CHAPTER 4

Reading

Freud, Lacan, Derrida

In his essay "On Transience," Freud recounts a summer walk through the countryside with a famous poet. The scenery is resplendent, but the poet is haunted by the sense that all the beauty will be destroyed by the passage of time. Everything that may be desired as beautiful bears its own destruction within itself because it is temporal and begins to pass away as soon as it comes to be. The poet's conclusion is that such temporal finitude deprives beauty of its value. As Freud explains: "All that he would otherwise have loved and admired seemed to him shorn of its worth by the transience which was its doom."[1]

The dialogue that follows exhibits two paradigmatic ways of denying the co-implication of chronophobia and chronophilia that I have sought to analyze in this book. The poet exhibits clear symptoms of chronophobia, since he is hypersensitive to how the beauty around him is "fated to extinction" (14:305/10:358). The poet does not acknowledge, however, that his chronophobia stems from a chronophilia. Rather than recognizing that transience is internal to the beauty he desires, he claims that it deprives beauty of its value. The experience of temporal finitude would thus be the experience of an ontological *lack,* since it can never measure up to the ideal of eternal being.

For all its groundbreaking achievements, the psychoanalytic conception of desire has generally not questioned the supposed experience of an ontological lack. Both Freud and Lacan assume that temporal being is a lack of being that we desire to transcend, while emphasizing that the idea of a timeless state of being is an illusion that we should learn to leave behind. Thus, in seeking to cure the poet of his melancholia, Freud does not acknowledge the chronophobia that is intrinsic to chronophilia. Responding to the poet, Freud claims that there is no reason why "the thought of the transience of beauty should interfere with our joy in it" (14:305/10:359). Rather, if we learn to let go of the fantasy of timeless being, we should be able to free ourselves from the phobic relation to the passage of time and enjoy the transience of life. Following the logic of chronolibido, however, this argument cannot be sustained. If one removes the fear of what may happen to a temporal being (chronophobia) one removes the attachment to the same temporal being (chronophilia), since one no longer cares if what happens to it is vital or lethal, beneficial or devastating. Indeed, attachment to a temporal being means that every affirmation is inhabited by negation from the start and even the most active embrace of life cannot be immune from the reactive mourning of death.

Chronophilia, then, cannot cure chronophobia. Philia and phobia are rather two aspects of the same chronolibidinal condition. The psychoanalytic logic of lack fails to articulate this condition, since it assumes that chronophobia derives from the desire for a timeless, eternal being. This assumption has two major consequences. First, it assumes that the fundamental drama of desire resides in the conflict between the temporal being that we are and the timeless being that we desire to be, rather than in the double bind of chronophilia and chronophobia. Second, because it does not articulate this double bind, the logic of lack invites the assumption that chronophobia could be cured by chronophilia.

In "On Transience," however, Freud opens the possibility for a different diagnosis of chronophobia. On Freud's reading, the poet's denigration of temporal being does *not* stem from the lack of a timeless being. Rather, it is a defense mechanism against the threat of loss. By denigrating the value of temporal being, the poet seeks to avoid the experience of mourning that follows from the attachment to a being that is lost. As

Freud puts it, those who "seem ready to make a permanent renunciation because what was precious has proved not to be lasting, are simply in a state of mourning for what is lost" (14:307/10:360–61). Importantly, what has been lost is not a timeless being but a temporal being: something that was precious but could not last and leaves the survivor in mourning. Furthermore, the mourning in question does not have to be the mourning of something that already has been lost; it can also be the mourning of what *will be* lost, as is the case when the poet finds his enjoyment of beauty "interfered with by thoughts of its transience" (14:306/10:359).

Hence, although the poet claims that he is lacking a timeless being, he is in fact mourning a temporal being. Freud himself does not elaborate this argument, but we can trace it through the account he gives. It is because the poet fears to lose a temporal being that he seeks to detach himself from it by renouncing its value. The apparent *detachment* thus presupposes *attachment* to a temporal being. If the poet were not attached to a being that could be lost, he would never anticipate the painful experience of mourning that motivates the act of detachment. What comes first, then, is not the desire for a timeless being that cannot be lost, but the attachment to a temporal being that can be lost. In my terminology, this attachment is the source of *both* chronophilia *and* chronophobia. The one cannot be disentangled from the other, since the chance of what one desires is inseparable from the threat of losing it. While this double bind is at work in every moment of life, it becomes poignant upon the death of the beloved. To mourn the beloved is precisely to experience how he or she or it could always become the source of radical loss.

The condition of mourning can thus be seen as paradigmatic for the general condition of chronolibido. Mourning requires both a chronophilic attachment to a temporal being and a chronophobic resistance to the loss of the same temporal being. Without the attachment, one would have nothing to lose, and without the resistance, one would have nothing to mourn, since one would not care about the loss of the temporal being.

For the same reason, the condition of chronolibido is inextricable from the condition of *survival* that I have analyzed throughout this book. To survive is necessarily to be haunted by mourning, both in relation to what has been lost in the past and what will be lost in the future. The *actual*

experience of mourning is preceded by the *possible* mourning that is at work from the first moment of experience, since everything that may be experienced is temporal and will be lost. It follows that every libidinal investment—what Freud describes as the "cathexis" *(Besetzung)* of an object—has an essential relation to time. The temporal finitude of the cathected object calls forth the economic capacity to redistribute resources or withdraw investments as a strategic response to being dependent on what may change or be lost.[2] Inversely, the calculation of libidinal investments is necessarily exposed to the incalculable temporality of the cathected object. The temporal finitude of the cathected object is thus what gives rise to a libidinal economy. It is *because* things are mutable and can be lost, because they have not always been and will not always be, that one cares about them. If things were fully present in themselves, if they were not haunted by alteration and loss, there would be no reason to care about them, since nothing could happen to them.

To elaborate this point, it is instructive to turn to Freud's essay "Timely Reflections on War and Death," written the same year as "On Transience," and in particular to the section entitled "Our Attitude Towards Death." Freud's argument here is apparently directly at odds with the notion of chronolibido, since he claims that the unconscious ("the deepest strata of our psyche") is unaware of either temporality or mortality. As Freud puts it, "our unconscious does not believe in its own death" (190/10:350) and for that reason "in the unconscious each of us is convinced of his immortality" (183/10:341). These claims resonate with assertions made in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* where Freud famously maintains that "unconscious psychic processes are in themselves 'timeless.'"[3] "This means," he goes on to explain, "that they are not ordered temporally; that time does not change them in any way; and that the idea of time cannot be applied to them" (18:28/13:28).

As I will seek to demonstrate, these assertions are incompatible with the logic of Freud's own arguments. First, while the unconscious certainly does not have to obey the chronology of *linear* time, this does not mean that it can be exempt from the *succession* of time. On the contrary, the retroactive temporality of the unconscious itself presupposes the notion of time that I derive from the implications of succession. The deferral and

delay that Freud calls *nachträglichkeit* is on my account characteristic of temporal experience in general. A temporal event can never be present as such, since it comes into being only by becoming past and becoming related to the future. The experience of the event is always given *too late* (in relation to what is no longer) and *too soon* (in relation to what is not yet). *Every experience* is thus characterized by a retroactive temporality, since what happens exceeds any given anticipation and can be apprehended only in retrospect, when it has already passed. If the unconscious was not marked by this succession of time, nothing would happen in it and nothing would happen because of it.

Second, when Freud asserts that the unconscious operates without regard for time and death, or believes that it is immortal, he does not rely on the evidence of psychoanalytic experience but on speculative concepts through which the evidence is interpreted. To challenge the coherence of these concepts, as I seek to do, is thus also to challenge the interpretation of the evidence. The most important move here is to distinguish between immortality and survival. Freud argues that because we cannot imagine our own death, we unconsciously believe that we are immortal. Freud is certainly right that we cannot imagine the state of being dead—this is the evidence of psychoanalytic experience to which he appeals—since in order to do so we have to imagine ourselves as surviving to witness our own death and thus necessarily fail to imagine ourselves as dead. It does not follow from this argument, however, that we are unconsciously convinced that we are immortal. Rather, what follows from Freud's argument is that even in our relation to death we fantasize about survival. To fantasize about *living on* after death is not to fantasize about being immortal, since to live on is to remain subjected to temporal finitude.

