular proposition but to the relevance of my speech. I am asking for you to accept my use of words as exemplary—an instance of what you would say—and hence for recognition as a member of the same linguistic community. I do not ask you to accept what I say as true, but I expect that you will see my speech as faithful to and hence representative of our shared linguistic constitution. This goes the other way, too. For, in my efforts to understand what it is that you have to say, I imagine the words as if they were my own; as though you took the words right out of my mouth and I accept or reject them on this basis. While this appeal and acceptance is not in lieu of nothing, as Cavell says, we do not know prospectively what the content of our agreement is. For there is no exhaustive set of criteria to be given or to be taken up. There is only the mutual authorization of one another as embodiments of what it is that we say and do.

In this way, the initiation into language does not represent the overcoming of privacy, but rather the stage upon which it gets played out. For we only ever come to learn a language through being in agreement with particular others and this private history will inevitably come to bear upon our sense of what words are to be used when. Hence, the ineluctable claim to publicity is always at the same time a confession of our private past. Criteria do not exist independently of the history of usage, a history of successful and failed attempts where success and failure are contextualized by our

²⁸¹ CR, 28.

relationship to others. This is the basis upon which Cavell builds his claim that the representative and autobiographical dimensions of speech are inextricably intertwined and further that, when a contradiction between me and my society occurs, it cannot be known *a priori* whether or not what is required is a transformation of the self or revolutionizing of my community.²⁸²

While the intimacy of speech is undeniable and the necessity of this intimacy, if we are to have a native tongue, unsurpassable, in allowing myself to be responsive to you, I do not know ahead of time what responsibilities this might entail and to what fate this might sentence my words. For Cavell, to assume a place within language is to undertake a position of fragile authority—a position as powerful as it is vulnerable. For communication is only possible through implicitly staking what one says as exemplary of what others would say or do and hence always involves exposing oneself to the risk of rebuff. We are in agreement, but we do not know beforehand its extent: if and where it will reach its end.

Secularity and its Discontents

That the content of our agreement, i.e., what exactly is entailed in our acceptance of a term, is not known prospectively means that the insistence upon the ordinary does not amount to a claim to know the foundations of community and hence to have untrammelled access to the meaning and value of our practices. Whatever the consent

²⁸² “When you say ‘I love my love’ the child learns the meaning of ‘love’ and what love is. *That (what you do) will be* love in the child’s world; and if it is mixed with resentment and intimidation, then love is a mixture of resentment and intimidation, and when love is sought *that* will be sought. When you say ‘I’ll take you tomorrow, I promise,’ the child begins to learn what temporal durations are, and what *trust* is, and what you do will show what trust is worth. When you say, ‘Put on your sweater,’ the child learns what commands are and what *authority* is, and if giving orders is something that creates anxiety for you, then authorities are anxious, authority itself uncertain,” (CR, 177).

here, it is not contractual. Rather the demonstration that convention constitutes a second nature is a way of urging us to discover to what it is that we are unwittingly beholden.²⁸³ Cavell understands Wittgenstein to be writing from precisely this “presumption which asks us to look to ourselves to find whether we share (one) another’s secret consciousness...voic(ing) our secrets, secrets we did not know were known, or did not know we shared.”²⁸⁴ As with psychoanalysis, it is not that ordinary language philosophy aims to provide evidence for our beliefs as if the burden were one of proof. Rather it is a matter of making them evident—discovering what ground they occupy and so “learn(ing) our position in what we take to be necessities, to see in what service they are necessary.”²⁸⁵ We may find ourselves lacking the capacity to undertake this course of study on our own or lacking, as Freud’s patients, the proper society in which such an investigation could occur. Cavell’s philosophical methodology is developed precisely in view of the fact that such society is so often lacking and that we do not yet know how to find a version of it within ourselves. The aim of his work, like Wittgenstein before him, is to constitute a therapeutic space of critical self-questioning. Only through such “an examination that exposes one’s conviction, one’s sense of what must and what cannot be the case...[could there be] a breaking up of one’s sense of necessity, to discover truer necessities.”²⁸⁶

²⁸³ “My interest lies in finding out what my beliefs mean, and learning the particular ground they occupy. This is not the same as providing evidence for them. One could say it is a matter of making them evident,” (MWMW, 241).

²⁸⁴ CR, 20.

²⁸⁵ Ibid, 120. “My foregone conclusions were never conclusions *I* had arrived at, but were merely imbibed by me, merely conventional. I may blunt that realization through hypocrisy of cynicism or bullying. But I may take the occasion to throw myself back upon my culture, and ask why we do what we do, judge as we judge, how we have arrived at these crossroads. What is the natural ground of our conventions, to what are they in service? It is inconvenient to question a convention; that makes it unserviceable, it no longer allows me to proceed as a matter of course; the paths of action, the paths of words, are blocked” (WV, 125).

²⁸⁶ CR, 21.

When a society has the conversation or contestation over necessities this is the conversation of justice. Yet, as Cavell presents it, the turn towards justice is one taken within the linguistic-moral self.²⁸⁷ For, as a native speaker, I have taken on the linguistic constitution and values of my culture and staked myself, wittingly or not, as the embodiment of its conventions. Thus I am responsible for what in them appears as necessary and what judgments they have rendered for me necessary. I am not fit for the conversation of justice unless I know, hence have taken responsibility for, the terms of my investment in it. On Cavell's view, this conversation is on-going and, inasmuch as the road to "truer necessities" involves the breaking up of one's sense of necessity and hence is a pathway of doubt, skepticism emerges both as that which threatens and from which there arises the possibility of life lived in solidarity with others. Cavell then could be read as inverting Wittgenstein and his avowed goal of bringing *philosophy* peace as though Cavell were concerned for philosophy not to end, but to finally begin.²⁸⁸

To redefine the meaning of criteria from the perspective of natural history and to bring the conservative-revolutionary nature of Cavell's practice more starkly into relief: because we have "agreement in judgments," an inference from the fact that our linguistic practices work by themselves, criteria are not something of which we are ordinarily in need. This means that (1) their elicitation occurs in a moment of crisis. The character and content of criterial elaboration is always specific to the semantic emergency that calls them forth. What kind of remark will count as criterial is determined by the context in

²⁸⁷ See *Conditions Handsome and Unhandsome: the Constitution of Emersonian Perfectionism*

²⁸⁸ In *Contesting Tears*, Cavell writes, invoking Benjamin (wittingly or not) that "for Derrida the land of thought is fully occupied, as it were, by the finished edifice of philosophy, one that has genuinely been built by the impulse to philosophy, so that room for thought must be made, say by a process of reading or writing or following on by the pedagogy called deconstruction; whereas for an American the question persists whether the land of thought has as yet been discovered, whether it will be today, and whether it is at best occupied by fragments, heaped in emergency, an anthology of rumor," (65).

which we find ourselves asking after the legitimacy of a given usage. Criteria do not predetermine the logic of language, but rather (2) elaborate the structure of our talk and hence exist on the same level as everyday language. Criteria are part and parcel of linguistic exchange. This means further that (3) produced in and by a moment of crisis caused by an extraordinary claiming, criteria are an attempt to recreate or to discover the common. In other words, the evocation of criteria is redemptive—an attempt to re-work and re-establish the terms of our relation to one another. This re-attunement in the present moment is a discovery of the implications and unintended consequences of our own words; for what we have, unknowingly, rendered ourselves responsible. The meaning of words we have already spoken is divined in the present moment and it is from out of this retroactive constitution that the future life of our language opens. The ordinary that we discover is both radically prehistoric and eminently futural.

Cavell thus interprets the purposes and techniques of ordinary language philosophy such that its “procedures present themselves as *returning* us to the ordinary, a place we have never been.”²⁸⁹ The “ordinary,” the eruption into consciousness of the groundlessness of our mutuality, makes its appearance in the disruption of the intersubjective weave of the everyday as the condition from which we have been estranged and the re-establishment of which is a responsibility that devolves upon each one of us, alone and all together. Here we see the reprise of the dialectic of devaluation and elevation that we reviewed in the context of the work of Benjamin and Freud. For only in the loss of prereflective (natural) meaning do our conventions come to appear as problematic or enigmatic hence not only open themselves to but demand interpretation. Emergent in the ordinary, this central Cavellian concept, is the same temporal structure of

²⁸⁹ “Something out of the Ordinary,” 24

impossible belatedness—of origination in belatedness—that stood as the theoretical basis for Freud and Benjamin’s respective hermeneutics. The ordinary, retrospectively constituted, appears only under the augur of its disappearance and so always too late: as already lost. It is only in our dislocation from the natural habitation of the everyday that the condition of mutuality gets constituted as some *place* from which we have been exiled and to which we may aspire to return. The ordinary is a dialectical image, in the Benjaminian sense:

The return of what we accept as the world will then present itself as a return of the familiar, which is to say, exactly under the concept of what Freud names the uncanny. That the familiar is a product of a sense of the unfamiliar and of the sense of a return means that what returns after skepticism is never (just) the same. (A tempting picture here could be expressed by the feeling that “there is no way back.” Does this imply that there is a way ahead? Perhaps there are some “back’s” or “once’s” or pasts the presence to which requires no “way.” Then that might mean that we have not found the way away, have not departed, have not entered history. What is to be developed here is the idea of difference so perfect that there is no way or feature in which the difference consists [I describe this by saying that in such a case there is no difference in criteria]—as in the difference between waking world and the world of dreams, or between natural things and mechanical things, or between the masculine and the feminine, or the past and the present. A difference in which everything and nothing differs is uncanny.)²⁹⁰

What occurs after the recuperation from the skeptical dissolution of the shared world is not simply the re-establishment of an old state of affairs; rather the return of the ordinary, that which skepticism represses, is repetition as alteration: the emergence of the new from out of the ever self-same. For any significant enactment of our social practices, i.e., any worth noting, will be, at the same time, their re-configuration and so our attempts to

²⁹⁰ QO, 166

preserve our conventions will inevitably induce their breakdown: their conservation indistinguishable from their overcoming. In this, Cavell's conception of modern experience coincides with that of Freud and Benjamin. In the introduction of this essential instability into the distinction between the natural and the social, the public and the private, a new form of bewitchment befalls us. Modernity is not the end of myth, but rather the era when even the most quotidian aspects of our lives can become, at a moment's notice, fantastic.

