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Dying One's Own Death: Freud with Rilke

In this discussion I want to try and elucidate some enigmas in Freud's hypothesis of the "death drive" (*der Todestrieb*), as it was introduced in the 1921 essay *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* ("Beyond the Pleasure Principle"), insisting on the political dimensions of this hypothesis, which are linked to the context of the "Great War," but also, in the end, on the *subjective remainder* that such a reading leaves unresolved.¹ Why adopt such a complex attitude? On the one hand, as in the case of other concepts, it can be argued that a psychoanalytic and a political viewpoint are *mutually constitutive*, so that neither "field" is *external* to the other.² As a consequence, there can be no question of *applying* notions such as *Todestrieb* as a readymade instrument providing psychoanalytic (or "psychological") explanations in the field of politics. A more intrinsic reciprocity of perspectives must be sought. This draws our attention to an intriguing chiasma: it seems obvious that political interests oriented Freud's thinking, in the immediate aftermath of the Great War, towards a theory of the unconscious forces behind collective violence and its traumatic effects on individuals, but it may be also the case that the articulation of the psychic and the political has to be read the other way around: the theoretical apparatus of psychoanalysis becomes entirely reformulated when the war reveals a death drive to be the common foundation of the collective and individual capacity of self-destruction. However, war cannot be considered the mere effect of this drive, nor can the death drive be understood in terms of pure destructivity. A tension remains observable at the heart of the two discourses. Again, we must elaborate a more complex reciprocity. I will try to do this in two successive moments: firstly, returning to the texts in which *Todestrieb* is announced, before being given its proper name, during the war period, I will identify the *symptomatic point* which indicates where the difficulty of its definition is concentrated; secondly, I will summarily describe what could be called the *political operations* performed by the death drive, in order to characterize the *unpolitical remainder* which exceeds them, or remains heterogeneous to their logic.³

***Todestrieb*: a symptomatic enunciation**

Certain dilemmas periodically return when using the idea of the death drive which need to be articulated with definitional problems in other key psychoanalytical concepts, to begin with the question of the “drive” (*Trieb*) itself. It would seem that what Freud is doing in his essay from 1921 is not so much an application or an extension of the existing notion of *Trieb* than a reversal of its meaning. The strange formula in chapter V, that I will use as my guiding thread throughout this essay, seems to connect these dilemmas with the traumatic historical context in which the enunciation takes place: “*Es erübrigt, dass der Organismus nur auf seine Weise sterben will*” (“It remains to be added that the organism is resolved to die only in its own way”).⁴ This is clearly an overdetermined sentence. If we read it in the context of the war, the question can be formulated this way: how can we inscribe in an anthropological discourse the destructive processes, affecting *masses* of human beings, which make it *impossible* for human *organisms* reduced to some sort of “naked life” to “die in their own way”? This immediately redirects our attention towards the central issue in the “speculative” part of Freud’s essay: an irreducible conflict emerges between the life of the individual (or the *separated* organism) and the life of the species (or, in a more “archaic” definition, the *continuity* of life).⁵ However, there remains an element of enigmatic meaning, which seems to concentrate the ethical dimension of the sentence: *within* the “life process” it is the *Todestrieb* that paradoxically embodies a recourse against the *violence of life*. The two ideas of life and death are opposed, for sure, but in a manner that contradicts the “natural” understanding of their relation. Let us therefore begin with a closer look at the context.

The idea of *Todestrieb* is introduced progressively in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*: the argument begins with an interpretation of the “compulsion to repeat” unpleasant affects (*Wiederholungszwang*), which contradicts the primacy of the Pleasure Principle, illustrating a “tendency of life to return to death” as an inorganic state; it ends with a reduction of the various forces which “aim at bringing life into death” (*Triebkräfte, die das Leben in den Tod überführen wollen*) to a single hypostasized *Todestrieb*, which confronts the totality of *Lebenstrieb*e (“life-instincts” or “pulsions,” in which narcissistic “ego instincts” and “sexual instincts” or “object-drives” are included). In the middle of this development, Freud discusses the “biological” theory according to which death has a necessary function in the reproduction of life through sexuality: he associates it with the philosophical idea (from Schopenhauer) that makes death the “proper goal” (*eigentlicher Zweck*) of life; then he distinguishes between “instincts of self-preservation” (*Selbsterhaltungstrieb*e) and “instincts of destruction”