The distinction between immortality and survival is not incompatible with Freud's reasoning, but rather an expressive tool that enables a different reading of the same text. By distinguishing between immortality and survival we can thus unearth a wealth of chronolibidinal insights in Freud's essay. Despite Freud's claim that the unconscious does not have a sense of mortality, his own account shows that the fundamental conflicts of the unconscious emerge from an experience of survival and mourning that would be impossible without a sense of mortality. Contrary to Freud's tacit assumption, the sense of mortality does not depend

on the ability to imagine or experience oneself *as dead.* On the contrary, the sense of mortality—the sense of oneself *as mortal*—is characterized by the exposure to a disappearance that exceeds one's grasp and can only be experienced in relation to an other, or in relation to oneself as an other. It is indeed impossible to experience one's own death, since in order to do so one could not be dead. The only death one can experience is rather the death of an other whom one survives. Inversely, the relation to one's own death marks the exposure to a future that will survive oneself and cannot be appropriated by oneself.

Now, it is precisely in the experience of survival that Freud locates the fundamental conflict of the unconscious with regard to death. While we cannot imagine our own death, we are nevertheless confronted with mortality through "the death or the threatened death of our loved ones."[4] This experience of mourning—or the mere anticipation of mourning—reveals an inherent contradiction in the unconscious between "two opposing attitudes to death, the one that acknowledges it as the annihilation of life, and the other that denies it as unreal," which "collide and come into conflict" upon the death of the beloved (192/10:353). Far from being unaware of mortality, then, the fear of death is operative in the unconscious. As I have argued throughout this book, to fear death is not to fear the state of being dead but to fear the loss of what one wants to keep. Rather than being limited to organic death, the fear of death is operative in relation to everything one cares about and can lose against one's will.

The significance of the fear of death and the experience of survival is further underlined by Freud's account of "primeval man," whose experience in this regard would be isomorphic to that of the unconscious. "When primitive man saw someone close to him die," Freud writes, "he was brought up against the fact that he himself could also die and his whole being raged against admitting this" (187/10:346). In a remarkable move, Freud goes on to suggest that it was this conflicted experience of survival that gave rise to the notion of an immortal soul as well as the sense of a moral conscience and ethical duty. "What came into being by the side of the loved one's corpse," Freud argues, "was not only the theory of souls, belief in immortality and a powerful root for the human sense of guilt, but also the first ethical commandments. The first and most significant prohibition of the awakening conscience was: *Thou shalt not kill*"

(189/10:348–49). What interests me here is not Freud's speculative invocation of the experience of "primeval man," but rather the structural significance of the double bind of survival that can be extracted from his mythical narrative. What this narrative indicates is first of all that the notion of immortality derives from the experience of survival. According to Freud, "the physical changes of death" first gave rise to "the division of the individual into a body and a soul," since "the constant memory of the dead person became the foundation of the hypothesis of other forms of life" and specifically "the idea of life continuing after apparent death" (188/10:347–8). The capacity to remember someone even after his or her body has ceased to be alive would thus be the origin of the idea of an immortal soul. By the same token, the very idea of a capacity to transcend death—of an immortal soul—derives from and depends on the memory of a mortal life that survives in others who themselves are mortal.

Furthermore, Freud makes clear that the survival of the dead is not simply something that is desired; it is not only the wishful projection of someone who does not want to let go of the beloved but also inflected by hostility toward the other and thus by guilt over having wished for or being satisfied by the death of the beloved. As Freud observes, "there adheres to the most tender and profound of our loving relationships a little piece of hostility which can stimulate the unconscious desire for death" (192/10:353), and this "law of emotional ambivalence, which still governs our emotional relationships with the people we love, would certainly have applied even more generally in primeval times" (187/10:346). Accordingly, "it was by the corpse of the beloved person that [primeval man] invented spirits, and it was his sense of guilt over the satisfaction that was mixed with his grief that meant that the first spirits he created were fearful, evil demons" (188/10:347).

The same ambivalence informs the ethical injunction "Thou shalt not kill." While it expresses care for the other through the recognition of his or her mortality, the same recognition is at the root of all sorts of aggression. As Freud puts it, "the very emphasis on the commandment: Thou shalt not kill, makes us certain that we are descended from an endless series of generations of murderers who had the lust to kill" (190/10:350). The double bind of survival, then, gives rise to and continues to haunt not only the notion of the immortality of the soul but also the sense of moral

conscience and ethical duty. The investment in survival is the condition for any care for life and resistance to death, but it is also the condition for any resentment of life and desire for death.

If the experience of mourning is exemplary of this double bind, it is because it elucidates the inherent violence of living on. On the one hand, mourning is an act of fidelity, since it stems from the attachment to a mortal other and from the desire to hold on to this mortal other. On the other hand, mourning is an act of infidelity, since it stems from the decision to live on without the other and thus leave him or her or it behind. This betrayal is certainly unavoidable—the only alternative to surviving the other is to kill oneself and thereby kill the memory of the other as well—but the violence of survival is nonetheless real. As Freud puts it in a letter to Jones, in mourning one is left with "the choice of dying oneself or of acknowledging the death of the loved one, which again comes very close to your expression that one kills the person."[5] Similarly, Freud offers a striking analogy between the process of mourning, in which the beloved object is declared dead, and the process of overcoming the libidinal fixation to an object "by disparaging it, denigrating it, and even as it were killing it."[6] The point is not that these two processes are necessarily the same, but that even the most peaceful mourning relies on a violent severing from the other. In order to live on, I cannot be absolutely faithful to the other. I have to mobilize my ability to do without the other and in the process "kill" my previous attachment to a greater or lesser degree.

Rather than valorizing either "mourning" or "melancholia" as an adequate response to loss, one should therefore analyze their co-implication. In "Mourning and Melancholia"—yet another essay written the same year as "On Transience"—Freud himself begins by elucidating the common traits of the two conditions. In both mourning and melancholia, we have "the same painful frame of mind, the same loss of interest in the outside world—insofar as it does not recall the deceased—the same loss of capacity to adopt any new object of love (which would mean replacing the one who is mourned) and the same turning away from any activity that is not connected with thoughts of the deceased" (14:244/10:429). Thus, in resistance to an actual absence, both the mourner and the melancholic seek to ensure the survival of what has been lost by keeping it within themselves. The crucial difference, for Freud, is that the melancholic fails

to recognize the reality of loss and instead incorporates the lost other in him- or herself through "an *identification* of the ego with the abandoned object" (14:249/10:435). As a consequence, the melancholic suffers not only from the loss of the other but also from a loss of the sense of self, expressed through an "extraordinary diminution" (14:246/10:431) of his or her self-regard. "In mourning it is the world which has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself" (14:246/ 10:431). Furthermore, due to the law of emotional ambivalence, the ego who is identified with the lost other becomes not only the subject of love but also the subject of hate. In the absence of an other to whom grievances can be addressed, the melancholic turns the aggression against his or her own ego: "abusing it, debasing it, making it suffer and deriving sadistic satisfaction from its suffering" (14:250–51/10:438).

Now, it is precisely in order to break the self-destructive circle of melancholia that Freud advocates a mourning that is able to recognize the reality of loss and sever the attachment to the lost other. In mourning, the attachment is first internalized through a process where "each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up and hypercathected" (14:245/10:430). But unlike in melancholy—where the attachment to what has been lost "takes refuge in narcissistic identification" and refuses to let go (14:251/10:438)—the attachment in mourning "is met by the verdict of reality that the object no longer exists; and the ego, confronted as it were with the question of whether it shall share this fate, is persuaded by the sum of the narcissistic satisfactions it derives from being alive to sever its attachment to the object that has been extinguished" (14:255/10:442). The aim of the work of mourning is thus, according to Freud, to retract the libido that was invested in the lost object and make it available for investment in new objects. Freud recognizes that this work of mourning is slow and painful—"carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathectic energy" (14:245/10:430)—but he holds that if it succeeds, "the ego will have succeeded in freeing its libido from the lost object," and through this completion of mourning, the ego supposedly "becomes free and uninhibited again" (14:245/10:430). The same notion of successful mourning recurs in "On Transience," where Freud claims that "if the objects are destroyed or if they are lost to us, our capacity for love (our libido) is once more

liberated; and it can then either take other objects instead or can temporarily return to the ego" (14:306/10:360). Indeed, Freud maintains that mourning "comes to a spontaneous end. When it has renounced everything that has been lost, then it has consumed itself, and our libido is once more free (insofar as we are still young and active) to replace the lost objects by fresh ones equally or still more precious" (14:307/10:361).

Freud's notion of successful mourning has been subjected to considerable critique in the last decades, but one should be careful to formulate the critique so as to avoid replacing the valorization of mourning with a valorization of melancholia. First of all, one should note that Freud himself indicates that his notion of successful mourning is insufficient to account for the phenomena it is supposed to explain. In "Mourning and Melancholia" he concedes that it is "not at all easy to explain" why it is "so extraordinarily painful" (14:245/10:430) to let go of the lost object, and in "On Transience" he confirms that he in fact has no explanation: "why it is that the detachment of libido from its objects should be such a painful process is a mystery to us and we have not hitherto been able to frame any hypothesis to account for it. We only see that libido clings to its objects and will not renounce those that are lost even when a substitute lies ready to hand. Such then is mourning" (14:306–07/10:360).