The return to the ordinary does not represent the permanent dissolution of the skeptical nightmare, but rather its abeyance. Because criteria do not constitute the prehistorical foundation of everyday speech, but rather are set and re-set in language—hence drag prehistory along with them; hence belie the thought of (progressive) history itself—every re-establishment of the native tongue gives rise to further misunderstandings. This reiterative movement is captured in the heap-of-fragments form of the *Investigations*, what sometimes feels like its aimlessness, its inconclusiveness, and its rhetoricalness, and, at other times, its inexplicable poignancy. The *Investigations* goes nowhere; its digressive method bespeaks the ambition to teach us how to begin again after finding only false-starts. This is a philosophy, as Cavell remarks, which does not assume publicness, but rather strives for it, which is “like having sanity as one's goal. Then what state would one take oneself to be in?”²⁹¹

Cavell takes this state, in which one is incurably (albeit inconstantly) exposed to the madness of skepticism, to be that of secularity. This is where we find ourselves when we awaken, divested—once again—of the forms of religious and post-religious authority capable of preempting skepticism. While Cavell's investment in modernism is

²⁹¹ CR, 44

unavoidable and his concern over democracy clear, at least to those capable of countenancing its Emersonian and Thoreauvian derivation, what remains largely unacknowledged in the literature is this preoccupation with secularism, which, on my reading, is central to his understanding of the former two concepts. This is unsurprising insofar as the topic of secularization is, for the most part, only indirectly broached in his writing. An interesting exception to this rule is the Endgame essay as well as the—perhaps not widely read, but—more widely read “Avoidance of Love,” in which an analysis of the tragedy of King Lear becomes a reflection upon the crisis in national sovereignty that was the Vietnam War. This essay “modernizes” tragedy and does so precisely in terms of secularization. As Cavell remarks in the final pages of the latter essay, “it does not look, after the death of kings and out of the ironies of revolutions and in the putrefactions of God, as if our trouble is that there used to be answers and now there are not. The case is rather that there used not to be an unlimited question and now there is. ‘Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is not able to answer.’ (Preface to the first edition of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, opening sentence).”²⁹² Cavell treats the problem of modern skepticism as a socio-political problem, the cataclysmic loss of divine guarantee as both a historical and a mythic event. Obtaining only in and through this loss, secularized society is a condition of freedom and equality, but, equally, one of anarchy. For obedience, when it is to be given, is now to be freely given and so each principle or person or phenomenon must, in each instance, prove its right to our recognition. Yet, having nothing to go on, we do not know in what such proof would

²⁹² MWMW, 352

consist: how and when our allegiance is rightly bestowed. Of this, we must remain permanently in doubt. Hence there is something irredeemably a-lawful—inherently disordered—about the secular condition in which nothing can rightly claim us *a priori*. The efforts of the secularized collective to discover or achieve or assure the normativity of its social and juridical practices remain permanently shadowed by the anarchism latent in its own concept of legitimate authority. Such is the ungodly lesson that Cavell discovers in the skeptic’s profanation of the ordinary: that the re-grounding of my conviction is not in the cards and I am left to lay claim to community without any ultimate basis upon which to do so.

The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as the discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason.²⁹³

In my attempts to gain acknowledgment from others, which are attempts to speak not just to heterogeneous others, but to speak *for* them representatively, my claim can go wrong in any number of unanticipated ways. I do not know how my appeal will be heard or if it will be heard at all. I have nothing more to go on than “my sense that I make sense:” that my experience, while private and particular, is nonetheless exemplary, hence that I am authorized in my claim to community. That my conviction is all that I have—“nothing more...than”—suggests that I have been left bereft of something that I once had or that I

²⁹³ CR, 20

can rightly expect and that there is no guarantee that my claim to community will be recognized means that what has gone missing will not be restored.

This passage, in which Cavell acknowledges the permanent instability of secularized society, sounds as a lamentation or a complaint. Its pathos is elegiac. It is at this juncture, in which the stakes of secularism emerge, that I find myself in disagreement with Stephen Mulhall, who attempts to read Cavell resolutely even in the acknowledgment that he cannot consistently do so, and Robert Pippin, who renders acknowledgment a reconciliatory concept of the order of Hegelian recognition. Both Mulhall and Pippin maintain that, in the acknowledgment of finitude, the idea that what we have is insufficient can no longer get traction: there is no thing from which we are barred. As Mulhall puts it: there is “nothing genuinely substantial in the sceptic’s fantasy of a position in or from which genuine knowledge of another would be possible. Hence we cannot say to him ‘That would not be knowledge,’ because there is no ‘that’ to which to refer.”²⁹⁴ Pippin, for his part, writes:

So, Cavell says, what we have in this concern with knowing others is not frustration at the limitations of knowledge (an assumption that implies there is some limitation that can be overcome...), but unavoidable, constant disappointment with what we do have available from the other, disappointment with what is available (all that is available), once we have disabused ourselves of the fantasy of “breaking into” the other’s world. However, once we have given up that fantasy, the idea that what we are left with is “insufficient,” or a frustrating result of an in principle overcomeable finitude, can no longer get a grip.²⁹⁵

²⁹⁴ *Wittgenstein’s Private Language*, 80.

²⁹⁵ “Passive and Active Skepticism,” nonsite.org

On the view forwarded by Mulhall and Pippin, mourning and mournfulness come to an end, corrected by reason; accordingly, they would locate Cavell within a Wittgensteinian tradition where the therapeutic aims of that tradition are understood as quietist. Yet, as is indicated in Cavell's deferral to Kant at the conclusion of "Avoidance of Love," Cavell's position is that reason still wants what it cannot have. The fantasy from which we suffer is not a mere dream, but a metaphysical illusion produced by reason itself, internal to its own operations. Mulhall and Pippin present acknowledgment as dissolving the relevance of skepticism, exposing it as meaningless, but acknowledgment is a project. It does not take the form of finality or resolution and it cannot bring the drama of skepticism to a permanent close. In acknowledgment, the melancholia of skepticism opens onto an interminable mourning yet, as Freud discovered, mourning and melancholia cannot, in the end, be parsed. Structurally, here, there is no difference. Rather, as with Benjamin (and Freud), the possibility of redemption (Cavell will use, in the Lear and Endgame essays, the word "salvation") consists in an attunement to that which is irrecoverably lost. Acknowledgment is not itself redemption, but it performs its work in that, in acknowledgment, we travel down "the path of accepting the loss of the world (you might say, accepting its loss of presence), accepting it as something which exists for us only in its loss (you might say its absence), or what presents itself as loss.... Since I lose the world in every impulse to philosophy... the world must be regained every day, in repetition, regained as gone."²⁹⁶ I must accept the world's independence from me as the condition of its objectivity and hence the possibility of my wholesome habitation of it just as I must acknowledge the other's independence from me if I am to attain to know her.

²⁹⁶ QO, 172

Post-absolutist society exists in a condition of bereavement for which Cavell offers acknowledgment as the therapeutic balm.²⁹⁷ What is to be acknowledged—taken to heart, once again—is the condition of secularity: that the limits of reason and human agency needn't be a condition of despair but rather the opportunity for the a renewed search for community. It is on this basis that Cavell offers, in allegorical form, his critique of the myth of contract. It is to this critique and to his 1971 *The World Viewed* that I now turn.

The Power and Limits of Acknowledgment in Cavell's Anarchic Cinema

We have to ask whether there is something in the light of film that is inherently (not, of course, inveterately) maddening. Here I think of my emphasis, in speaking of photography, of photography's metaphysically hallucinatory character, its causing us to see things that are absent: it makes things present to us to which we are not present. Hence I call film a moving image of skepticism. In viewing film we know ourselves to be in Paula's condition of victimization, in need of ratification, if so far without her bad luck—as if to be human is to be subject to the madness of skepticism.²⁹⁸

All three of my redemptive critics regard madness as internal to secularized experience in which the private and the public are separated yet inextricably intertwined. As Freud sees it, there is no means by which to transcend or transform the mutual indifference or outright antipathy of the post-religious multitude, hence no means by which render its madness livable with others.²⁹⁹ Rather, the best for which one can hope is private salvation, finding in love and work the resources to sustain oneself in and

²⁹⁷ “In acknowledgment, I am called upon to do something--to say specific things that will add up to an explicit revelation? Because what is to be acknowledged is always something specifically done or not done; the exact instance of my denial of you. The particular hurt or crudity or selfishness or needfulness or hatred or longing that separates us must be given leave to declare our separateness, hence the possibility of our connection. It is balm, but it must still touch the wound” (WV, 128).

²⁹⁸ CT, 69

²⁹⁹ Kristeva's re-reading of the primal horde, offered in *The Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*, exemplifies psychoanalysis' inability to offer a political solution to political problems.

against the anonymous crowd. On Benjamin's terms, by contrast, redemption lies in the direction of a social practice capable of overcoming the anonymity and isolation by which this madness is produced, which would be, at the same time, the overcoming of the capitalist form of life. For Cavell, the disorder internal to secularized experience cannot be overcome if the aspiration to democracy is to be preserved; hence the hope is that such madness is livable with others in solidarity. For Cavell, our separateness is both the problem and the promise.

In this section, I turn to look more closely at acknowledgment—how it works and what political promise it extends—and why, on Cavell's analysis, the movies are not simply one scene of acknowledgment but rather represent an exemplary instance of it. Cavell presents movie-going as capable of embodying or satisfying my conviction, however ungrounded it remains and, in giving my conviction form, rendering it shareable with others. The movies (1) as myth, treat the fantasy of skepticism on its own terms and (2), as a common possession, signal the turn from the anarchic and uncanny condition of secularity to the collective self-conscious myth-making of democracy.³⁰⁰ The

³⁰⁰ Cavell treats the movies as redemptive myth, i.e., psychoanalytically, not just in *The World Viewed's* claim that the dramatic mode of film is mythological. Rather this theme, in which film appears, after the passing of psychoanalysis, as the last refuge—hence site of the redemption—of myth in modernity, is consistent throughout all his books on film. In the *Melodrama* book, Cavell remarks that “it is from the perspective of our culture as having entered on a path of radical skepticism (hence on a path to deny this path) from the time of, say Shakespeare and Descartes—or say from the time of the fall of kings and the rise of the new science and the death of God—that I see, late in this history, the advent of psychoanalysis as the place, perhaps the last, in which the human psyche as such, the idea that there is a life of the mind, hence a death, receives its proof,” (94). My thinking here is that, if myth does anything, it assumes hence redeems the thought of the human soul. While Cavell identifies psychoanalysis and not film as “perhaps the last” cultural site at which the human soul receives its confirmation, the *Melodrama* book is concerned, in part, to show an “internal connection between the discovery of psychoanalysis and the means of film narrative... each originating, in the closing years of the nineteenth century, in the study of the sufferings of women,” (93). Both film and psychoanalysis discover themselves in and through those who have been deprived of (a public) voice: whose remaining mute is the condition of upon which the social order establishes itself. Film provides proof of the soul in that, in its preoccupation with the fate of the freed sisters, it is the site at which is demonstrated that there exists an “inner agenda of culture” hence that American, which as yet “conceives Utopian longings and commitments for itself” (PH,17) still has a soul to be lost or redeemed even as it seems to have staked itself by and on inequality and injustice.

relationship between (1) and (2) is complex and will have to be teased out over the course of the remainder of this chapter. Suffice it to say for now: an essential feature of myth is its status as held in common—as that which brings us together, here and now, in its revival by the community that it simultaneously creates. Myth is social practice. However, according to Cavell, the way in which movies achieve the condition of myth renders questionable the thought that they could be possessed at all; hence serve as the basis for a unified community. Cavell presents the movies both as myth and as its overcoming just as Freud presented his scientific myth of the primal horde and as Benjamin presented his allegorization of commodity culture in the *Arcades*. And just as Freud's treatment of ethnography generated a mythic image that registered the impasse of post-absolutist solidarity, *The World Viewed* produces the same yield. In the *World Viewed*, Cavell presents the movies as a scene of acknowledgment, cinematic experience as the pivot upon which the position of skepticism turns potentially to conviction, the raw material of democracy—that of the disaggregated crowd—into community. Yet, he simultaneously maintains that the movies are inherently anarchic and that this anarchism is their unique achievement.