(*Destruktionstriebe*). In the long endnote to chapter VI, it appears, however, that a semantic oscillation has remained. It is as if Freud was hesitant to directly invoke a mythical antagonism (what his disciples will call the *Eros-Thanatos* polarity): the single *Todestrieb* remains opposed to a multiplicity of life-instincts (*Lebenstriebe*), or to a multiplicity of instincts/drives *qua* life-instincts. Conversely, “Eros” is presented as a force which “seeks to force together and hold together the portions of living substance,” and therefore opposes all forces or instincts of destruction operating within sexual life itself. At this point two rival teleologies emerge: the teleology of life, encapsulated in a total “Eros,” which is capable of overcoming all destructive and annihilating tendencies, and the teleology of death, forming the *end or goal* of life itself (and it must be acknowledged that Freud’s language here does nothing to clarify the old philosophical ambiguity already present in language: to what extent is it possible to assert that the end is also a goal?). From this point of view, the *Lustprinzip* would appear to be itself “a servant of the death-instincts” (*im Dienste der Todestriebe*): pushing to the extreme, *Todestrieb* would be the “Master,” which all life-instincts governed by the pleasure principle are in fact “serving.”⁶ This oscillation between two teleologies carries a fundamental ambiguity in the uses of the names “life” (*das Leben*) and “death” (*der Tod*), whose symmetry is now anything but granted.

At this point we can ask again the political (or “meta-political”) question of an intrinsic relationship between the *texts* where the “hypothesis” of a death drive is constructed, and the historical *event* which confers upon their constellation a distinct style of questioning: *war*, or *the trauma of war*, as I prefer to name it. But what exactly is it that, in war, generates a trauma? The answer seems obvious: it is the *cruelty* of the war, its unprecedented levels of extermination, the “total” character of a war which kills civilians as well as fighting soldiers, extending the opposition of friend and enemy (foe) to every moment of life.⁷ As a consequence, this war destroys all the protective fences erected between the public and the private, it subverts the difference between intimate and collective mourning, and reverses what seems to be the natural order following which death puts an end to life: sons die before their fathers and “for” them, this sacrificial perversion becomes the normality, representing the political bond of society, the State and the nation... In his 1915 essay, *Zeitgemässes über Krieg and Tod*, Freud describes the “disillusion” arising from the war’s abjection, where civilization tends to destroy itself, since the right to kill was taken from the individuals by the State only to become transformed into a duty of mass murder.⁸ Again, in *Jenseits*, we find a development (which seems to have been inspired by his patient and disciple Sabina

Spielrein)⁹ about the fact that the reproductive process which perpetuates the life of the species demands a sacrifice of the individual, who needs to die to access sexual life. This could be read as a great “organic” metaphor of the war situation, in which society demands the sacrifice of its members to “save” itself from the mortal threat of its enemies. We now reach the extremes of ambivalence, since the State, in the name of the society, proves able to convince individuals that they must overcome the moral interdiction of killing (“Thou shalt not kill”) for the sake of making war, or of *killing more*. To sum up, as members of the society belonging to the nation, individuals have a duty both to kill and to die. *Death has become the social bond*.