The reason why Freud fails to explain the pain involved in letting go is because his notion of successful mourning assumes that there is a self who precedes the bond to the other and who can return "free and uninhibited again" after having traversed the ordeal of loss. If this were the case, to sever the bond to the other would simply be a matter of withdrawing an investment made by a self who remains essentially the same and who can substitute the object of attachment for another object with equal value or effect. Freud himself undermines this assumption, however, when he makes clear that the incorporation of the other is at work not only in melancholia but also in mourning and indeed in the very formation of the self.[7] To sever the bond to a significant other is not merely to relinquish something external but *to relinquish one self*—to betray what one has been and to become someone who is irreducibly altered—which accounts for the intensification of pain and the internal conflict in the experience of mourning. By the same token, there can never be a self who emerges "free and uninhibited" from the process of mourning, since there is always a

memory and anticipation of loss with which one has to reckon. Indeed, no matter how much one may seek to "kill off" the past, one may always be haunted by it in ways that exceed one's control and find oneself overtaken by it when one least expects it.

Let me emphasize, however, that the constitutive bond to the other does *not* entail that there is an inherent obligation to cultivate the bond to a given other or that one should resist the violence of mourning in the name of an "ethical" melancholia. On the contrary, it is because alterity is irreducible that neither mourning nor melancholia can be exempt from violence. Moreover, there is no given way to negotiate the violence of mourning. To be sure, mourning necessarily involves a "betrayal" of the other who is left behind. But to assume that this betrayal by default is unethical is a fallacy, since there is no intrinsic value in being faithful to the other. There are innumerable situations where "mourning" the other consists in coming to terms with abuse inflicted by the other. To betray or kill the attachment to the other can therefore be better and to keep it can be worse. Depending on the content and the situation, one may want to welcome or resist, embrace or lament, the loss of the past. The point, however, is that one always has to *reckon* with it. Whatever one does, one is haunted by a past that is repressed or commemorated, and often repressed precisely by being commemorated or vice versa. The temporal condition of survival is the reason why there is a problem of repression in the first place and why one must always respond to the past by "burying" the dead, either in the sense of forgetting or remembering.

My argument here can be seen to develop the logic of Derrida's claim that "to mourn and not to mourn are two forms of fidelity and two forms of infidelity," so that there is always a "terrible fatality of mourning: semi-mourning or double mourning. The psychoanalytic discourse, despite its subtlety and necessity, does not go into this fatality, this necessity: the double constraint of mourning."[8] Yet when Derrida takes issue with Freud's conception of mourning he tends to employ the latter's terminology in a misleading way, which compromises the articulation of his argument. Derrida regularly criticizes the notion of "normal" or "successful" mourning by aligning it with incorporation: "In successful mourning, I incorporate the one who has died, I assimilate him to myself, I reconcile myself with death, and consequently I deny death and

the alterity of the dead other and of death as other. I am therefore unfaithful."[9] Since the other is "effectively, presently, undeniably dead," it follows that "if I take him into me as part of me, and if, consequently, I 'narcissize' this death of the other by a successful work of mourning, I annihilate the other, I reduce or mitigate his death. Infidelity begins here" (160/258). At the same time, Derrida recognizes that there can be no fidelity to the other without incorporation. He underlines that "*I must* (and this is ethics itself) carry the other in me in order to be faithful to him," but nevertheless emphasizes that "a certain melancholy must still protest against normal mourning" since the latter is "the good conscience of amnesia. It allows us to *forget* that to keep the other within the self, *as oneself,* is already to *forget* the other. Forgetting begins there. Melancholy is therefore *necessary* [Il faut *donc la mélancolie*]."[10] The exact status of this argument is unclear. Derrida certainly provides a powerful argument against those (e.g., Elisabeth Roudinesco) who think that mourning can be deemed "successful" if it incorporates the love for the lost other in subsequent relations. As Derrida emphasizes in *For What Tomorrow,* when one perpetuates the love for a lost other through the love of another, "the loved object is perpetuated in being betrayed, in being forgotten" (160/258). However, by confusing Freud's own terminology of mourning and melancholia, Derrida blurs the stakes of his argument and invites the misreading that deconstruction advocates an "ethics" of melancholia. As we have seen, Freud's notion of successful mourning does *not* hinge on incorporating the other in oneself but on severing the attachment to the other. To take issue with Freud's notion of successful mourning it is therefore insufficient to problematize the idea of incorporation. Inversely, Freud's notion of melancholia cannot be mobilized against the idea of incorporating the other as oneself in oneself, since melancholia consists in precisely such incorporation.

Rather than promoting the "fidelity" of melancholia against the "infidelity" of mourning, Derrida's logic of the double bind should lead one to articulate the constitutive violence of both mourning and melancholia, both the letting go and the incorporation of the other. Indeed, the logic of Derrida's arguments allows one to see the internal contradictions of the very idea of a faithful melancholia or mourning. There can be no fidelity to the dead other without incorporation, but this fidelity is at the same

time marked by infidelity, since it denies the death of the other. Conversely, to be faithful to the fact that the other is dead is to be unfaithful, since it entails that one leaves the other behind. Fidelity is therefore a form of infidelity and infidelity is a form of fidelity. Furthermore, as I argue, nothing ensures that one should be more rather than less faithful to the other. The other who is "mourned" can be someone who has inflicted severely violent trauma just as well as someone who has given deeply positive love, not to mention that both of these aspects can be part of the legacy of the "same" other. Consequently, there is nothing that can determine a priori whether more or less fidelity to the other who is mourned is preferable in a given case. Successful mourning is strictly impossible—in the sense that one is always bound to an other and never emerges unscathed from loss—but it does not follow that it is better to embrace rather than to resist the failure of mourning.

For the same reason, the problem of survival and mourning is operative not only in the relation to others but also in the most immediate self-relation. Of course, the loss that is inherent in the experience of survival is made much more palpable in the actual mourning of someone's death, but it is operative on a minimal level in every experience, since the movement of survival necessarily entails the eradication of what does *not* survive. If one survived wholly intact—unscathed by the alteration of time—one would not be surviving; one would be reposing in absolute presence. The violation of integrity is therefore inscribed in the movement of survival as such. When one lives on it is always at the expense of what does not live on, of those past selves that are obliterated or eradicated in the movement of survival.

The temporality of survival is thus the condition both for preservation and violation, fidelity and infidelity. The temporality of survival opens the possibility of maintaining libidinal bonds, but it also opens the possibility of betraying, manipulating, or terminating libidinal bonds. This is why the theory of chronolibido seeks to rethink the constitution of the libidinal economy on the basis of the temporal process of *binding*. On Freud's own account, there is no libidinal life without the tension of excitation, which can be experienced only by being "bound." This binding is not an external restriction but indispensable for the being of libido as such: without binding there would be no pathways and no possible flow

of desire. The bonds may always be broken, however, and thus call forth the economic capacity to redistribute resources or withdraw investments. This economization is a response to being bound to the mutable and losable, which is a condition for libidinal being in general. Even the most immediate auto-affection presupposes a temporal difference, without which one could never affect or be affected by oneself. This temporal difference constitutes both the possibility of binding and the impossibility of any final bonding.

The decisive question, then, is how the process of binding should be understood. It is a chief insight of Freud's discourse that the libidinal bonds that bind us to others are marked by a fundamental ambivalence of love and hate. Given that we are never self-sufficient—that we depend on others for our survival from the moment we are born—we are structurally bound to a life that exceeds our control. This dependency is the source of love, since only a being that is not self-sufficient can be invested in something other than itself. But the same dependency is also the source of hate, since only a being that is not self-sufficient can feel adversity to something other than itself. The same bond that inspires love can therefore inspire hate, since it is predicated on the relation to an undecidable other.