Let me begin by way of (2) and the clarification of Cavell's claim that, in film, Americans have a common possession. On the face of it, this claim is too broad. Which films? All of them? At all times? Possessed by whom? Everyone? Given the proliferation of "new media" and new privatized formats for viewing, starting with but not restricted to broadcast television, and given the division within American film into Hollywood, independent movies, and the avant-garde (which once was called 'The New American Cinema'), it is doubtful that there is a singular cinematic audience anymore.

What's more, it appears that film, as a material basis, no longer even defines "the movies." That such a claim—made then or now—about the medium *per se* is inherently dubious is not lost on Cavell. It is suspect for straightforwardly empirical reasons and for reasons that concern the very nature of the medium. As he writes, "it is not clear that we do have films in common, or, not clear what it is to 'have' them."³⁰¹ The second deeper formulation in which Cavell suggests that there is something about the movies that renders questionable the thought that they could be possessed is, as I have already indicated, to be broached in and through an examination of the way in which movies represent the last refuge—hence transformation—of myth in secular modernity. Taking up the first formulation in preparation for our confrontation with the second: given that Cavell countenances that we do not know the extent to which or even if film is commonly possessed, then we must take his writings on movies to be experiments: attempts to discover them as commonly possessed. It is a hypothesis to which Cavell is driven in consideration of the inherent pluralism of American culture and the necessary heterogeneity of democratic experience.³⁰² Where Benjamin was faced with the challenge of "brushing history against the grain" and discovering a critical mode through which to inherit and transmit the past, Cavell is faced with the problem that America has no such tradition to inherit, hence our democracy is asked to assure itself in the absence of a coherent culture or, more precisely put, the absence of the philosophical foundation upon which the edifice of a(n) (American) culture could be established.

³⁰¹ PH, 10

³⁰² "To speak now of modernism as the activity of an avant-garde is as empty as it is in thinking about modern politics or war, and as comforting: it implies a conflict between a coherent culture and a declared and massed enemy; when in fact the case is more like an effort, along blocked paths and hysterical turnings, to hang on to a thread that leads from a lost center to a world lost" (WV, 110).

For Cavell, American film comes to be in the space that an American philosophy might otherwise have occupied.³⁰³ As he remarks, in the introductory pages to *Pursuits of Happiness*, explaining why, when asked to deliver a symposium paper on the limits and presuppositions of intellectual inquiry, he offered an essay the structure of which was defined in and by the indecorous juxtaposition of Kant and Capra:

Kant is not a part of the common cultural inheritance of American intellectuals. (Perhaps this just means that we are not Germans or Central Europeans.) But if one of the indisputably most important philosophical achievements of the modern era of Western civilization is not a piece of our inheritance, what is? The ensuing discussion of a Hollywood film might stand in the place of an answer, or as a certain emblem of an answer. It must be an ambiguous place.³⁰⁴

Why *must* it be ambiguous? It must be ambiguous because the question of what is common—what America means and hence in what community consists—must remain open if the aspiration to a democracy responsive to irreducible plurality is to be preserved. In this consists the bind of American democracy. Democracy, inasmuch as it consists in more than institutions, requires a common culture in which members of a society are synchronically and diachronically connected with one another and through

³⁰³ “I assume that movies have played a role in American culture different from their role in other cultures, and more particularly that this difference is a function of the absence in America of the European edifice of philosophy. And since I assume that American culture has been no less ambitious, craved no less to think about itself, than the most ambitious European culture, I assume further still that the difference everyone recognizes as existing between American and European literature is a function of the brunt of thought that American literature, in its foundings in, for instance, Emerson and Whitman and Poe, had to bear in that absence of given philosophical founding and edifice, lifting the fragments of literature found, so to speak, handy and portable. Finally, I assume that American film at its best participates in this Western cultural ambition of self-thought or self-invention that presents itself in the absence of the Western edifice of philosophy, so that on these shores film has the following peculiar economy; it has the space, and the cultural pressure, to satisfy the craving for thought, the ambition of a talented culture to examine itself publicly; but its public lacks the means to grasp this thought as such for the very reason that it naturally or historically lacks that edifice of philosophy within which to grasp it” (CT, 72).

³⁰⁴ 9. Cavell explains that he initially made this comparison between Kant and Capra when asked to prepare a paper for a conference on the limits and presupposition of intellectual inquiry. His intention in such an unseemly pairing of the epitome of high culture with an instance of the low was indeed to scandalize—to provoke us to test our own sensibility in response to this violation of the boundary between philosophy and what does not even appear as art; hence to make us curious about the presuppositions that we must have about what the intellect is and in what its inquiries consist and what their merit is.

which the terms of that interconnection can be negotiated; a medium through which our collective and varying desires can find expression hence open themselves to interrogation. This is to say that democracy cannot dispense with tradition. Yet, at the same time, tradition inasmuch as it names the sanctification of convention, i.e., the authority of culture, is anathematic to democratic conceptions of authority—not to mention with Cavell's own conception of convention. For us, an homogeneous, self-assured culture will not do. Culture—*Kultur*—cannot come to fill the place of vacated authority and so any culture befitting democracy must be one that is self-critical, which is to say one that achieves the condition of philosophy even in the absence of a sustained and sustainable philosophical tradition. Philosophical criticism, after all, is the need of societies that lack traditional authority and hence the traditional means of settling disagreement. Furthermore, defined, as Cavell so defines it, as the “world of a particular culture brought to consciousness of itself,”³⁰⁵ philosophy names as well the opening of the space of culture's self-criticism. This is the implied problematic to which Cavell's uptake of Hollywood movies provides an emblem of an answer.

As is signaled by the name Capra, Cavell's focus is on the “talkies,” i.e., pieces of popular culture. These Hollywood movies from the “long decade” of the thirties³⁰⁶ that achieved, in their time, public standing are movies that “some people treasure and others despise, ones which many on both sides or on no side bear in their experience as memorable public events, segments of the experiences, the memories, of a common life. So that the difficulty of assessing everyday experience, the difficulty of expressing oneself satisfactorily, of making oneself find the words for what one is specifically

³⁰⁵ MWMW, 313

³⁰⁶ Cavell dates this decade, in *Pursuits of Happiness*, from 1934-1941.

interested to say, which comes to the difficulty, as I put it, of finding the right to so be interested.”³⁰⁷ These movies are the proper tutors in a democratic education because they forgo cultural authority in the sense of *Kultur*. Their subject is the everyday; wholly exoteric, open to and criticizable by all, whatever power that they have to command our attention depending upon our own willingness to take an interest in, hence notice the details of the everyday, seeing the ordinary as the extraordinary. These films run the risk of triviality, but that is a condition and measure of their achievement—their exemplification of the medium’s unavoidable commitment to the mundane. For film is of the world and, in its claim that the scene of the everyday is worthy of attention, film undertakes the redemption of the everyday at the same time as it leaves itself open to the accusation of insignificance. Such is the danger internal to the affirmation of the ordinary.

All this is to say that: while Cavell cites the popularity of these films as evidence for his claim that they represent the “shared fantasies”³⁰⁸ of the nation, this claim is not ultimately to be evaluated empirically. His approach is not sociological. Rather, the films upon which he focuses are ones that show us what film, in general, is; epitomizing hence disclosing the conditions of the medium’s meaning-making, conditions that must be, if Cavell’s thesis is to go through, those that obtain in the democratic conversation and which necessitate a self-conscious practice of emblematics: as he says “a certain emblem of an answer” for an indefeasibly “ambiguous place.”

³⁰⁷ PH, 41-2

³⁰⁸ Ibid, 17

By Cavell's lights, the "talkies" concretize and externalize the "inner agenda of a culture,"³⁰⁹ thus continue to exist as a potential site of culture's self-examination inasmuch as these are films preoccupied with questions of voice, separateness, privacy, representativeness, intimacy, community, self-denial, education, equality, and self-authorization; acknowledgment and skepticism—issues that are both totally ordinary and those upon which the individual human life is staked in relation to another hence that upon which the life of the community depends. In other words, "talkies" are films that are literally about conversation or its failure. Furthermore, these are films featuring the conversations and quarrels of women and men over the meaning of marriage and gender; films that question the possibility of the state of a union between equals and, as Cavell sees it, films that demonstrate that neither a happy union nor genuine equality consist in the erasure of difference. The genres of the Comedy of Remarriage and the Melodrama of the Unknown Woman take up the prohibition on conversation between women, whose public voice has been denied or stolen, and men. As such, they are part of the ongoing conversation and quarrel of American democracy (with) itself and over the divide between the public and the private. As Freud showed us in *Totem and Taboo*, there can be no free public sphere when patriarchy is preserved in the private realm and these films continue the investigation of the fate of the "freed" sisters; the critique of the state of the society that erects itself on the basis of female exclusion and silencing; and the possibility of redeeming a tradition and a culture to which historical injustice is fundamental.³¹⁰

³⁰⁹ Ibid, 17

³¹⁰ Indeed, while Cavell's debt to Freud is weighty, it is not until the *Melodrama* book that he feels compelled to give an account of his psychoanalytic inheritance. As he writes, "I have suggested that some internal connection between the discoveries of psychoanalysis and the means of film narrative is argued in their each originating, in the closing years of nineteenth century, in the study of the suffering of women," (52).

As Cavell sees it, the movies in general and these movies in particular have been denied their rightful position in American culture's self-interrogation. For even though "films persist as natural topics of conversation... (and) remain events, as few books or plays now do,"³¹¹ this conversation is not yet "as good as its topics deserve."³¹² While movies are a part of daily interchange, Cavell maintains that they remain unclaimed hence unpossessed insofar as the depth of our attraction to them, the logic of their appeal, is unexplored. I take it that, in the unseemly pairing of Kant, a sure candidate of high culture if ever there was one, and Capra, a classic instance of the American popular or low, Cavell means to scandalize and to provoke us to ask why this is felt as an indiscretion. What must our presuppositions be such that we find this blurring of the boundaries between philosophy and what appears as mere entertainment, i.e., as empty or trivial hence unworthy of philosophical attention, so unbearable? The suggestion is not that the distinction between Kant and Capra, one valued as edifying and the other unreflectively enjoyed or reflexively dismissed, is arbitrary, but that it is in need of an account. For, as Cavell sees it, we seem to have become incurious about in what our intelligence consists, what needs or purposes serves, and at whose pleasure. Cavell consistently characterizes this trend as one of repression, i.e., as a denial definitive of the American life of the mind.³¹³ By Cavell's lights, the failure to recognize these films as an

³¹¹ PH, 38

³¹² "My fantasy here is of conversations about *It Happened One Night*—or, for that matter, about *Kramer vs. Kramer*—that demand the sort of attention and the sort of command of relevant facts that we expect of one another in evaluating a team's season of play; conversations into which, my fantasy continues, a remark of mine will enter and be pressed and disputed until some agreement over its truth or falsity, some assessment of its depth or superficiality, has been reached... If the conversation, the culture I fantasize, is technically at hand, something further, something inner, untechnical, keeps it from our grasp," (PH, 39). As on Benjamin's assessment, we have all that we need at our disposal.