I have recalled these well-known developments, which are clearly decisive to explain the origins of *Todestrieb*, but only if we add another element of a more reflexive character: *the subject* (Sigmund Freud) finds himself personally and actively involved in the perversion of the political. The “disillusion” is not just a judgment over the circumstances that is rooted in cultural convictions and hopes for the progress of civilization now brutally contradicted by the war: its convincing force derives from a personal experience, what we may call the “patriotic cycle” in Freud’s attitude towards the war, where nationalist enthusiasm was soon followed by horror and repulsion. Reading *Trauer und Melancholie* (1917)¹⁰ helps us understand what happened, when it describes the capacity of depression to become reversed into mania and vice versa. We can read there an element of self-analysis: in 1914, when the war is declared, Freud did really participate in a “manic” episode of collective enthusiasm.¹¹ As a consequence, a matrix and an anticipation of *Todestrieb* can be found in the correlation of these two essays from 1915 and 1917 respectively: in the first, *regression* towards violence and barbarity is seen as immanent in civilization; in the second, the *tendency* which drives manic-depressive cycles to their continuous repetition is seen as a melancholic process, which makes it impossible to end or completely “elaborate” mourning. I submit that Freud in part invented *Todestrieb* through the analysis of his *own* manic-depressive cycle, in which he observed a surprising movement of “fusion” within the collective (or attraction towards the “mass”), soon followed by retreat into repulsion, solitude or distantiation. More precisely, he *recognized* there, in his own behavior, a sequence governed by the death drive.

From this first elucidation, it is interesting to jump to the celebrated essays from the following years, where a theory of “culture” is proposed: as we know, they are governed by a deep “pessimistic” idea, applying *Todestrieb* to the articulation of life and history and to the critique of the idea of *progress*. In *Das Ich und das Es* (*The Ego and the Id*, 1923), we read

that the construction of the Superego as an instance that unconsciously “punishes” the realization of the subject’s desires forms a “pure culture of the death drive” (*Reinkultur des Todestriebes*). The idea is continued in the essay from 1930, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur* (*Civilization and its Discontents*) which discusses the “cruelty” of the Superego, whereby overcoming a “regression” towards archaic pulsions will always be paid for by repression and unhappiness.¹² These new developments, however, seem to me to also represent a certain neutralization of the tension that was inherent in the idea of *Todestrieb*, especially if it is articulated with a problematic of “narcissism”: in the new “topography” of the unconscious now elaborated by Freud, the *negative* becomes distributed between two antithetic instances (respectively called *das Es/the Id* and *das Überich/the Superego*) which subject the miserable *Ich (Ego)* to their tyranny, expressing incompatible demands and tearing it apart into opposite directions. This is the law of “culture.” Simultaneously the traumatic element of politics, in other words the combination of war as a “return” of repressed savagery, and violence as an instrument of “civilization” within a single complex, apparently loses its *externality* with respect to psychic life: instead of being located in the “real” (for example, war), it becomes *interiorized* to the psychic, leading to what has been the dominant tendency in “psychoanalytical interpretations of history”: an “Oedipian” genesis of the social and political unconscious, ultimately rooted in the anthropological mythology that had been exposed *before the war*, in the essay *Totem and Taboo* (1912). My conclusion from this brief (and inevitably superficial) comparison is: the “secret” of the internal tensions in the “political” construction of *Todestrieb* must be searched for in the *intermediary moment*, between the introduction of the notion and its later incorporation into the revised topography. Which is to say: in the relationship between the two essays from 1920 (*Jenseits*) and 1921 (*Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*).¹³

But, again, there is something unclear in this relationship. Why does Freud in the latter text never refer to the death drive which he has just “discovered” and that seems to mark a new departure for theory? Should we believe that a “psychobiological” speculation has been immediately put aside in order to investigate an alternative possibility for the understanding of the construction of personality: developing a theory of “identification” which elucidates the *institutional* dimension of the unconscious, or its essentially transindividual character?¹⁴ Or is it rather the case that he is preparing for the new dispositive of agencies within his psychic topography by successively addressing the question from opposite angles: reinscribing the violence of pulsions as cruelty of the moral Superego, splitting the Ego into a figure of the

Master and a figure of the Servant, creating an ambiguous unity that includes both the Superego and the Ego-ideal? At this point we must pause and ask: is it *really* the case that the essay from 1921 (*Massen*) “avoids” the death drive or says nothing that is relevant to its function? I would rather suggest that the essay is speaking about *Todestrieb* in a manner at the same time central and hidden: moving from metonymy to metaphor and migrating from the question of its sources and symptoms to the question of its domination. To which a third component must be added, adding a “clinical” element to the theoretical constellation, since it is in the same context that *Todestrieb* is also inscribed in the interpretation of neurotic destinies (with the great “interminable analysis” of the Wolfman). Within this context we may give full resonance to the enigmatic formula located at the center of the proposition of a “death drive”: *der Organismus nur auf seine Weise sterben will*, the organism *wants to die* (but) only in its *own* fashion.