For Freud, however, the drama of libidinal bonding is *secondary* in relation to a state of being that precedes it. As he puts it in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego:*

> By being born we have made the step from an absolutely self-sufficient narcissism to the perception of a changing external world and the beginnings of the discovery of objects. And with this is associated the fact that we cannot endure the new state of things for long, that we periodically revert from it, in our sleep, to our former condition of absence of stimulation and avoidance of objects. (18:130/13:146)

The very fact of being bound to life—of being dependent on others—is here described as the loss of a primordial state of being ("an absolutely self-sufficient narcissism") that did not have to reckon with the problem of binding excitation. The reason one may be unable to bear libidinal bonds—the reason one may dream of escaping or terminating them—is thus not explained on the basis of an investment in the undecidable fate of

survival. Rather, the ambivalence of libidinal bonds is explained on the basis of a longing to return to a state of being that precedes the condition of survival, what Freud here describes as "our former condition of absence of stimulation." In psychoanalytic theory, this state is typically ascribed to the perpetual fulfilment that is assumed to have existed in the womb and is regarded as the ontogenetic source of metaphysical fantasies of paradise or eternity. Yet it is not hard to see that the supposed state of absolute bliss is inseparable from a state of absolute death. As Freud himself makes clear, there is no life without the stimulation of excitation, so if there is an "absence of stimulation" there is no life whatsoever.

The latter conclusion is made explicit in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* where the ontogenetic myth of an absolute self-sufficiency to which we long to return is supplemented by the phylogenetic myth of an absolute death to which we are driven to return. In both cases, our aim would be to attain an absence of stimulation. The binding of excitation is thus understood as an intermediary function in the service of what Freud calls the death drive. The function of binding would be to find pathways for relieving excitation, with the ultimate purpose of discharging all excitation from the organism. The very advent of life—in introducing the tension of excitation—is thereby taken to be a traumatic event that gives rise to the death drive. "The attributes of life were at some time evoked in inanimate matter," Freud speculates, and "the tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavored to cancel itself out. In this way the first drive came into being: the drive to return to the inanimate state" (18:38/13:40).

The excitation of life is thus assumed to be experienced as a violation of the quietude that supposedly precedes life and to give rise to the drive to return to this state by seeking to eliminate all tension, all excitation. Following this logic, Freud proposes that the death drive is the ultimate explanation for sadism and masochism, as well as negative affects in general. Sadism is explained as an externalization of the drive to quietude, which feels hatred toward objects because they give rise to excitation. Furthermore, given that the tension of excitation is internal to the living organism itself, there is a "primary masochism" where the self turns against itself and seeks to extinguish itself as the source of unpleasurable tension. Both our aggression toward others and toward ourselves are thus understood

as an effect of the drive to rest in peace, to die one's "proper" death by eliminating the excitation of life that is internal to one.

The death drive has often been regarded as a radical element in Freud's thought, which calls into question the pleasure principle and accounts for how the psyche can be driven toward trauma and destruction. While Freud claims that the death drive is "beyond the pleasure principle," however, his own reasoning shows that they are based on the same axiom. For Freud, to be bound to life is by definition an experience of "unpleasure," since life is driven by an excitation that prevents the organism from coming to rest and compels it to survive in a state of tension. In contrast, the aim of the pleasure principle is to discharge the tension of life in favor of a complete release. The aim of the pleasure principle is thus inseparable from the aim of the death drive. The death drive seeks to restore the living organism to a supposed primordial state of total equilibrium, which is exactly the aim of the pleasure principle. As Freud himself points out, the pleasure principle operates in accordance with "the most universal striving *[Streben]* of all living substance—namely to return to the quiescence *[Ruhe]* of the inorganic world" (18:62/13:68), which is to say that it operates in accordance with the death drive.

If the pleasure principle and the death drive are based on the same axiom, however, the death drive cannot account for what is "beyond the pleasure principle." This logical fact undermines the reason for introducing the death drive in the first place, since the latter is supposed to account for the phenomena that contradict the pleasure principle. These phenomena comprise the compulsion to repeat traumatic events, as well as masochistic self-destruction and sadistic aggression. Their common denominator is that they contradict the pleasure principle by not seeking to reduce tension. On the contrary, the experience of pain (whether traumatic, masochistic, or sadistic) *increases* tension, so the compulsion to repeat or provoke painful experiences cannot be explained by a principle that dictates that we seek to eliminate tension. Consequently, it cannot be explained by the death drive. If the compulsion to repeat or provoke pain calls into question the pleasure principle, it necessarily calls into question the death drive, since the latter two are based on the same axiom.

Freud's main example of the repetition compulsion is the nightmares suffered by survivors of trauma. These nightmares call into question the

pleasure principle by compulsively repeating experiences that are charged with *unpleasure.* If this repetition was ruled by the death drive, its goal would be to eliminate the bonds to the traumatic event and to extinguish the organism that has to endure unpleasure. As is clear from Freud's own account, however, the compulsion to repeat trauma is rather a matter of *binding.* In Freud's economical model for the psyche, a trauma is defined by being *too much.* In the traumatic event, it is impossible to bind the stimulus that breaches the psyche, in the sense that one cannot assimilate what happens to oneself. The return to the event in nightmares or flashbacks is an attempt to make up for this temporal lag: to "bind" the stimulus of the traumatic event into an experience that can be processed and understood.

Rather than being driven by a desire for death, the attempt to bind trauma presupposes an investment in living on. It is indeed true that the excitation of life marks an originary alterity that can come to be experienced as intolerable and precipitate a violent response toward the internal source of tension that persists as long as one is alive. Yet while the *response* to the excitation of life may always be destructive, one cannot have any relation to it at all without binding it, without being bound to it, and thereby minimally invested in it. It is thus because one is invested in survival—because one cannot be indifferent to what happens, because one is bound to it—that one may come to experience the exigencies of survival as unbearable and be driven to terminate survival. The investment in survival is not *sufficient* to determine a given affective response (it may lead to a desire for destruction as well as preservation), but without being invested one would not even respond to what happens and seek to renew, destroy, or maintain libidinal bonds.

The investment in survival can also be seen to inform the repetition compulsion in Freud's second example. Freud recounts the story of a child who does not cry or complain when his mother leaves him, despite his great attachment to her. The child's feelings before the experience of abandonment are rather displaced to a game he plays with his toys. The child deliberately throws them away while uttering a "long-drawn-out 'o-o-o-o,' accompanied by an expression of interest and satisfaction" (18:14/13:12). In Freud's interpretation, the *o-o-o-o* is an abbreviation of the German word *fort,* so the game consists in playing "gone" with the

toys. The experience of the mother's disappearance is thus re-enacted through the game. Sometimes a toy that has been *fort* is pulled back and greeted with a joyful *da* ("there"), but Freud emphasizes that the act of playing *fort* is often "staged as a game in itself and far more frequently than the episode in its entirety" (18:16/13:13). The question, then, is why the child is driven to repeat the distressing experience of the mother's disappearance. Freud's answer is that the game allows the child to transform his *passive* exposure to the departure of the mother into an *active* choice. Rather than being powerless to prevent a loss that he fears, the child posits himself as willing the disappearance of the mother. When throwing away the toy, he in effect says: "All right, then, go away! I don't need you. I'm sending you away myself" (18:16/13:14).

The repetition compulsion here reveals a drive toward aggression and vengeance, but once again we can note that it has nothing to do with a death drive. Freud's examples show that the psyche can be driven to repeat destructive experiences, but they do not show that the drive is oriented toward the absolute quietude of death. On the contrary, both the traumatic nightmares and the child's game testify to an investment in survival. Through the nightmares, the psyche attempts to process what has happened to it by establishing a bond to the traumatic event, and through his game the child attempts to come to terms with the experience of being dependent on an other who is mutable and may be lost. However adequate or inadequate, successful or unsuccessful, these strategies arise in response to the experience of temporal finitude and are precipitated by an investment in survival. Even when the desire for a finite being is negated (as when the child stages a negation of the mutable mother), the negation itself testifies to a prior attachment and is performed *to enable the child to survive* beyond the loss of the mother.

To be clear, I am not arguing that self-destruction, aggression, or other negative phenomena are derivative in relation to a positive affirmation of life. On the contrary, the investment in survival accounts for both the impetus to preserve and the impetus to destroy, so any dualistic opposition between a life drive and a death drive is untenable. Consequently, I am not arguing that it is impossible to desire death, but that the desire for death presupposes the investment in survival. Even the most suicidal desire to end all survival presupposes such an investment, for at least two reasons.