³¹³ "If indeed the conviction in Hollywood's metaphysical or magical ignorance is a fixed idea, then nothing would count as evidence for or against it. One would have instead to locate some spiritual trauma that has caused the fixation. It must be a late version of the trauma sustaining the idea that Emerson cannot

American cultural achievement hence a worthy inheritance is a repetition of the failure to hear, in the writing of Emerson, a distinctively American philosophical voice and a call to democratic conversation.³¹⁴ The charge of anti-intellectualism lobbied against Hollywood movies or against Emerson and by which we refuse them as worthy interlocutors is interpretable in two ways. It reads either as the prejudicial claim that Hollywood movies are unserious or lacking in self-consciousness; that they produce meaning unwittingly and are unaware of the desires that they raise. Or it can be read as the preemptory claim that pleasure is not to be taken seriously; that we needn't be thoughtful and have intelligence about the pleasure (or displeasure) we take in such films because, here, there is nothing upon which to reflect. These films are just for fun and, as entertainment, to be consumed as commodities. (Recently a friend remarked to me that the concept of a guilty pleasure was inherently misguided: that no pleasure was guilty. I took this declamation of the insignificance of his own sensibility—that what pleased him was no-account—as a sure sign of a guilty conscience.)

Yet, in democratic social space, in which we have no authority upon which to rely other than the everyday, the distinction between private pleasure and public value, between my conviction and what I ask for my society, cannot be drawn in any absolute and stable way. We have no other ground for the conversation over the good life, the

know what he does, that to know his work just cannot be his work. It is a point on which America's admirers and its detractors eagerly agree," (CT, 78).

³¹⁴ These films represented in the melodrama of the unknown woman are among those films known to our culture, from the time of their making until the present, as 'women's films' or 'tear jerkers'. And even in recent years, when they are receiving more attention, particularly from feminist theorists of film, they are characteristically, as far as I have seen, treated as works to be somewhat condescended to, specifically as ones that do not know their effect, the desire that is in them, and do not possess the means for theorizing this desire, as it were, for entering into the conversation over themselves...I regard [these melodramas] as full companions of the remarriage comedies from which I take them to derive, hence among the high achievements of the art of the film—worthy companions in intelligence, in seriousness of artistic purpose, in moral imagination, and even in a sense in wit," (CT, 7).

arrangement of just society, then the question of what respectively commands our interest and esteem: why I take pleasure in what I do—why I value what I do and why there is happiness for you there as well: why you should value it, too. It is the attempt to discover, from out of our respective privacies, what is common. There can be no shared life without the capacity to tolerate and acknowledge one another’s fantasies and so without the capacity to give voice to our own. Accordingly, Cavell presents his re-writing of these films as the fulfillment of a social-political obligation—his attempt to “find the words for what (he) is specifically interested to say” as the “finding (of) the right to thus be interested,”³¹⁵ which amounts to concretizing his conviction and pleasure in a form that is publically criticizable, available for either acceptance or rejection: “I would like to say that what I am doing in reading a film is performing it (if you wish, performing it inside myself). (I welcome here the sense in the idea of performance that it is the meeting of a responsibility.)”³¹⁶ As the drama (or melodrama) of the films in which Cavell is interested hinges upon the characters’ ability to give voice to their condition and subsequently on the promise of acknowledgment or threat of denial by others, which they must learn either to accept or to withstand (the former at times as difficult as the latter), the gambit of Cavell’s method is to embody film’s provocation—the desires that it elicits in him. The attempt to establish accord over meaning and meaningfulness begins in the hope of agreement—it begins in solidarity—and it continues in the attempt to find the words capable of expressing the source and significance of one’s pleasure. This is why, as Cavell writes in “Aesthetic Problems of Modern Philosophy,” “art and the criticism of art...have their special importance (and)

³¹⁵ PH, 41-2

³¹⁶ Ibid, 37-8

elicit their own forms of distrust and gratitude. The problem of the critic, as of the artist, is not to discount his subjectivity, but to include it; not to overcome it in agreement, but to master it in exemplary ways.”³¹⁷

Accordingly, I can further specify my thesis that Cavell’s writings on film are experiments. In the exemplification of what it would mean to take seriously the position of cinematic spectatorship and its pleasures (or displeasures), Cavell aims to provide a model by which we might be enabled to take seriously our own standing responses to the movies, hence enter into conversation over them. His work thus consists in the redemption—the democratization—of the mass culture commodity, film “everything a commodity should be: equal instances available to all, regardless of position.”³¹⁸

Cavell and Benjamin on audience-formation

To re-state this exposition of Cavell’s democratization of film in terms of Benjamin’s politicization of the medium as discussed in Chapter Two: where Benjamin was interested in what movies could, of themselves, accomplish, Cavell is interested in what *talking* about movies might do. This does not mean that Cavell is unconscious of the fact that movie-making, movie-viewing, and talking about movies are historically determined practices. Cavell’s (quasi) transcendental business is to lay bare the conditions of possible cinematic experience and to do by means of “think(ing) the causes of (his own) consciousness of film as it stands,” presenting himself as exemplary.³¹⁹ For, “the nature of the audience of an art, its particular mode of participation and perception,

³¹⁷ MWMW, 94

³¹⁸ WV, 122

³¹⁹ Ibid, 12

is internal to the nature of that art.”³²⁰ This aspect of his philosophy of film, de-emphasized in his genre books, is central to the structure of the *World Viewed*, which, despite its subtitle and its profession of an aspiration to ontology, writes movie-viewing in and through a moment of its historical transformation. If there is an ontology to be had here it is thoroughly dialectical and thoroughly materialist. Like Benjamin before him, Cavell assesses the movies belatedly in a moment in which a new regime is consolidating itself hence a prior practice is, in its pastness, available for scrutiny.³²¹ Benjamin, in the face of the fascistic appropriation of film, wishes to mark the betrayed promises and unrealized potential of film in its earlier and now forever lost form.³²² We find Cavell, in the *World Viewed*, equally melancholy in the loss of his natural practice of movie-viewing. Yet, despite the distaste that he expresses for this new regime of cinematic consumption, the suggestion of the book as a whole is that it is only now—or only in 1971—that cinematic experience truly comes into its own socio-politically speaking. Cavell writes, in his introductory chapter, “An Autobiography of Companions”

I have mentioned my increasing difficulty over the past several years to get myself to go to new movies. This has to do partly with an anxiousness in my response to new films I have seen (I don’t at all mean I think they are bad), but equally with my anxiousness in what I feel to be new audiences for movies (not necessarily new people, but people with new reasons for being there), as though I cannot locate or remain together with my companions among them. I take this as something of more than clinical interest.

One could say that movie showings have begun for the first time to be habitually attended by an audience, I mean by people who arrive and depart at the

³²⁰ Ibid, 212

³²¹ On this point, I follow Miriam Hansen. See in particular her “Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: “The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology” as well as her book *Cinema and Experience*.

³²² Hansen claims that, given Benjamin’s description in the Artwork essay, he must be referring the early “cinema of attractions.”

same time, as at a play. When moviegoing was casual and we entered at no matter what point in the proceedings...we took our fantasies and companions and anonymity inside and left with them intact. Now there is an audience, a claim is made upon my privacy; so it matters to me that our responses to the film are not really shared. At the same time that the mere fact of an audience makes this claim upon me, it feels as if the old casualness of moviegoing has been replaced by a casualness of movie-viewing, which I interpret as an inability to tolerate our own fantasies, let alone those of others—an attitude that equally I cannot share.³²³

On the cusp of a new regime of movie-making and movie-viewing, Cavell looks back at what appears, from the perspective of 1971, as American film's pre-social period in which the movie-theater was filled with but a "crowd of scattered souls."³²⁴ In other words, in the past, Cavell sees an uncompromised hence unreflective privacy and, inspecting his present, he sees an equally unreflective gathering, which is to say: nothing but a mass. What is crucial here is that, while Cavell rejects the Benjaminian thesis that the audience's murmuring in the dark constitutes a communicative act, hence that, within the movie-house, shared experience obtains, it is only when "the movie" becomes a public event that the question of community-formation within the theater can be sensibly posed. For with the establishment of the audience, there arises the expectation of shared experience, which means further that there is, for the first time, the threat of remaining alone; the promise of community unfulfilled.

Cavell is drawn to the movies because he sees in them all the elements that Benjamin saw: the promise of shared experience; the allegorical recycling of the mundane; the mass gathered together. And, like Benjamin before him, Cavell is highly ambivalent about the movie-going crowd. For the movie-theater, as a site of public

³²³ WV, 11

³²⁴ Ibid, 10

gathering, extends the promise of community-formation, but, at the same time and for precisely the same reasons, it threatens the mob. Benjamin's ultimate verdict was that the movie-going audience was an absent-minded examiner,³²⁵ having before it all the tools needed to form revolutionary class-consciousness, but still unable to take them up. On my reading of the Artwork essay, while Benjamin brushes the cinematic audience against the grain, he still develops it in such a way that it is impossible to distinguish from the fascistic mass. Cavell, for his part, describes the movies as both "anarchic" and "illicit," interestingly dispensing with the all-too-common film-theoretic accusation that the pleasure of moviegoing is perverse—a case of onanistic voyeurism—and presenting the movies instead as unlawful, i.e., as a crime against the community and, what's more, a crime of the community against itself. For, in the darkened space of the movie-theater, anonymity reigns, anonymity being but the private face of the public concept of anarchy. "The anarchism of movies is already contained in the condition of viewing unseen. For the *polis* can be affirmed only in the present speech, the members live for one another, each explicit, the city gathered within earshot of itself."³²⁶

The cinematic audience does not constitute "a public," a community, at all. As Cavell sees it, the participants in the cinematic event are immersed in their private experience and this is not a failure, but the very condition of possible experience. Nonetheless, it is a gathering in public and so, even as we sit ignorant of one another, "a claim is made on (our respective) privacy, so it matters...that our experiences are not really shared."³²⁷ Perhaps we should say rather that we do not know if our experiences are shared and so the possibility of publicity shadows the condition of private viewing.

³²⁵ SW4: "Work of Art," 269

³²⁶ Ibid, 215

³²⁷ Ibid, 12

What we fail to know, during this “hundred minutes of speculative solitude,”³²⁸ is with whom we are (or are not) in community. To know this would require that we reveal ourselves and make known what it is that we have undergone, but “the audience (of film) is not a gathering of citizens for honest confession and acceptance of one another.”³²⁹ This is something that can only happen after the cinematic gathering is concluded. Whatever community is to be had here, it occurs after the lights go up, secured on the basis of the very depth of our privacy within the theater. In other words, the audience of a film is formed retrospectively in conversation or not at all.