So, the organism *wants* to die. Or perhaps even: what is it that the organism essentially wants? It wants *to die*. But who is “the organism”? *How does it declare what it wants* (and to whom)? *How do we hear its voice*, how do we *grant it a voice*? To unfold the effects of this formula, should we “force” another voice into the text, that of the writer, expressing in a general manner his own personal desire, who substitutes his voice for the silent voice of the organism: “I, being a *living thing*, even before being a *thinking thing*, want to die”? But the proposition also says that the organism does not want to die in *any manner*, as people die, for example, at war, or of the Spanish Influenza.¹⁵ It wants to die in a *specific manner*, which is its *own* manner: in other words, it wants to die only if death becomes *its own death*. Should we understand: this death *belongs* to it, exclusively, it is not the death of others or another? Or perhaps even: it is not one’s own *as of the other*. The organism’s “wish” would appear as a wish to remain or become *self* even and above all *in dying*.

Such hypotheses seem to already modify the meanings of “mourning” and “melancholia” as they were proposed in the essay from 1917: since in such a process of dying there is no mourning either of self or other, should we speak of melancholia (which is incurable), but paradoxically with a positive sense? Of course, what lies behind all these speculations are the classical metaphysical oppositions about the autonomy of the “will,” which found their most radical formulations in Schopenhauer and Nietzsche: life becomes portrayed as a tendency or an effort (*ein Streben*, we could say in Spinozistic or Hobbesian fashion a *conatus*, usually translated in classical English as *endeavor*), whereas death is pictured as a “pulsion” or a “drive” (*ein Trieb*, *ein Drang*). But on which side is “desire,” which we may define as “the

unconscious will,” or “the will of the unconscious”? Can there exist something like an *involuntary will*? Rather than speculate abstractly about this classical antinomy, asking how it is possible to involuntarily want one’s death or death as such, I would suggest that the question suggested to us by Freud’s formulation regards the fact that “death” (and all the singular deaths which, taken together, form “death”) precisely raises the issue of the involuntary side of every will, hence the radical *alienation* of every decision or choice. Which could be translated as: every “will” harbors a pulsion or *Trieb*, but every *Trieb* arises from *Todestrieb*, because it ends with it.

If we had more room, we should tarry with some classical questions. Firstly, there is the “principle of constancy” and the “return to the inorganic” invoked by Freud as biophysical laws extended to psychic life. What they seem to involve is a *preference for zero excitation*, another form of teleology, that is also comparable “ethically” with a limit case of what the ancient philosophies (siding with “oriental” wisdom) called *ataraxy* or *nirvâna*. In which sense should we locate a *Todestrieb* governed by such a *telos* (of *ending* every movement or tension) “beyond” the principle of pleasure (and unpleasure)? Is it because *Todestrieb* is extrapolating a tendency already implicit in the *Lustprinzip*: the pulsion which tries to turn off the unpleasure of excitation has a role of “conservation” or “preservation” of the organism, which would be paid for by the suppression of the *pleasure* also associated with the “pain” of excitation, in short with the “movements” (or passions) of life? This is an antinomy which directly resonates with the oscillations described by Freud in his analysis: between destruction and conservation, or destruction and repetition. Hence the second question, about the so-called “compulsion to repeat” itself (*Wiederholungszwang*), which now appears as the more general pulsion “driving” every other one, resonating with the idea that “death is at work within life itself.”¹⁶ But the idea of the “return to” (the inorganic that “precedes” life) is also combined with the idea of a “return of” pre-human or proto-human experiences. At this point the case study of the *Wolfman* becomes particularly interesting¹⁷: the traumatic “primitive scene” of the patient’s parents having sex *more ferarum* (in a *coïtus* “from behind,” *a tergo*) would not insist so powerfully in the fantasmatic life of the subject, continuously haunting his dreams and inhibiting his sexual life, if it were not itself a “repetition” – that of human phylogenetic “descent” from animality. Thus we find indications that the whole discussion in *Jenseits* which identifies the *Trieb* with a *Zwang* and a *Drang* (a pulsion with a coercive force) is permeated with extrapolations of the “biogenetic law” that forms the fundamental model for Freud’s understanding of the articulations of life and history.¹⁸ We cannot but