First, without the investment in survival, one would not experience any suffering that could motivate suicide, since one would not care about what *has happened* or *is happening* to one. Second, without the investment in survival, one would not care to end all survival, since one would not care about what *will happen* to one. The investment in survival is not only the source of all joy in life but also the source of all suffering in life and can thus turn against itself. It is an essential possibility of the condition of survival that it can become unbearable. The response to the condition of survival can therefore not be given in advance and may call forth the most positive as well as the most negative affective responses. Indeed, the value of survival itself is undecidable: it opens the chance for pleasure *and* pain, satisfaction *and* suffering, preservation *and* destruction in the same stroke.[11]

In challenging Freud's notion of the death drive, then, I do not seek to replace it with another drive that would play the same constitutive role, e.g., a drive for survival that would compel us to live on at all costs and in every situation. Rather, I argue that there is no drive that precedes or provides the purpose of binding. Contra Freud, the excitation of life is not traumatic because we have lost or seek to attain the absolute peace of death. Rather, the excitation of life is traumatic because we *cannot experience it as such* and must bind it to something other than itself to have any relation to it at all. If this seems like an enigmatic formulation, we can clarify it through Freud's own account. As he emphasizes, in being alive we always have to reckon with external and internal stimuli that exceed what we can comprehend at any given moment. The primary problem of psychic life is therefore the same as the one that is intensified in the experience of trauma, namely, "the problem of mastering the amounts of stimulus that have broken in and of binding them" (18:30). Even in relation to myself, I cannot have any experience without binding excitation, and this bond is necessarily a double bind. On the one hand, the bond makes it possible to master stimuli: to manage, calculate, and negotiate what happens. On the other hand, the bond makes it impossible to master stimuli, since it is bound to an existence that can upset any calculation and undermine any negotiation. It is this process of binding, rather than the death drive, that calls into question the pleasure principle. Again, my point is not to deny the *phenomena* that Freud seeks to explain with the notion of

the death drive, but to argue that these phenomena require a different explanation and that Freud's own text provides us with the resources for an alternative account through the notion of binding. As Freud himself underlines, the function of binding "must be accomplished before the dominance of the pleasure principle can even begin" (18:32/13:32), since it is "more originary than the purpose of gaining pleasure and avoiding unpleasure" (18:32/13:32).

It follows that binding precedes the constitution of any drive, desire, or will, since it precedes the constitution of any possible purpose for psychic life. For the affective self who comes into being through the bond, the binding of excitation is therefore undecidable: it is the source of both pleasure and unpleasure, chance and threat, love and hate. As an *effect* of this double bind, one can certainly be driven to seek the termination of life and libidinal bonds, since the excitation and tension of life may become too overwhelming or unbearable. But this explanation of suicidal or destructive behavior as an effect of the double bind must be strictly distinguished from an explanation that posits a death drive as the cause of such behavior. In responding affectively to the loss or gain of a given bond, we are necessarily invested in survival and can come to engage in all sorts of purposeful activity when establishing, maintaining, or terminating libidinal bonds. But the investment in survival—and whatever purposeful activity it may precipitate—derives from a binding that itself cannot be described in terms of a purpose. Indeed, to speak of a purpose of binding itself is to misconstrue the constitutive status of binding. Binding itself cannot have a purpose, since being bound is the condition for having a purpose.

The most important reference point for my argument here is Derrida's analysis of Freud in *The Post Card.* Through a close reading of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* Derrida argues that the libidinal economy should be understood as a "bindinal economy" that operates in accordance with the logic of "stricture."[12] The logic of stricture entails that any given X always already is bound to its other. Any apparent opposition between a "positive" and a "negative" principle is an internal limitation within the positive principle itself. Accordingly, Derrida argues that there can be no opposition between the pleasure principle and what Freud calls the reality principle. The reality principle binds and restricts the possibility

of pleasure in an economy of loss and gain. Due to the reality principle, desire can never simply abandon itself to a free flow but has to bind itself to something other than itself and calculate with latent threats. This restriction, however, is not preceded by anything else. As Freud admits in the last chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle:* "binding is a preparatory act which introduces and assures the dominance of the pleasure principle *[die Herrschaft des Lustprinzips]*" (18:62/13:67). Derrida places considerable stress on this admission, since it reveals an originary stricture of pleasure. Without the binding of excitation, there could be no pleasure in the first place. But the binding that makes pleasure possible at the same time limits it and charges it with unpleasure. To be sure, Freud thinks the stricture within a teleological horizon, where binding is "a preliminary function designed to prepare the excitation for its final elimination in the pleasure of discharge" (18:62/13:68). But since there is no libidinal life without a more or less pressing charge, a more or less tense excitation, the teleological schema is untenable. There cannot be any pleasure that is not bound to its other: no pleasure without unpleasure. *Pure* pleasure—if such a thing were possible—would be pure death.

The apparent opposition between pleasure and unpleasure is thus an internal limitation within pleasure itself. As Derrida emphasizes: "there is only pleasure which itself limits itself, only pain which itself limits itself, with all the differences of force, intensity, and quality that a set, a corpus, a 'body' can bear or give 'itself,' let itself be given."[13] For the same reason, one cannot know in advance which relations will give rise to pleasure or pain, suffering or satisfaction. In contrast to Freud's axiom, an increase of tension cannot be equated with unpleasure and a decrease of tension cannot be equated with pleasure. Pleasure is not an autonomous quality or quantity; it is generated by being bound to other qualities and quantities. In this heteronomous relation, an increase of tension just as well as a decrease of tension may be experienced as pleasurable, depending on what happens. What cannot happen, however, is that one is liberated from the stricture of pleasure. The stricture may be more or less tight, but it cannot be removed. On the contrary, all possible affects play themselves out in the bindinal economy of stricture. The bindinal economy is always more or less perforated by its own finitude, more or less traversed by pleasure and pain, so that even "the most normal step has to bear disequilibrium"

(406/433). This is ultimately because pleasure *must* bind itself to something other than itself in order to be what it is. If pleasure were to absolve itself from differential binding—to detach itself from all mortal bonds—it would cancel itself out in the same gesture.

Freud's own work here provides the resources to call into question his axiom that an increase of tension is unpleasurable and a decrease of tension is pleasurable. As Freud points out in "The Economic Problem of Masochism," *if* we adopt the former axiom, the pleasure principle "would be entirely in the service of the death drives, whose aim is to conduct the restlessness of life into the stability of the inorganic state" (19:160/13:372). However, Freud himself goes on to argue that "such a view cannot be correct" since "it cannot be doubted that there are pleasurable tensions and unpleasurable relaxations of tension" (19:160/13:372). Pleasure and unpleasure are therefore not a matter of quantitative relations whose ideal point would be the elimination of tension in complete equilibrium. Rather, Freud speculates that pleasure is a matter of "the *rhythm,* the temporal sequence of changes, rises and falls in the quantity of stimulus" (19:160/13:372). The same line of thought can be found in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle,* where Freud suggests that the experience of pleasure depends on "the amount of increase or diminution in the quantity of excitation *in a given period of time*" (18:8/13:4, see also 18:63/13:69). Following these remarks, one can develop a chronolibidinal conception of pleasure, where pleasure is not oriented toward a *telos* of absolute repose. If pleasure is a matter of rhythm and periodicity, it depends on temporal succession, which divides the very experience of presence from its inception and entails that unpleasure is intrinsic to pleasure as such.

In accordance with the logic of lack, however, Freud assumes that we seek to transcend the double bind of pleasure/unpleasure. The fact that absolute pleasure would be absolute death does not lead Freud to call into question this logic of lack. On the contrary, he maintains that death itself is the proper destination of pleasure. According to Freud, only "external influences" force the primordial death drive "to diverge ever more widely from its original course of life and to make ever more complicated *detours* before reaching its aim of death" (18:38–39/13:40–41). Even the reality principle would thus be motivated by a death drive that seeks to ensure that the organism will die "in its own fashion" (18:39/13:41). The proper drive is the

drive for a "proper" death, which answers to Freud's definition of pure pleasure by being liberated from all tension. Far from being radical, then, the death drive is based on the same logic of lack as the pleasure principle. Both the notion of the pleasure principle and the death drive adhere to the traditional assumption that the aim of desire is to *not* desire. The movement of desire would thereby have a proper—albeit unattainable—destination: to rest in peace.

In contrast, Derrida argues that the principle of desire is a *postal principle* that has no proper destination. The postal principle may seem like an enigmatic term, but we will see how it provides a congenial way to describe the temporal constitution of libidinal bonds. In sending a letter one binds oneself both to the material support of the letter and to the other who receives it. Hence, one is bound to something that is inherently divided between past and future. On the one hand, the letter establishes a relation to what has been: the Latin word *post* means *after* and reminds us that a letter never arrives without delay. On the other hand, the letter is by definition written for a reader to come. Both the sender and the addressee must, from the beginning, calculate with an interval of time that separates them from each other. When writing a letter, one knows that the message will belong to the past when it is read. In this transition from one time to another, there is both a chance and a threat. By corresponding, one can establish connections across spatial and temporal distance, but at the same time one is dependent on a sending that cannot finally be controlled. The letter may be destroyed or end up in the wrong hands. And even if it arrives safely, the interval between sender and addressee is a source of disquietude in itself. When the letter arrives, the sender may already be dead or no longer subscribe to the meaning of the letter. This is a *necessary possibility,* which is latent even when the correspondence apparently works smoothly. To send a letter is by definition to inscribe a trace of the past that is addressed to a future that may erase it.