Hence Cavell maintains that there is something intrinsically (formally) illicit—unlawful—in taking up this private position in the dark, in public, amongst strangers. This unruliness is the condition of the cinematic redemption of privacy, but without confession and acceptance—without conversation—the cinematic gathering is no more than a rabble. Where Benjamin’s *Artwork* essay claims that an earlier instantiation of movie-viewing was defined by the mass’ “organizing and regulating their response,”³³⁰ hence that revolutionary class consciousness could be realized therein, Cavell’s theory of communication is such that the question of whether or not the audience is indeed a community can only be established retrospectively in conversation and on the basis of our respective privacies.

Here we turn to face directly the non-empirical version of the question of film’s possess-ability, the question with which we began, and thus towards the question, as well, of how it is that film achieves—as it overcomes—the condition of myth. As Cavell sees it, cinematic experience is so “deep,” let us say, as to render dubious the supposition that

³²⁸ Ibid, 12

³²⁹ Ibid, 12

³³⁰ Ibid, 264

it could be possessed at all. Cavell rather maintains that it is we who are possessed by it. As Benjamin weirdly compared movie-viewing to the “consumption” of architecture, characterizing the experience as haptic, Cavell admits to some hesitancy over the question of whether or not the movies are even to be regarded as an artform because “its effects (are) too powerful or immediate to count as the effects of art.”³³¹ “The impact of movies is too massive, too out of proportion with the individual worth of ordinary movies, to speak politely of involvement. We involve the movies in us. They become further fragments of what happens to me, further cards in the shuffle of my memory, with no telling what place in the future.”³³² Freud and Benjamin maintained that we do not possess our past so much as it possess us (a sense of modernity that Cavell shares) and that the solution to this problem lies not in the development of a new form of mastery, but rather in the cultivation of the capacity to acknowledge the permanence of our dispossession and be acknowledged in it. If a genuinely democratic community is to be formed, this acknowledgment must gain a properly public form. In the movies, Cavell believes himself to have discovered just such a social practice.

Photogenesis as allegoresis: the cinematic redemption of skepticism

In the movies, the matter of history is offered up, in its derangement before its public. Cavell offers an ontological definition of film as a “succession of automatic world projections.” Movies mechanically (“automatically,” without the intervention of the human) preserve reality (“world”) by means of its fragmentation (“succession”) and

³³¹ WV, 103

³³² Ibid, 154

its re-collection in and by way of its displacement (“projection”).³³³ That Cavell can so define the essential nature of film establishes, perhaps paradoxically, that the law of cinema is its lawlessness. For this definition of the representative powers of film via mechanical fragmentation and displacement entails that cinema’s unique achievement is disconnection: that film gives us the world through disembodiment, severing it from its spatio-temporal origins, and reassembling its pieces by way of juxtaposition.

“That which the [camera] has fixed upon is sundered from the customary contexts of life: it is at once shattered and preserved.”³³⁴ The *World Viewed* presents photogenesis as a species of allegoresis, the process by which unhinged images of the world are produced. Decontextualization is achieved through the mechanism of the camera, which, inasmuch as it is perfectly “dumb,” cannot but access the mundane as the profane, reducing the stuff of the world to a state of pure equality. In this profanation of the landscape, the human being is no exception. For “photographs are of the world, in which human beings are not ontologically favored over the rest of nature.”³³⁵ The world pictured on film is one freed from the hierarchy of the natural and the social. In the destruction of this distinction proper to commonsense, film suggests that we ourselves do not know in what the difference consists—or if indeed there is one.³³⁶ It so renders the ordinary extraordinary. As Cavell says “we have forgotten how mysterious these things

³³³ “The material basis of the media of movies...is, in the terms which have so far made their appearance, *a succession of automatic world projections*. ‘Succession’ includes the various degrees of motion in moving pictures: the motion depicted; the current successive frames in depicting it; the juxtapositions of cutting. ‘Automatic’ emphasizes the mechanical fact of photography, in particular the absence of the human hand in forming these objects and the absence of its creatures in their screening. ‘World’ covers the ontological facts of photography and its subjects. ‘Projection’ points to the phenomenological facts of viewing, and to the continuity of the camera’s motion as it ingests the world” (Ibid, 72).

³³⁴ Walter Benjamin: SW4, 169. Benjamin speaks not of the camera but of “the allegorical intention.”

³³⁵ Ibid, 37

³³⁶ Ibid, 190

are, and in general how *different* different things are from one another, as though we had forgotten how to value them. This is in fact something movies teach us.”³³⁷

The camera’s operations are mortifying, wresting objects from their natural sequences and locales. Yet, in this divorcement from the context of the everyday and through their celluloid resurrection, these reassembled pieces of the world take on a new significance. Cavell develops the power of film in terms of the same dialectic of devaluation and elevation that Benjamin and Freud identified as the essential feature of allegorical meaning-making and by which Cavell himself typified the uncanniness of the ordinary. Indeed, the uncanniness latent in the everyday “is the normal experience of film,”³³⁸ in which the mundane world is subject to a foreign animation. And just as Freud and Benjamin described the task of the one who would decipher dreamlife, Cavell maintains that the “discontinuities are those of *attention*. You are given bits of the world, and you must put them together into (the) lives (of those onscreen), one way or another, as you have yours.”³³⁹ In other words, cinematic spectatorship is a practice of physiognomic reading in which the meaningfulness of a film depends upon its (re)construction by the individual through the interpretation of its images singly and together.

Even as Cavell resists the notion that cinematic experience is properly encapsulated through the metaphor of dreaming (or, let’s say, dreaming, as spoken of here, remains too metaphorical to do the job; it needs to become psychoanalytical or mythological), he is of the mind that, as with the Freudian dream, we may be fooled by the veneer of coherence that the Hollywood film imposes upon the material of history.

³³⁷ Ibid, 19

³³⁸ Ibid, 156

³³⁹ Ibid, 88

Or, better put, we deceive ourselves when we believe that the linear narrative, decried as a betrayal of the subversiveness of the medium by Adorno,³⁴⁰ is the whole story. Cavell is in agreement that film qua medium is essentially montage. Thus he argues that even when storytelling is “imposed” upon it, it nonetheless remains allegorical.³⁴¹ To put this otherwise, in terms of one of the central themes of this dissertation: film is able to tell stories—to become historical—without becoming historicist. It is up to us to read between the lines and we can only do this if we believe in these films’ intelligence just as mutual intelligibility with another person depends upon our imagination and thus our goodwill: our willingness to see them as having something to say and something that is worth hearing. As Cavell remarks in the context of discussing *Stella Dallas*, amongst the “womens’ film” or “tear-jerkers” that are “treated [by intellectuals] as works to be somewhat condescended to.”³⁴² “‘Can’t you read between those pitiful lines?’ [Mrs. Morrison] is in the narrative referring to Stella’s letter to Laurel...But I cannot doubt that Mrs. Morrison, or someone, is...referring to the lines of this film as such, hence asking their addressee—us—to read, to interpret, for example, her own line, and not alone as warning us to get beyond the film’s lines to its silences and its images, which are equally to be contended with; but as asking us to get quite beyond an interpretation of the pitiful as pathos for the film’s lines and its silences as its images more generally.”³⁴³

For Benjamin and for Freud, such an allegorical recreation of the world was dialectically bound up with the subjective condition of melancholia in which one was

³⁴⁰ See, in particular, the essay “Transparencies on Film.”

³⁴¹ “The liveness [of even a motionless camera] suggests that what we are shown on the screen is always only one of an endless number of equally possible views, that nothing the camera does can break out of the circle of viewing; we are always outside; there is no perfect, or more significant, view,” (WV, 102).

³⁴² CT, 7

³⁴³ CT, 206

dispossessed of one's past and thus equally unconscious to one's present. As I have argued, Cavellian skepticism is a variant on the Freudo-Benjaminian theme of melancholia. It should thus come as no surprise that, in the movies, the skepticism latent in modern selfhood finds the scene of its realization and thus a proper forum for its working-through. The economy of cinematic experience is such that it "establishes the connection [with reality] only at the price of establishing our absolute distance and isolation. And this is exactly the price of skepticism."³⁴⁴ In viewing a film, we both assume the skeptical position and undergo its redemption. The skeptic, desirous to discover the ground—if any—of her connection to the world and those within it, undertakes a posture of withdrawal. But, in this abstention from her practical relation to the world for the sake of realizing its epistemological presentness, what she discovers is that the world's presence cannot be re-gained on the basis of the senses alone. She finds herself isolated, wholly outside—displaced from—the world whose reality she would assure. Movies do not simply countenance the skeptical assertion that, when it comes to knowledge of the world's existence, experience does not suffice. Within the movie-theater, "not only is there a reasonable possibility, it is a fact that here our normal senses are satisfied of reality while reality does not exist—even, alarmingly, *because* it does not exist, because viewing it is all it takes."³⁴⁵

The epistemological anarchism of skepticism finds its aesthetic correlate in the ontological anarchism—if I may be permitted this absurdity—of film. For, as I have already suggested, Cavell's ontological definition of the material basis of movies as a succession of automatic world projections fails to provide the photographic image with

³⁴⁴ WV, 195

³⁴⁵ Ibid, 189

its ontological place. As Cavell sees it, there is no such place.³⁴⁶ For, while film is obviously *of* the world—reality is its subject—there nonetheless remains something unthinkable about the connection, which is to say, as well, the difference, between a photograph and what it is a photograph of. Cavell denies that this connection is properly thought, as Bazin tries to think it, as one of reproduction either in the sense of a visual impression, as if photogenesis were a process of mold-making, or in the sense of a visual transcription, as if film reproduced the sights of objects as, say, a record reproduces the sounds of instruments. For “objects don’t *make* sights, or *have* sights...Objects are too *close* to their sights to give them up for reproducing.”³⁴⁷ Yet, while Cavell makes argument with Bazin’s formulation of photogenesis as the visual transcription of reality, he nonetheless preserves a version of the rejected thought in his emphasis on film’s spectral—its metaphysically hallucinatory—character. As Cavell develops it, the question of whether or not what we see onscreen is real or illusory admits of no direct or consistent answer and the unresolvability of this question saturates cinematic experience. Again, the uncanny is the normal experience of film and the uncanny is precisely what characterizes the skeptical mood or predisposition in which one is overcome by the indistinction between reality and fantasy.

Yet film, in making things present to us to which we are not present, represents the success of the skeptical posture of withdrawal, disclosing a world complete in itself, i.e., one whose revelation is independent of my engagement with it. It is precisely on the condition of my radical exclusion—my utter displacement—from this world that it is fully present to me. “A screen is a barrier. What does the silver screen screen? It

³⁴⁶ See, in particular, Chapter 2 of *The World Viewed*.

³⁴⁷ WV, 7

screens me from the world it holds—that is, it makes me invisible. And it screens that world from me—that is, screens its existence from me.”³⁴⁸ Cavell attributes to the screen a protective quality; in mechanically guaranteeing my absence, it absents me from responsibility for this world, renders my passivity necessary. Outside the space of the movie-theater, my disinclination or inability to effect change in the world—to act in the face of injustice, to prevent the suffering of others or to share in their pleasures—is a failure that I must accept as my own. In viewing a film, I am relieved of this burden insofar as my powerlessness is automatically assured.³⁴⁹ My absence, incapacitation, and ineffectiveness—this condition of dispossession—in the darkened theater is not only excusable; it is a condition of experience, necessary to any serious attendance to what occurs therein.