acknowledge that they are rather shaky and, in the end, perhaps arbitrary. The most problematic element remains the connection of the “origins” of the *species* (reproduced through sexuality) to the “origins” of *life* itself, supposed to reside in its separation from the “inorganic,” followed by the *return to the origin*: in other words, it is the equivalence established between “matter” and “inorganic,” *unseparated* and *undifferentiated* forms of being. With these speculations, we find ourselves in the middle of several varieties of the great evolutionist narrative of late nineteenth-century anthropology. Freud was no exception to this “scientific ideology” (in Canguilhem’s terminology).

Yet, something else, more directly linked to clinical observations, is also clear: in his new understanding of the *Trieb*, Freud is moving away from the philosophical tradition that grants a privilege to the articulation of the *goal* and the *object* (e.g. in the definition of “genital sexuality”), towards another articulation: that of *goal* (*Zweck*) and *drive* (*Drang*), or at least towards a *questioning* of this articulation...¹⁹ The consequence of this move is not a simple addition, in which *new* “pulsions,” *oriented towards death* and qualitatively different from the first (the pulsions oriented towards the conservation of *life*), would be added to the existing ones in the theory. Rather, Freud’s is a subversive move, which liberates the concept of pulsion *in general* from every psychologism and anthropomorphism, and more profoundly from every vitalism, the absolutization of life and survival: “death” represents this phylogenetic legacy which drives the pulsion – or the energy of life – towards its ultimate goal, disappearance or dissolution. *Todestrieb* therefore is a name for the momentum or the driving element within the pulsion as such. The crucial question is not: which object is cathected? Rather it becomes: what is it that makes it possible to cathect any object? Which “energy” within *libido* or sexual desire itself pushes them beyond their immediate goal towards their ultimate goal/end? As a consequence, a radical ambivalence is inherent in *Todestrieb*, which accounts at the same time for the endless repetition or the continuity of the pulsion, and its “final” reversal. *Todestrieb* as a concept introduces the unity of opposites into the “energetic” understanding of the unconscious, opening the possibility for either a dialectical or a tragic interpretation of its “vicissitudes” (what Freud in his 1915 essay on *Triebe und Triebchicksale* had called the “fate” or “destiny” of the pulsions)²⁰. At this point we may return to the modality in which *Todestrieb* is “implicit” (or involved in a latent manner) in the (meta)political constructions of the other essay: *Massenpsychologie und Ich-Analyse*.