The postal principle does not, however, supervene on an immediate presence that is *first* given in itself and *then* sent forward/backward in time. The postal principle is rather the condition for anything to be given to itself, namely, the condition for auto-affection in general. Due to the constitutive negativity of time, every moment is stamped with the postal mark of being delayed *(no longer)* and deferred *(not yet)* in its very event.

Even the most immediate moment ceases to be as soon as it comes to be and must therefore be inscribed as a trace of the past, which by the same token is sent forward in time. Such postal sending is the minimal condition of survival. The trace of the past is the condition for anything to live on in time, but in living on it is exposed to erasure, since it is delivered to a future that may transform, corrupt, or delete it.

The postal principle is thus the principle of survival, which allows us to account for Derrida's apparently paradoxical statements about the relation between destination and death. On the one hand, Derrida maintains that the letter *cannot* arrive at its destination: "the condition for the letter to arrive is that it ends up and even that it begins by not arriving" (29/34). The reason why the letter cannot arrive is not because it has been cut off from an origin or end; it is due to the essence of the letter itself. Even ideally speaking the letter *must not* arrive at its destination—it "must bear within itself a force and a structure, a straying of the destination, such that it *must* also not arrive in any way" (123/135)—since if it were to arrive it would cancel itself out. The destination of the letter is thus understood as the final destination of death. On the other hand—but for the same reason—Derrida maintains that the destination of the letter is not the final destination of death. Death is *not* our destination in the sense that "we would be destined to die, no, not in the sense in which to arrive at our destination, for us mortals, is to end by dying."[14] Contra Freud's notion of the death drive, death is neither a past state of being from which we have departed nor a future state of being at which we could arrive. No one has ever been and no one will ever be dead, since death is not a state of being. Rather, we can only have a relation to death through the deferral of death that is the movement of survival. The point is not that life is deferred but that life *is* deferral and cannot overcome the movement of deferral without ceasing to be alive.

Nevertheless, while I argue that the postal principle provides powerful resources to call into question the logic of the death drive, Derrida himself sometimes invokes the notion of the death drive with apparent approval. Thus, in his essay "Différance," Derrida glosses the death drive "as expenditure without reserve, as the irreparable loss of presence, the irreversible usage of energy" and "as the relationship to the entirely other *[rapport au tout-autre]* that apparently interrupts every

economy."[15] Derrida qualifies his statement by saying "apparently interrupts," since he wants to think the economical and the aneconomical as co-implicated. Yet it is misleading to align the death drive with the aneconomical that is at work within the economical. Contrary to what Derrida implies in "Différance," the idea of the death drive is the idea of *the most economical,* since it aims at restoring a state of absolute fullness/emptiness where nothing can be lost. Far from being compatible with the idea of the death drive, the co-implication of the economical and the aneconomical that Derrida seeks to articulate follows from the deferral of death in the movement of survival that neither has an origin nor an end. As Derrida himself rightly underlines in "Freud and the Scene of Writing": "there is no life present *at first* which would *then* come to protect, postpone, or reserve itself"; rather, "life can defend itself against death only through an *economy* of death, through deferment, repetition, reserve."[16]

The key to articulating this economy of death in Freud is the deferral *(Aufschub)* of the reality principle rather than the death drive. Indeed, the passage from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* that Derrida himself most often refers to as his resource (and quotes at length in "Différance") is one where Freud maintains that the pleasure principle must submit itself to the *Aufschub* of the reality principle. Derrida radicalizes this argument by emphasizing that "the difference between the pleasure principle and the reality principle is not uniquely, nor primarily, a distinction, an exteriority, but rather the original possibility, within life, of the detour, of *différance (Aufschub)* and the economy of death" ("Freud and the Scene of Writing," 198/295, trans. mod.). The glossing of *Aufschub* as *différance* also recurs in "Différance" (18–19/19–20) and in *The Post Card* (282/301). The point is that *différance*—as the tracing of time—designates an originary deferral that is not preceded by anything else and not oriented toward anything beyond itself. The logic of this argument is incompatible with the logic of the death drive. The latter does not articulate an originary deferral but rather assumes that there is a teleological end (absolute stasis) that is deferred and in relation to which the movement of survival is a provisional detour away from the lost origin (absolute stasis) to which we supposedly long to return. As Derrida himself points out in *The Post Card,* the logic of the death drive follows "the law of the proper *(oikos, oikonomia)* which

governs the detour and indefatigably seeks the proper event, its own, proper propriation" (359/381), which Derrida goes on to link to "the poetics of the proper as reconciliation, consolation, serenity" (363/386). In contrast, the postal principle undermines precisely the notion of a proper death, since it elucidates a co-implication of life and death that "consists not only in compromising oneself *[s'auto-entamer]* but in compromising the self, the *autos*—and thus ipseity. It consists not only in committing suicide but in compromising *sui-* or *self*-referentiality, the *self* or *sui-* of suicide itself."[17] The logic of deconstruction is thus incompatible with the logic of the death drive, since the latter depends on the idea of a proper death, a proper *sui-* of suicide. To think the postal principle as constitutive is rather to think the inherently violent condition of survival, which entails that one can live and die only by compromising one's own integrity, without archeological origin or teleological end.

Now, Derrida's own articulation of the postal principle is pursued through a critique of Lacan. The point of departure is Lacan's seminar on Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Purloined Letter," where a stolen letter circulates among the characters and precipitates their actions. The content of the stolen letter is never revealed; its significance hinges instead on its position in relation to the characters of the drama. Lacan draws on this plot to exemplify his linguistically oriented version of psychoanalysis, in which the *signifier* and not the signified constitutes the subject. Lacan thereby rejects the notion of a self-identical subject and maintains that we are subjected to the symbolical order of language, where the process of signification cannot be stable or brought under the control of an autonomous will. Nevertheless, Lacan claims that "a letter always arrives at its destination" and ultimately is indivisible ("cut a letter into little pieces, and it remains the letter it is").[18] These remarks are at the center of Derrida's critique. A number of readers have defended Lacan by emphasizing that the remarks in question do not express a notion of absolute identity. The letter in Lacan's analysis does not have an inherent meaning, but marks an ever-possible displacement of determinations and definitions. The principle of the letter is precisely that meaning is *never* given and always may be retroactively altered by the one who receives the message.

It should be noted that such a defense of Lacan does deflate a number of the theses that Derrida criticizes. Derrida often seems to assume that

Lacan actually believes that there is an indivisible integrity or given meaning of the letter—namely, that the letter does arrive at its destination—and the latter assumption compromises the force of his critique.[19] The argument that needs to be developed is rather the deconstruction of the logic of lack that underpins Lacan's account. Indeed, we can say that for Lacan the letter of desire *never* arrives at its destination, since the proper destination is an absent fullness. But it is precisely the notion of an absent fullness that allows Lacan to assert that a letter *always* arrives at its destination, since the failure of the letter to arrive at an absolute fullness verifies the truth of ontological lack. Or as Derrida puts it in *The Post Card:* "[for Lacan] the letter will always refind its proper place, a circumvented lack (certainly not an empirical one, but a transcendental one, which is better yet, and more certain)" (425/453).

To deconstruct Lacan's account, one must therefore (beyond the limitations of Derrida's critique) take issue with the notion of the death drive that informs it. While Lacan revises Freud's theory of the death drive in a number of important ways, he nonetheless retains a version of the logic of lack. For Lacan, the death drive is *not* a biological tendency that pertains to living organisms in general. The death drive is proper only to human beings, who articulate their desire along a signifying chain and seek to understand the cause of their suffering. Human desire is then, according to Lacan, not primarily oriented in relation to the natural world but in relation to a transcendent Thing *(das Ding, la Chose)* that is supposed to have been lost and whose return would relieve suffering in satisfying desire completely. As Lacan explains in *Seminar VII,* the Thing "will be there when in the end all conditions have been fulfilled" but by the same token it is "clear that what is supposed to be found cannot be found again. It is in its nature that the object as such is lost."[20] Lacan goes on to explain that "it is this object, *das Ding,* as the absolute Other of the subject, that one is supposed to find again" (52/65), which entails that the "goal of the specific action which aims for the experience of satisfaction is to reproduce the initial state, to find *das Ding*" (53/66–67).