So, while Cavell resists the idea that “film is *the* modern art, the one to which modern man naturally responds” and does so on the grounds that “if there is anything seriously to be called ‘modern man,’ one fact about him is that what is natural to him is not natural, that naturalness for him has become a stupendous achievement,”³⁵⁰ he confirms its special status as the art that naturalizes our denatured condition in and through rendering our condition of displacement necessary:

Viewing a movie makes this condition automatic, takes the responsibility for it out of our hands. Hence movies seem more natural than reality. Not because

³⁴⁸ WV, 24

³⁴⁹ “How do movies reproduce the world magically? Not by literally presenting us with the world, but by permitting us to view it unseen. This is not a wish for power over creation (as Pygmalion’s was), but a wish not to need power, not to have to bear its burdens. It is, in this sense, the reverse of the myth of Faust,” (Ibid, 40.)

³⁵⁰ Ibid, 14. Cavell qualifies his distrust further, writing that “(1) [this idea] assumes that the other arts are *not* capable of eliciting the old values of art. That *may* be true; but it may also be that someone who claims it is true is not in a position to recognize the live article when he sees it. (2) If film is seriously to be thought of as an art at all, then it needs to be explained how it can have avoided the fate of modernism, which in practice means how it can have maintained its continuities of audiences and genres, how it can have been taken seriously without having assumed the burden of seriousness.”

they are escapes into fantasy but because they are reliefs from private fantasy and its responsibilities; from the fact that the world is *already* drawn by fantasy. And not because they are dreams, but because they permit the self to be wakened, so that we may stop withdrawing our longings further inside ourselves. Movies convince us of the world's reality in the only way we have to be convinced, without learning to bring the world closer to the heart's desire (which in practice now means learning to stop altering it illegitimately, against itself): by taking views of it.³⁵¹

In the epigraph by which I initiated this section, Cavell suggests that secular society exists in a condition of victimization, hence requires something more than mere politics can provide but without which politics cannot occur. *The World Viewed* as a whole argues that the experience of film provides this something. My absolute distance from reality projected and screened is the basis on which this reality makes a claim on me, the scene of the everyday revealed to me as extraordinary and so redeemed from its state of fallenness, its disenchantment for me.³⁵² Within the space of the movie-theater, our privacy is not transcended, but nor is it left untouched. Rather the meaning of privacy is transformed, the fact of individuality not experienced as fatedness to isolation and so a cause for despair but realized as the basis of our intimacy with the world and to those within it.³⁵³

³⁵¹ Ibid, 102

³⁵² "What movies did at first they can do at last: spare our attention wholly for *that* thing *now*, in the frame of nature, the world moving in the branch. In principle, anyone and everyone could be seeing it now. It is not novelty that has worn off, but our interest in our own experience," (Ibid, 122).

³⁵³ Given the sense of profound intimacy that permeates one's experience before the silverscreen—"its effects being too powerful or immediate"—Cavell is hesitant to "count [these effects] as effects of art," (Ibid, 102). This point finds further elaboration in his remark that "the impact of movies is too massive, too out of proportion with the individual worth of ordinary movies, to speak politely of involvement. They become further fragments in the shuffle of my memory," (Ibid, 154). In his sense of cinematic aesthetics as profoundly haptic even as we are entirely screened from contact with filmed reality, Cavell echoes Walter Benjamin's Artwork essay.

In other words, the movies do not transcend the anarchism of secularized social space, but they perform the work of redemption insofar as, within the space of the theater, we find this madness to be not merely livable with others but worth living. “The movies promise us happiness...because we can tolerate individuality, separateness...in particular, because we can maintain a connection to reality despite our condemnation to viewing it in private...The myth of film is that nature survives our treatment of it and its loss of enchantment for us, and that community remains possible even when the authority of society is denied us.”³⁵⁴ Whatever the society of cinema, it is one the principle of which has yet to be discovered—if in fact there is any shared experience here at all. Within the movie-theater, we do not know whether or not community is, in fact, achieved or if we simply happen to occupy the same time and place, consuming the same commodity. But this is the further fact that movies allow us to acknowledge: that since we cannot know a priori with whom we are in community and on what basis, the secular constitution is one as yet in need of ratification.

For the movies are inherently anarchic. Their unappeasable appetite for stories of love is for stories in which love, to be found, must find its own community, apart from, but with luck still within, society at large; an enclave within it; stories in which society as a whole, and its laws, can no longer provide or deny love. The myth of movies tells not of the founding of society but of a human gathering without natural or divine backing; of society before its securing (as in the Western) or after its collapse (as in the musical or the thirties’ comedy, in which the principals of romance are left on their own to supply the legitimacy of their love). It shares with any myth the wish for origins and comprehension which lies behind the grasp of human history and arbitration. In myth the past is called before us, reenacted, and in its presence we are rededicated. On film, the past

³⁵⁴ Ibid, 213-14

which is present is pastness or presentness itself, time itself, visually preserved in endless repetition, an eternal return, but thereby removed from the power to preserve us; in particular, powerless to bring us together.

As Cavell sees it, the movies give refuge to myth in modernity, but only on the condition of myth's self-overcoming. Myth is the force that founds community and consecrates it. Myth creates and preserves a community through the provision of a shared past and purpose and thus provides the way into the future. At the same time, the survival of the mythic past depends upon the members of a society coming together and, through the convention of collective storytelling, reanimating this past in the present. In the movies, the new site of the mythic convention, the past is presented to us, automatically, without our having to do anything. The past on film is independent of us, which is to say, complete without us, and hence, we are without it. In the movies, we know our union to be unsponsored, illegitimate—say, theologically illegal: lacking both the certain story of our past and hence the knowledge of our proper future.

Yet, in both the myths that it tells and the mythological experience that it affords, the movies renew the hope that, even as politics and the laws that it puts forth can no longer provide or deny love—ensure a happy state of the union—solidarity yet remains possible. Cavell continues:

The myth of movies replaces the myth according to which obedience to law, being obedience to laws I have consented to and thus established, is obedience to the best of myself, hence constitutes my freedom—the myth of democracy. In replacing this myth, it suggests that democracy itself, the sacred image of secular politics, is unliveable.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁵ Ibid, 214

To what myth does Cavell refer? Democracy, taken as a form of self-government in which I obey the government that I have given myself, is a structure subtended by the myth of consent. It is an explanatory myth in that we discover ourselves acting freely in complicity with the conventions of our society. Agreement is an inference from this current state of accord. To put this otherwise: we must consent to the myth of consent if we are to regard our existence here as chosen and hence know ourselves as free. In accepting this myth, we both consent to political equality and recognize that we are both answerable to and for our government hence our society. The myth is not intended simply to secure our compliance, but to authorize us as members of the polis.³⁵⁶

But can the myth of consent do this? Can it authorize us?—this is the question that remains unasked but which undergirds the passage from the *World Viewed* in which Cavell contends that the ideal of democracy generated by the myth of contract is unlivable. For when I try to implement the political education afforded by the myth and inspect the state of my society, I both feel that I *cannot* have consented to *this* and that, if I am responsible for it, I do not know in what rectification would consist or if anybody else knows of the state of injustice—or cares.³⁵⁷ The hegemonic myth of democracy, on the interpretation of the *World Viewed*, serves but to perpetuate our incapacitation.

³⁵⁶ As Cavell writes in the *Claim of Reason*: “What I consent to, in consenting to the contract, is not mere obedience, but membership in a polis, which implies two things: First, that I recognize the principle of consent itself; which means that I recognize others to have consent with me, and hence that I consent to political *equality*. Second, that I recognize the society and its government, so constituted, as *mine*; which means that I am answerable not merely to it, but for it. So far, then, as I recognize myself to be exercising my responsibility for it, my obedience to it is obedience to my own laws; citizenship in that case is the same as my autonomy; the polis is the field within which I can work out my personal identify and it is the creation of (political) freedom,” (23).

³⁵⁷ Here, I mean to put my reader in mind of Cavell’s essay “The Avoidance of Love” in which his reading of the tragedy of King Lear turns into a mournful meditation on the crisis of American national sovereignty during the era of Vietnam.

But the movies, as myth, treat our incapacitation—our skepticism and non-knowledge—on its own terms and the acknowledgement that cinematic experience, as mythological, potentially affords is that, while the principle of our connection is as yet unknown, we might nonetheless find community with one another.³⁵⁸ In generating through the movies a mythic image of democratic solidarity, Cavell seeks to preserve and open, beyond the hegemonic myth of contract, the promise of democracy, giving voice to a politics of consent without consensus. Community yet might be confirmed, retroactively, in conversation; the secular constitution might still be ratified. For when the lights go up, “our hiddenness, our silence, and our placement,” having been acknowledged, “are now our choices.”³⁵⁹

³⁵⁸ “The philosophical appeal to what we say, and the search for our criteria on the basis of which we say what we say, are claims to community. And the claim to community is always a search for the basis upon which it can or has been established. I have nothing more to go on than my conviction, my sense that I make sense. It may prove to be the case that I am wrong, that my conviction isolates me, from all others, from myself. That will not be the same as the discovery that I am dogmatic or egomaniacal. The wish and search for community are the wish and search for reason,” (CR, 20).

³⁵⁹ MWMW, 343

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: REDEMPTIVE CRITICISM AND DEMOCRATIC INSTITUTIONS

Over the course of this dissertation, I have argued that the texts of Sigmund Freud, Walter Benjamin, and Stanley Cavell are productively read alongside of and in terms of one another. Specifically: reading them thus has enabled me to develop the concept of a hermeneutical tradition that I have designated “redemptive criticism,” a form of critique—a “therapy of disillusion”—that aims not to leave us in a state of disillusionment, but rather to awaken us once again to the claim of the quotidian.³⁶⁰ I have sketched the meaning of redemptive criticism and made the case for the essential homology between these three thinkers primarily through emphasizing the historico-political dimension that fundamentally dictates the logic of their endeavors. Once this dimension is identified, it becomes clear how necessary it is to take up the texts of Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell in terms of the implicit theory of secularity that undergirds them. For only in the provision of the historico-political backdrop of their thinking is one able to get ahold of the normative impulse that shapes their texts. In this, I take myself to have provided the context within which the writings of Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell are legible as philosophy, specifically legible as the attempt to inherit philosophy within

³⁶⁰ In his essay “The Politics of Interpretation (As Opposed to What?),” Cavell presents his own activity of philosophizing via its identification with the work of Emerson and Thoreau in terms of “redemptive reading,” a practice that he explicitly describes as psychoanalytic in derivation. The question of such a practice would be that of “how to accept a therapy of disillusion (or dismantling) without succumbing to disillusionment, I mean disillusionment as an attitude, something between discouragement and cynicism,” (59). Cavell’s idea redemptive reading, which is no more than a sketch, does not so much coincide with my redemptive criticism as it is comprehended by it. I appropriate the term “redemptive criticism” from Jurgen Habermas’ 1972 lecture, “Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism,” in which he seeks to differentiate Benjamin’s critical hermeneutics from the practice of ideology critique. While Habermas ultimately fails to apprehend what is at stake in Benjamin’s work, both his development of this work in contradistinction to ideology critique and his misreading of Benjamin are highly instructive. It is thus his term, rather than Cavell’s, that I have retained for my project.

secularized social space and, moreover, for the sake of renewing the secular aspiration to life lived beyond absolute authority.