As we will see, both Lacan and his commentators equivocate regarding the question of whether there ever was an initial state of satisfaction. On the one hand, they often ascribe the experience of the Thing to a state of fulfilment that is assumed to have existed in the womb or in the unity with

the mother's breast. On the other hand, Lacan can also be seen to recognize that there never was such an experience of unity or fulfilment and that the Thing is nothing but a retrospective projection, which creates the illusion of an absolute satisfaction that was lost. Regardless of whether it is conceived as a lost reality or as a retrospective fantasy, however, the idea of absolute satisfaction turns out to be inseparable from the idea of absolute termination, the idea of pure fullness turns out to be inseparable from pure emptiness, and the idea of pure life turns out to be inseparable from pure death. This is why Lacan employs the death drive as a metapsychological model for both the register of the drive and the register of desire.

In the register of desire, Lacan makes clear that there can be no satisfaction because of the absence of the Thing. What is desired under the heading of the Thing is a state of absolute fullness to which no object can ever be adequate. Any given object of desire thus fails to provide the satisfaction of the Thing and propels the subject to search for new objects that in turn fail to satisfy its desire, in a chain of metonymic displacements that for Lacan testifies to the subject's fundamental lack of being. In his late work, however, Lacan introduces the register of the drive to explain how there can be satisfaction despite the fundamental lack of being.[21] "It is clear," he points out in *Seminar XI,* "that those with whom we deal, the patients, are not satisfied, as one says, with what they are. And yet, we know that everything they are, everything they experience, even their symptoms, involves satisfaction" (166/151). On Lacan's account, it is the register of the drive that accounts for this satisfaction: "the function of the drive has for me no other purpose than to put in question what is meant by satisfaction" (166/151). In the register of the drive, there is satisfaction in the movement of circling around the object rather than in the possession of the object itself, and pleasure is derived from the process of attaining the object rather than from the attainment itself. As Lacan puts it, "even when you stuff the mouth—the mouth that opens in the register of the drive—it is not the food that satisfies it, it is, as one says, the pleasure of the mouth" (167/153).

If every drive is a death drive—as Lacan maintains—it can therefore operate only by "inhibiting" its own aim and "braking" its own drive toward death. As Joan Copjec has argued, "the drive inhibits, as part of its very activity, the achievement of its aim. Some inherent obstacle—the object of

the drive—simultaneously *brakes* the drive and *breaks it up,* curbs it, thus preventing it from reaching its aim" (34). While this establishes a distinction between desire and drive, the founding assumption in both cases is that the *aim* of libidinal being is the complete satisfaction that is inseparable from death. The difference is that desire rejects all objects as inadequate in comparison to the Thing that would satisfy it once and for all, whereas the drive satisfies itself with a substitute. As is clear from this schema, however, the lack of fullness is not called into question but is located at the root of both desire and drive.[22] Consequently, Copjec maintains that the object of the drive "emerges *out of the lack,* the void, opened by the loss of the original plenum or *das Ding.* In place of the mythical satisfaction derived from being at one with the maternal Thing, the subject now experiences satisfaction in this partial object" (60).

Like other Lacan scholars, Copjec vacillates when determining the status of the original plenum. On the one hand, she maintains that the idea of a lost plenum is a "retrospective illusion" (33). On the other hand, she subscribes to the idea of a maternal Thing that has been lost. "The problem is not simply that I cannot think the primordial mother," Copjec asserts, "but that her loss opens up a hole in being . . . the *jouissance* that attached me to her has been lost and this loss depletes the whole of my being" (35–36).[23] Similarly, Bruce Fink argues that the idea of a lost object is "essentially phantasmatic in nature, not corresponding to a *remembered* experience of satisfaction," while nevertheless maintaining that there is a "first experience of satisfaction" in which the mother's breast is not constituted as an object at all. This primordial satisfaction precedes the experience of the desired object as "separate from and not controlled by the child." Given the latter experience of alterity, "the child can never again refind the breast as experienced the first time around: as *not separate* from his or her lips, tongue, and mouth, or from his or her self. Once the object is constituted, the 'primal state' wherein there is no distinction between infant and breast, or between subject and object . . . can never be re-experienced, and thus the satisfaction provided the first time can never be repeated. A kind of innocence is lost forever, and the actual breasts found thereafter are never quite *it.*"[24] According to this narrative, there once was a primordial satisfaction in the experience of the breast, which the subject seeks to recreate in all subsequent relations.

Every attempt to do so will prove to be vain, since no object can measure up to the ideal of perfect unity. The idea that an object can ever fill our lack or complete our being is thus regarded as a phantasmatic illusion. But what is not regarded as a phantasmatic illusion is the idea that there indeed was a primary experience of unity with the breast, before the separation between subject and object.

The most powerful elaboration of such a Lacanian theory can be found in Adrian Johnston's *Time Driven: Metapsychology and the Splitting of the Drive.* Systematizing the implications of Slavoj Zizek's groundbreaking reading of Lacan, Johnston describes the drive as split between an axis of iteration and an axis of alteration. The axis of iteration demands the repetition of a primordial satisfaction, which Johnston ascribes to an experience in early infancy when "the breast is not registered as being a separate/separable object belonging to another subject."[25] According to Johnston, the drive originates in this experience of primary unity—the experience of the Thing—and the axis of iteration constitutes the endlessly repeated attempt to recover what has been lost. The experience of the Thing can never be restored, however, since no actual object of desire can yield an experience of unity. Rather, every actual object of desire is temporal and can only be given along an axis of alteration, where nothing is ever repeated as the same.

Consequently, there is a fundamental conflict between the demand for atemporal unity that is articulated along the axis of iteration and the temporal objects of desire that are given along the axis of alteration. Johnston's main argument is that nothing can resolve this conflict, since it is inherent to the constitution of the drive itself. The Lacanian notion of "castration" should therefore *not* be understood as an external prohibition—a socially induced repression or symbolic Law—that if removed would give the subject access to full enjoyment. Rather, castration should be understood as the irrevocable loss of the Thing, which gives rise to the drive but at the same time dooms it to strive for something that never can be retrieved. The reason why the drive cannot attain the full enjoyment of the Thing is not because of an empirical-historical barrier, but because of a deadlock that is intrinsic to the drive itself.

Now, Johnston insightfully demonstrates that this Lacanian notion of the drive amounts to a rethinking of the death drive. Johnston is well

aware of many inconsistencies in Freud's notion of the death drive, but he seeks to rectify them by regarding the death drive not as a drive in itself but as characteristic of all drives. For Johnston, Freud's main mistake is that he literally conceives of death as the origin and goal of the drive. Given that death is not a state of being, there cannot have been an experience of death to which the organism longs to return. Drawing on Lacan's reading of the death drive in *Seminar XVII,* Johnston argues that the origin to which the drive strives to return is not the literal state of death but the lost experience of the Thing.[26] The death drive does not aim at a return to the inorganic but rather articulates "the insistent demand for an absolute enjoyment" (238).

We can thus understand why Johnston, following Lacan, regards the death drive as characteristic of all drives. On the one hand, the death drive exemplifies his assumption that we are driven to repeat a primordial experience of the Thing. On the other hand, the death drive exemplifies how the constitution of the drive itself makes it impossible to (re)experience the Thing. In order to achieve full satisfaction—that is, in order to experience the Thing—the drive would have to evacuate all tension from the organism. Yet the drive itself is an internal generator of tension, so the drive to eliminate tension comes to generate tension in its turn. Johnston therefore concludes that the drive is "inherently self-defeating, since it aims at eliminating tension while, at the same time, being itself responsible for generating tension" (237).

For the same reason, however, there cannot ever have been an experience of full satisfaction in early infancy or at any other stage. Johnston cogently argues that "Freud fails to respect the limits imposed by finite, ontogenetic experience" (181) by locating the origin of the drive in a state of death to which there cannot ever have been access. But the same critique can be launched against Johnston's own conception of a lost fullness at the origin of the drive, since fullness is incompatible with finite, ontogenetic experience. Given Johnston's own admission that "full satisfaction implies a kind of psychical death, an evacuation of the tension of dissatisfaction that perpetually drives the libidinal economy" (239), the child in early infancy must be dead in order to experience full satisfaction.

Hence, Freud's inability to separate the idea of full satisfaction from the idea of complete death is not a speculative mistake. Rather, the idea of

full satisfaction is strictly inseparable from the idea of complete death. While Lacan explicitly recognizes this logical equivalence of absolute fullness/absolute emptiness, it does not lead him to call into question that the death drive is an adequate metapsychological model for understanding the libidinal economy. On the contrary, Lacan maintains that we are constitutionally driven toward an unattainable absolute life/absolute death.