In unfolding the inner life of the post-absolutist collective through the work of Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell, I have theorized secularity as an ethos of intolerable authority, calling as it does for an authority that it cannot stand, and, accordingly, presented democratic experience as inherently, which is not to say inveterately, maddening. For Freud, who regarded the social order as fundamentally religious, anonymous individuals bound together through the force of illusion (or, in the much stronger terms of the later Freud, mass delusion), the only redemption from this madness was individual in nature, the project of self-authorization to be privately pursued through the cultivation of the inner resources requisite to sustaining oneself in the otherwise uninhabitable sphere of anonymous others. Freud developed the mythic substructure of post-absolutist society in the psychological terms of private life, terms ultimately orthogonal to the normative drives of democracy, and, accordingly, remained unable to redeem myth for post-absolutist politics despite his having shown its significance.

Yet, as Benjamin recognized, the psychoanalytic project of self-authorization cannot be sustained or accomplished by the individual alone in isolation inasmuch as the madness of modernity, the phantasmagoria of secularized experience, arises in the gap between the public and the private and the concomitant fragmentation of culture. Only in the communal re-collection and re-animation of these fragments might there be discovered a form of myth-making adequate to the needs and aspirations of secularized society. It is hence, in Benjamin's thinking, that redemptive criticism achieves a communal character as a new self-critical form of tradition, i.e., a material practice of

remembrance. However, while Benjamin knew that the project of self-authorization required a public stage and, conversely, that private experience offered the tools by which to get a grip within the ideological terrain of the present, he nonetheless remained unable to conceive of solidarity beyond a Hegelian reconciliatory model. In this, he was at odds with himself. For the secular realization of tradition and the emancipatory politics that might follow therefrom obtains not in the defeat of private life, but rather requires its renewal inasmuch as the private is that which is excessive or other to the social totality and, as such, that which has the power to critical contest it.

It is in the work of Cavell, with its recognition that because “the relation between self and community (because they are composed of one another) is an undying dialectic...you cannot know beforehand whether a given contradiction requires a revolution of self or an adaptation of community,”³⁶¹ that the concept of redemptive criticism comes to fruition in and as a solidaristic practice of meaning-making. In his treatment of skepticism and the concept of acknowledgment that arises therefrom, Cavell offers a thoroughly dialectical, which is to say, a thoroughly democratic, conception of solidarity as achieved, not despite, but in virtue of privacy where that privacy serves as the ground of communication and interrelation. Cavell shares Freud and Benjamin’s diagnosis that the madness of modernity is due to the simultaneous separation and ungraspable intertwinement of the private and the public spheres. Yet, on his account, the hope for a life lived in freedom and equality with others does not abide in the image of this madness overcome, but rather in the thought that it might be redeemed, discovered as livable with others.

³⁶¹ WV, 138

In sum: in identifying, tracing, and developing this concept of redemptive criticism through Freud and Benjamin and, finding, in Cavell, the dialectical realization, of their respective critico-redemptive enterprises, I have shown that democratic solidarity is misunderstood when it is thought to consist in the expulsion of the private and that privacy, while it names, in part, that which is excessive to conceptualization or codification, is misunderstood when it is treated as the purely particular, the irrational, or the incomprehensible. Mutuality obtains only in virtue of this excess. In having presented redemptive criticism as such an interpretation of democratic mutuality and as a means of its practical realization, I cannot evade the further political dimension of my dissertation by asking the question of whether and how the practice of redemptive criticism, through which the permanent crisis of democratic solidarity is addressed, could find an institutionalized form. Moreover, I take it as incumbent upon me to acknowledge and, if not contend with this question here, at the limits of this project, at least to point in the direction of a possible answer as I have implicitly developed redemptive criticism as vision of solidaristic meaning-making alternative to the proceduralist accounts offered by thinkers such as Habermas and Rawls and presented redemptive criticism explicitly as a vision of democratic life alternative to that offered in the liberal myth of contract.

It is my sense that such an inquiry would begin through posing the question of what it is that we mean by “political institutions.” This issue, while not the focal point of my current inquiry and thus not directly prosecuted in these pages, has nonetheless been broached and negotiated throughout this dissertation. Freud, in his disclosure of the dialectical relation between private patriarchal authority and public order, politicized the institution of the family, which, in turn, gave rise to the institution of psychoanalysis.

Thus, although Freud assiduously guarded psychoanalysis from any particular political affiliations, the practice of the talking-cure emerges as a supplement to or means of negotiating our standing institutions: or, alternatively, the meaning of our own standing within and amidst these institutions, private and public. This need for a liminal space, for a space of privacy that does not coincide with the domestic interior, could be read as a sign of institutional failure: that our institutions do not allow for the kind of educative society of which we, as secular citizens, are in need. However, implicit to what I have argued throughout this dissertation and what I wish to emphasize here is that the withdrawal into the space of psychoanalysis need not be read as a rejection of private relations nor as a refusal of social and political responsibilities. For potentially, we withdraw from these institutions for the sake of these institutions, i.e., for the sake of cultivating the capacity to operate within, contribute to, radically remake, and, if need be, to reject these institutions.

While Benjamin's politicization of mass culture called for a political praxis, an "institution," that it could not itself supply, his texts, as I have argued, nonetheless contribute to the provision of this secular education—are themselves contributions to the tradition of cultural critique, an institution whose effectiveness we might question, but an institution nonetheless. But, with Cavell, I find myself hesitant to assert that his treatment of movies or his analysis of linguistic conventions represent the immediate or direct politicization of these respective phenomena. Cavell's democratization of the mass culture commodity of film and his democratization of criteria should rather be described as offering an image of solidarity through which to reimagine the purpose and shape of political institutions through destabilization the divide between the private and the public,

opening the meaning of both to a radical reinterpretation. Cavell's analysis of the cinematic audience is, as I have argued, the analysis of a certain kind of conversation and his analysis of our conventions presents these social institutions not as structures that forestalls or eliminates semantic/intersubjective crises, but as a structure defined by the perpetual possibility of crisis and, at the same time, the site at which we negotiate these crises and potentially take advantage of them. Viewed this way, we could say that Cavell's critical allegorization(s) of the myth of contract emblematically envisions proceduralist politics as dialectical politics. This "proceduralism," which presents open-ended conversation as the medium of politics, radically alternative to that advanced by either Rawls or Habermas inasmuch as the conversation of justice does not depend upon the expulsion of the private. Rather, political discourse, theorized in terms of Cavellian acknowledgment, arises in the very indistinction between the private and the public, where this indistinction is both spatial (as mythically imaged in Cavell's anarchic-democratic cinema) and internal to claim-making: a matter of voice.

In arguing that the private is not opposed to the communal and, as such, to be ignored, extruded, or surmounted, but rather secured as the condition of the possibility of communal life and in further positing that the divide between the private and the public is not one resolved before politics proper but the very stuff of democratic political life, I am not alone. There are many theorists and philosophers engaged in the effort to reimagine political institutions accordingly (e.g., Iris Marion Young, Bonnie Honig, Chantal Mouffe, to name a few). Here, I would like to consider two such politico-philosophic projects, those advanced by Judith Butler in *Precarious Life* and José Medina in his recent publication *The Epistemology of Resistance*. In marking the limits of the current

project and the direction of further research, the efforts of Butler and Medina are the right ones to consider insofar as they share my conviction that democratic solidarity attains in the recognition of the excess that is nonetheless internal to it and that the question for political theory is whether or not this excess can, indeed, be democratized through the identification and development of the kinds of institutions that could properly house and nourish such solidarity.

In *Precarious Life*, Butler develops her politics of acknowledgment in terms of a missed opportunity. This is redolent of Cavell, for whom acknowledgment is always acknowledgment of some specific instance of ethical failure. Specifically: *Precarious Life* finds its occasion in the aftermath of 9/11. Butler proposes that the retaliatory violence undertaken by the U.S. is rooted in our inability to grieve; that rather than mourning the sense of sovereignty that was lost, the myth of sovereignty was resuscitated through the invasion of foreign soil and the internal invasion of the private sphere by U.S. government surveillance. While Butler does not outline specific institutions through which such solidarity might be realized in the future—nor does she indicate what kind of political institutions might have allowed us to respond differently to the crisis of 9/11—she does designate “the media” and the capitalist interests that control it as the primary institutions that facilitated and supported the gross ethico-political failing of the United States.³⁶² What was revealed and immediately repressed in the wake of 9/11, she contends, was the ontological fact of our “fundamental dependency on anonymous

³⁶² “The war coverage has brought into relief the need for a broad de-monopolizing of media interests, legislation for which has been, predictably, contested on Capitol Hill. We think of these interests as controlling the rights of ownership, but they are also, simultaneously, deciding what will and will not be publicly recognizable as reality. They do not show violence, but there is a violence in the frame in what is shown. That latter violence is the mechanism through which certain lives and deaths (either once again) by the war effort. The first is an effacement through occlusion; the second is an effacement through representation itself,” (147).

others.’³⁶³ Had we been able to acknowledge and, in acknowledging, to accept our shared condition of finitude and vulnerability, the crisis of 9/11 could have become the occasion, not for further trespass, extra-national and domestic, but rather the basis for a reconstitution and reorientation of political community—and not just the political community of the U.S., but rather the discovery of a global political community. Butler writes that

Despite our differences in location and history, my guess is that it is possible to appeal to a ‘we,’ for all of us have some notion of what it is to have lost somebody. Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all. And if we have lost, then it follows that we have had, that we have desired and loved, that we have struggled to find the conditions for our desire... This means that each of us is constituted politically in part by virtue of the social vulnerability of our bodies—as a site of desire and physical vulnerability, as a site of a publicity at once assertive and exposed. Loss and vulnerability seem to follow from our being socially constituted bodies, attached to others, at risk of violence by virtue of that exposure.³⁶⁴

Here, there emerges a parallelism between Butlerian mournful solidarity and the elegiac pathos which grounds the Cavellian search for community. That said, where Butlerian solidarity is one formed in light of an extra-political truth of human finitude, interdependency, exposure, and mortal vulnerability, on my reading of Cavell, the loss that might bring us together is one that is already political insofar as it concerns the historico-political condition of secularism *qua* condition of exile, the divestment of community always, at the same time, the possibility of its rediscovery. Where, for Cavell, this loss and the incapacitation that it implies serves as the basis of solidarity inasmuch as this divestment is, as one name for privacy, also the condition of our

³⁶³ Ibid, xii

³⁶⁴ 20

freedom and of our capacity to freely encounter one another, for Butler, conversely, the acceptance of our own vulnerability is a source of solidarity inasmuch as it re-orient us to the other qua desiring, suffering body; as vulnerable to the same violence that threatens us and to the violence that we yield. Butler thus suggests that a Levinasian ethics of alterity serves as an important resource for the theorization of democratic solidarity. Butler's *Precarious Life*, in this way, offers a further means by which to enrich and expand the account of solidarity that I have developed here.

As I have treated it in this dissertation, acknowledgment does not offer a conceptual resolution to a personal, ethical, or political problem, but rather a means of recasting the essential problematic of democratic community. Acknowledgment, in naming what remains excessive to public recognition, names the permanent crisis of secular community. In *Epistemologies of Resistance*, however, José Medina goes further, proposing a politics of acknowledgment in which acknowledgment is itself the force of democratic legitimation. While the pedigree of Medina's concept of acknowledgment admits of a relation to the Cavellian concept, he writes from out of a very different tradition than that from which this dissertation descends. Yet his Wittgensteinianism and his investment in Castoriadis, specifically in his Freudo-Marxist concept of the social imaginary, create additional points of contact between our two studies. Medina depicts the politics of acknowledgment precisely as a proceduralism alternative to those aimed at consensus, such as Habermasian discourse ethics, or those that one-sidedly prioritize disagreement and seem to sacrifice solidarity, such as the Mouffean agonistic model. Medina seeks to re-conceptualize the very privacy, pluralism, and non-knowledge that would seem to defy the possibility of community as the foundation of community,

arguing that genuine solidarity consists in embracing the limits of our own perspective and the ability to engage with perspectives radically other to our own. He writes that the collective imagination

... must be rendered open to contestation in (an) indefinite and radical way. A society's sense of itself—of its past, present, and future—must always remain radically open to contestation. And this radical contestability, far from being a threat to social cohesion, actually constitutes the basis of a particular kind of social relationality that is precisely what pluralistic democracies require. In this radically pluralistic view, democratic solidarity and democratic participation revolve around diversity and critical engagement with differences; and they do not have to be grounded in or aimed at consensus—whether facilitated by common features, a common culture, or shared views.³⁶⁵

Medina's concept of a politics of acknowledgement is thus meant to countenance, highlight, and address many of the same issues that have made up the basic material of this dissertation and dictated the terms of its engagement with Freud, Benjamin, and Cavell. Medina presents solidarity in terms of the willingness to discover with whom it is that we are in community and acknowledgment as the crucial normative relation by which we are able to countenance and appreciate the claims of others whose experiences diverge radically from our own. Moreover, Medina depicts this solidaristic form of meaning-making as one in which crises are courted and redeemed, democratic community as that which is capable of critically interrogating and challenging its fundamental assumptions about its past, the meaning of its present, and the possibility of its future. As Butler offers the opportunity to enrich my account of the affective constitution of democratic solidarity, an engagement with Medina's work affords the possibility of the more direct or immediate politicization of redemptive criticism or, to

³⁶⁵ *Epistemologies of Resistance*, 275

restrict this claim, its specifically Cavellian form of acknowledgment. I imagine that such an engagement would be focused in terms of Medina's thesis that the acceptance of the radical contestability, the provisionality and open-endedness, of every feature that defines a political community could itself act as the force through which a community coheres. For, in the terms laid out in this project, the question of community cannot be closed with the provision of the concept of acknowledgment. Instead acknowledgment is the concept or the act through which that question first (or always) recurs. Where Medina sees the acceptance of pluralism, privacy, and non-knowledge as vindicatory, a mechanism through which community could be re-grounded, I see no such possibility of ratification. Rather, on my reading, it is in the very anarchism of secularized social space that the hope of democracy obtains, democratic culture but the attempt to redeem the unending crisis of secular solidarity.

REFERENCES

- Adorno, Theodor W. "Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda." In *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*. Eds Andrew Arato & Eike Gebhardt. New York: Urizon Books, 1978: 118-137.
- _____. "The Idea of Natural-History." *Telos*. 1984, no. 60 (1984): 111-124.
- _____. "Transparencies on Film." *New German Critique* 24/25 (1981): 199-205.
- Adorno, Theodor & Benjamin, Walter. *The Complete Correspondences of Adorno & Benjamin: 1928-1940*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.
- Agamben, Giorgio. *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*. Ed Daniel Heller-Roazen. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999.
- Arendt, Hannah. "Walter Benjamin: 1892-1940." In *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken, 1968: 1-58.
- Aristotle. *Politics*. Trans Ernest Barker. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.
- Baker, G. P. and Hacker, P. M. S. Wittgenstein: Understanding and Meaning: Volume 1 of an Analytical Commentary on the Philosophical Investigations, Part I: Essays. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.
- Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Ed Rolf Tiedemann. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2002.
- _____. *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*. New York: Schocken, 1968.
- _____. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Trans. John Osborne. London: Verso, 2003.
- _____. *Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*. Eds. Michael Bullock & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996.
- _____. *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927-1930*. Eds. Michael Bullock & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996.
- _____. *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1931-1937*. Eds. Michael Bullock & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996.
- _____. *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. Eds. Michael Bullock & Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 1996.
- Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Dialectics of Seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.
- _____. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. New York: The Free Press, 1977.
- Butler, Judith. *Prearious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence*. London: Verso, 2004.
- _____. *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997.

- Cavell, Stanley. *Cities of Words: Pedagogical Letters on a Register of the Moral Life*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005.
- _____. *The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979.
- _____. *Contesting Tears: the Hollywood Melodrama of the Unknown Woman*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1990.
- _____. *In Quest of the Ordinary: Lines of Skepticism and Romanticism*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1994.
- _____. *Must We Mean What We Say?* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- _____. *The Pitch of Philosophy: Autobiographical Exercises*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994.
- _____. "The Politics of Interpretation (As Opposed to What?)." In *Themes Out of School: Effects and Causes*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984: 27-59.
- _____. *Pursuits of Happiness: the Hollywood Comedy of Remarriage*. Cambridge: Harvard University, 1981.
- _____. "Remains to be Seen." In *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*. Ed Beatrice Hanssen. New York: Continuum, 2006: 259-263.
- _____. *The World Viewed: Reflections on the Ontology of Film*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979.
- Conant, James. "Mild Mono-Wittgensteinianism." In *Wittgenstein and the Moral Life: Essays in Honor of Cora Diamond*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2007: 31-142.
- Conant, James & Diamond, Cora. "On Reading the Tractatus Resolutely: Reply to Meredith Williams and Peter Sullivan. In *The Lasting Significance of Wittgenstein's Philosophy*. Eds. Max Kölbel & Bernhard Weiss. London: Routledge, 2004: 46-99.
- Derrida, Jacques. "Signature, Event, Context." In *Margins of Philosophy*. Trans Alan Bass. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982: 307-330.
- Freud, Sigmund. "Civilization and Its Discontents." In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1930)*: 57-146.
- _____. "The Ego and the Id." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIX (1923-1925)*: 1-59.
- _____. "Family Romances." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1906-1908)*: 235-244.
- _____. "Fragment of an Analysis of a Case of Hysteria." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII (1905)*: 1-124.
- _____. "Future of an Illusion." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXI (1927-1931)*: 1-56.

- _____. "Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVIII (1920-1922)*: 65-144.
- _____. "From the History of an Infantile Neurosis." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XVII (1918-1919)*: 1-124.
- _____. "Inhibitions, Symptoms and Anxiety." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXII (1925-1926)*: 75-176.
- _____. "Interpretation of Dreams." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volumes IV-V (1900-1901)*: 1-628.
- _____. "Mourning and Melancholia." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIV (1914-1916)*: 237-258.
- _____. "Observations in Transference Love." In *Wild Analysis*. Trans Alan Bance. London: Penguin Classics, 2002.
- _____. "Obsessive Action and Religious Practices." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IX (1907-1909)*: 115-128.
- _____. "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume VII (1905)*: 123-246.
- _____. "Totem and Taboo." *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XIII (1913-1914)*: 1-162.
- Gadamer, Hans-Georg. *Truth and Method*. New York: Continuum, 2006.
- Habermas, Jurgen, *Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism: The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin*. Trans. Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner. *New German Critique*. No. 17, Special Walter Benjamin Issue (Spring, 1979), pp. 30-59.
- Hammer, Espen. *Stanley Cavell: Skepticism, Subjectivity, and the Ordinary*. Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2002.
- Hansen, Miriam. "Benjamin, Cinema and Experience: 'The Blue Flower in the Land of Technology.'" In *New German Critique*, No. 40, Special Issue on Weimar Film Theory (Winter, 1987):179-224.
- _____. *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012.
- Hegel, Georg F. W. *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Trans. A. V. Miller. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- _____. *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History: Introduction*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975.

- Hunt, Lynn. *The Family Romance of the French Revolution*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993.
- Kristeva, Julia. *Sense and Nonsense of Revolt*. Trans. Jeanine Herman. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000.
- LaPlanche, Jean. *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*. Trans Jeffrey Melhman. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1985.
- Lear, Jonathan. "On Reflection: the Legacy of Wittgenstein's Later Philosophy." *Ratio* 2, no. 1 (1989): 19-45.
- Lukács, Georg. *The Theory of the Novel*. Trans Anna Bostock. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971.
- Marcuse, Herbert. *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1974.
- Martin, Jay. *Adorno*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984.
- _____. *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996.
- Marx, Karl. *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*. Trans Ben Fowkes. New York: Vantage Books, 1977.
- Medina, José. *The Epistemology of Resistance: Gender and Racial Oppression, Epistemic Injustice, and the Social Imagination*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.
- Mulhall, Stephen. *Wittgenstein's Private Language: Grammar, Nonsense, and Imagination in Philosophical Investigations, sections 243-315*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.
- Norris, Andrew. "Political Revisions: Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy." In *The Claim to Community: Essays on Stanley Cavell and Political Philosophy*. Ed Andrew Norris. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2006: 80-97.
- Oliver, Kelly. *Animal lessons: How they teach us to be human*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2009.
- Pateman, Carole. *The Sexual Contract*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988.
- Pensky Max. *Melancholy Dialectics: Walter Benjamin and the Play of Mourning*. Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1994.
- _____. "Method and time: Benjamin's dialectical images." *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*. Ed David Ferris. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004: 177-98.
- Pippin, Robert. "Passive and Active Skepticism in Nicholas' Ray *In a Lonely Place*." *Nonsite.org*. No 5. 18 Mar. 2012. Web. 10 Oct. 2012. <<http://nonsite.org/>>.

- Plonowska-Ziarek, Ewa. "Stanley Cavell and the Economy of Skepticism." *The Rhetoric of Failure: Deconstruction of Skepticism, Reinvention of Modernism*. New York: SUNY Press, 1996: 25-69.
- Rose, Jacqueline. "Freud in the 'Tropics.'" In *History Workshop Journal*, no. 47. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999: 49-67.
- Santner, Eric L. "Freud's Moses and the Ethics of Nomotropic Desire." *October*. Vol. 88 (Spring, 1999): 3-41.
- Whitebook, Joel. *Perversion and utopia: A study in psychoanalysis and critical theory*. The MIT Press, 1996.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. *Philosophical Investigations*. Trans. G. E. M. Anscombe. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2001.