The fundamental experience of survival—of the life that lives on by *not* being absolute—is therefore assumed to be a fundamental experience of lack. A striking example of this logic can be found in *Seminar XI,* where Lacan describes how "two lacks overlap" in the constitution of the subject. We are thus treated to a clear account of what Lacan understands as the ontological lack of being, which is worth quoting at length:

> Two lacks overlap here. The first emerges from the central defect around which the dialectic of the advent of the subject to his own being in relation to the Other turns—by the fact that the subject depends on the signifier and that the signifier is first of all in the field of the Other. This lack takes up the other lack, which is the real, earlier lack, to be situated at the advent of the living being, that is to say, at sexed reproduction. The real lack is what the living being loses, that part of himself *qua* living being, in reproducing himself through the way of sex. This lack is real because it relates to something real, namely, that the living being, by being subject to sex, has fallen under the blow of individual death.
>
> Aristophanes' myth pictures the pursuit of the complement for us in a moving, and misleading, way, by articulating that it is the other, one's sexual other half, that the living being seeks in love. To this mythical representation of the mystery of love, analytic experience substitutes the search by the subject, not of the sexual complement, but of the part of himself, lost forever, that is constituted by the fact that he is only a sexed living being, and that he is no longer immortal. (204–05/186–87)

Lacan begins by rehearsing his doctrine that our dependency on language answers to an alienation; here described as the "central defect" of being dependent on a signifier that cannot be controlled by the subject. This

notion of language presupposes that the necessity of mediation—the necessity of relating to ourselves via the alterity of time and language—is experienced as a lack of being. Lacan goes on to say that the ultimate source of this lack is that the subject is *no longer immortal.* This may appear to be a startling statement, but Lacan has anticipated his point a couple of pages earlier, when arguing that all objects of desire are "representatives" of "immortal life, or irrepressible life, life that has need of no organ, simplified, indestructible life. It is precisely what is subtracted from the living being by virtue of the fact that it is subject to the cycle of sexed reproduction" (198/180). The temporal process of survival—here exemplified by sexual reproduction—is thus opposed to a proper immortality. As living beings subjected to generation and corruption, we can never be immortal: we can only *live on* through reproduction—whether this reproduction is sexual, linguistic, or dependent on some other form of mediation. This movement of survival will never yield a proper immortality, since whatever lives on through reproduction is itself subject to corruption and death. If one assumes that we seek a proper immortality—an absolute self-sufficiency—one must therefore conclude that the experience of survival is one of ontological lack, since the movement of survival compromises any self-sufficiency from its first inception. The aim of what Lacan here calls "analytic experience" is to make us recognize this fundamental lack at the core of our libidinal being. In contrast to the experience of love, which makes us believe that the relation to another can fulfill us, analytic experience would make us recognize that what we are *really* seeking in seeking love is an absolute self-sufficiency that is forever lost and inaccessible to us as mortal beings.

Again, whether there ever was a state of self-sufficiency is equivocal both in Lacan's text and in the established commentaries. According to Copjec's detailed interpretation, libidinal objects are "representatives" of an immortal life that has been lost (52), but the status of the lost immortality is unclear. On the one hand, Copjec asserts that "immortal, indestructible life has been subtracted from us" (52) and that "the body and satisfaction have lost the support of the organic body and the noumenal Thing" (37), which implies that there once was an immortal life or a noumenal Thing. On the other hand, she asserts that the self-sufficiency of immortal life is a myth of something that never existed.

Copjec's contradictory assertions culminate when she writes that "pure and total self-sufficiency does not now and never did exist (or: there is no original plenum), yet something nevertheless remains of that never-existing, mythical time and self-sufficiency" (52). One is thus left to wonder how something can remain from what never existed.

A defender of Lacan could certainly avoid the inconsistency by strictly maintaining that the supposed loss of immortality is nothing but a retrospective projection and that Lacan only analyzes it as the fundamental fantasy of the subject. Yet this qualification does not affect the premise with which I take issue, namely, that the "truth" of desire is the lack of immortality. In Lacan's terms, there is a constitutive difference between the *jouissance* expected (full enjoyment) and the *jouissance* obtained (temporal enjoyment), since no object of experience can answer to the desired Thing. As he puts it in *Seminar XX:* "'That's not it' is the very cry by which the *jouissance* obtained is distinguished from the *jouissance* expected."[27] For Lacan, the *jouissance* expected is not inaccessible for contingent reasons that can be overcome. On the contrary, it is inaccessible due to the ontological lack of being. Following *Seminar XI,* this ontological lack should ultimately be understood in terms of the fact that we are mortal. The absent Thing is proper immortality, and the impossibility of ever attaining such an absolute self-sufficiency—the impossibility of ever transcending the temporal finitude of survival—is the repressed "truth" of desire that Lacan aims to elucidate.

Furthermore, the very desire for the Thing is, according to Lacan, marked by a fundamental ambivalence. As Adrian Johnston recalls: "desire à la Lacan is not simply a matter of attraction to the impossible-to-attain, forever-absent, always-already missing Thing; it also consists of a simultaneous repulsion from the Real of *das Ding.*"[28] Specifying this logic of ambivalence, Johnston maintains that the Thing is an "absent presence" that is "both alluring and horrifying" as well as a "present absence" that is "both painful and energizing" (167). It follows that the Thing "both is and is not desired at the same time, functioning as a center of libidinal gravity that the desiring subject neither can live with nor can live without" (167). This is certainly a compelling presentation of the ambivalence of Lacanian desire, but it does not answer my chronolibidinal critique. What I am calling into question is precisely the notion of an absent Thing that

functions as the "center of libidinal gravity." According to this model, the Thing is "alluring" since it promises the state of absolute fullness that we desire, but at the same time it is "horrifying" since such an absolute fullness would in fact be absolute emptiness and eliminate ourselves along with our desire. Following the same logic, the absence of the Thing is "painful" since it prevents us from attaining the aim of our desire, but at the same time it is "energizing" since it is only because we do not attain the aim of our desire that we are driven to do or to desire anything at all.

The Lacanian model thus reads the ambivalence of desire as a response to the investment in the absent Thing. The ambivalence of the Thing does not call into question its organizing role in the libidinal economy but rather allows it to explain both repulsion and attraction, both the pain of loss and the energy of aspiration. This assumed "truth" of desire has two major consequences. First, the fantasy of the absolute is diagnosed as the cause of our inability to come to terms with reality. The reason we develop neuroses, phobias, and resentful aggression is ultimately because we sustain the fantasy of an absolute enjoyment (the transcendent Thing) that no actual object or real human being ever can provide. Second, this diagnosis assumes that *if* we were able to let go of the fantasy of absolute enjoyment, we would be able to come to terms with reality. Lacanian analysis therefore sets out to dispel the idea that there is a Thing out there that can be obtained by the subject. The moment of "authenticity" in Lacanian analysis is the moment when one recognizes the lack of being that nothing can fill and assumes the "symbolic castration" that constitutes one's subjectivity. By "traversing the fantasy" of absolute enjoyment, the analysand is supposed to arrive at the insight that nothing can satisfy his or her desire—that nothing can be *it*—and learn to live with this absence of the Thing.

In contrast, the theory of chronolibido reads the ambivalence of desire as a response to the investment in the undecidable fate of survival: in temporal finitude as the source of both the desirable and the undesirable. The reason desire is ambivalent is ultimately *not* because we are driven toward the absolute but because we are invested in survival—an investment that gives rise to acknowledgment *and* denial, compassion *and* aggression, vital change *and* deadening repetition. At stake in the difference between these two accounts of ambivalence are two different models for

reading the drama of desire. On Lacan's account, the drama of desire stems from the conflict between the primordial aim of transcending libidinal bonds (the death drive toward the state of absolute self-sufficiency that is represented by the Thing) and the self-defeating nature of the attempt to achieve such transcendence, which serves to explain the ambivalence, reversals, and tragic fates of desire. On the chronolibidinal account, however, the drama of desire—with its ambivalence, reversals, and tragic fates—stems from a double bind that is internal to the temporal process of binding itself. Rather than being derived from a primordial aim of eliminating or transcending libidinal bonds, the drama of desire derives from an economy of binding that has no given aim.

Chronolibidinal reading thereby seeks to show that the ontological lack of being is not the repressed truth of desire. On the contrary, the idea of an ontological lack *is itself a repression* of the constitutive investment in survival that derives from the necessity of binding. Following my analysis of Freud's "On Transience," the supposed experience of ontological lack—the lament over the absence of a timeless being—dissimulates the preceding investment in the survival of a temporal being. The experience of loss does not stem from the mourning of a Thing we never had but from the mourning of a temporal being who is ceasing to be from the beginning. The fundamental problem of desire is not that mortal life cannot answer to the immortality we desire, in accordance with Lacan's formula *That's not it.* Rather, the fundamental problem of desire is that *This is it:* the bond to mortal life is the condition for everything we desire and everything we fear.