Political effects of the death drive

As I said, there is something disconcerting in this rapid shifting of orientation. What is striking in particular is the fact that, in *Massenpsychologie*..., Freud has become very critical of the *normative presuppositions* that dominated the early psychoanalytical discourse and will largely remain dominant after him, namely the idea that there is a *good* (healthy) *social norm of sexuality* to which the individual must be adapted through the transition from infantile “polymorphous” sexuality to adult “genital” sexuality if his life is to be “livable” (or reasonably happy). This normative bias remains true even if we admit that Freud always rejected the idea of a preestablished harmony between the libido and its objects/goals (pleasure, satisfaction), thus associating the power of unconscious desires, which gives them value, with a kind of inherent “anarchism.” Such views are not incompatible with a Durkheimian notion of the conflict between social order and anomie which includes the opposition between the normal and the pathological in individual psychology. Over the crucial years of the war, perhaps also through the discussions with his disciples, things seem to have profoundly evolved. Of course, there is no trace in *Massenpsychologie* of a complete reversal of this scheme of normality (and normalization), as will emerge in Reich, or Marcuse (and Lacan to some extent), who all, in one way or another, assert that it is *society which is pathological* (and pathogenic), far from instituting the norm of well-being. Still, we can read there a thorough critique of the conceptual distinction between the normal and the pathological itself, which shows that the proper effect of institutions is to cathect desires with destructive pulsions, in the form of subjective *identifications* with “authorities” which are deeply alienating. The demonstration is carried out in two steps: first, while borrowing heavily from Le Bon’s theory of the “crowd” (an explicitly counter-revolutionary discourse which explained phenomena of collective identification as regression to “primitive instincts” due to the collapsing of institutional constraints), Freud proposes to reverse its point of application: it is the “normal” working of institutions which continuously relies on such “primary” processes. Identification and regression are just what the institutions of the social order, which he calls “artificial (or constructed) masses” (*künstliche Massen*), need in order to fortify themselves. But, in a second step, it appears that the social bond these institutions (typically the *army* and the *church*) construct is permanently threatened with dissolution from inside, a “de-linking” in which concentrated violence becomes released and gives rise to symmetric forms of collective anarchy (panic and intolerance), turning safety into terror and love into hate. Therefore, it is not impossible to propose the following interpretation: the

“life” of institutions covers the processes of both suppression *and* elaboration of the destructive (and self-destructive) violence which they produce themselves. Death is not the external threat that is kept at bay as long as institutions work properly; it is the immanent “cause” at work in the very institution of the political.²¹

War is a continuous subtext in this argument. This is not just due to the fact that one of the two “organizations” which together form a metonymy of the State is the *army*; it is also due to the fact that the modes of identification for the two typical “masses,” the army and the church (identification with the “real” person of the leader in the first, identification with the idea or “ideal” in the second), together help to introduce the figure of the *enemy* as a stranger, a non-believer or an infidel. Identification involves counter-identification. If, in the first approach, Freud seems to be describing only *positive* forms of identification, whose motor is love and support, the immediate reverse side for each of them is a *negative* identification, a “becoming common” of hatred or a rejection of the other that makes it possible for the multitude to be One. For that reason, in a previous essay, I had written: “in every religious conversion there is an element of war, in every national war there is an element of crusade.”²² Which quite naturally leads to the question: could there exist a *revolutionary critique* of this psychic complex of war, intolerance, and the State-form, that is based on “brotherhood” or “the love of the neighbor” – a completely different, non-exclusive type of identification? From a Freudian point of view, this is unlikely, or in any case this alternative remains to be defined. Today’s readers of *Massenpsychologie* find there a prophetic description of the coming fascist dictatorships. I would rather suggest that it involves a diagnosis of the immediate present (perhaps to be linked with Freud’s discussions and disagreement with his socialist and communist disciples, such as Paul Federn, Sandor Ferenczi): the danger lies not only in a “dissolution of the social bond,” or the anarchy after the war, but in the revolution as civil war. *De facto*, in the same period Lenin repeatedly and, in the end, successfully called for the “transformation of imperialist war into revolutionary civil war,” a transformation to be led by a “party” that is a *counter-State*, fusing the “army-form” and the “church-form” without juridical mediation, in order to endow its members or fighters with an eschatological worldview.²³ For Freud, despite his reluctance to express directly political views in the name of psychoanalysis, this “danger” was not virtual, it already had a name which was a precise date: October 1917, and was associated with a process of *repetition* in the minds of both its admirers and opponents.²⁴

But there is more to say about the ambivalent unity of love and hatred. A disturbing equivalence can be found between the element of “subjectivation” of an *impersonal* power, particularly the State (which becomes manifest when it decides to “punish” its enemies, *taking revenge* for their offenses or blasphemies), and the question of *sovereignty*, or absolute authority, which is perpetuated and multiplied in the “sadistic” practices of the State’s agents towards ordinary citizens, all along the spectrum of institutions which leads from the ordinary bureaucracy to the prisons and the torture chambers... In other words, the question raised by *Massenpsychologie* concerns the *excessive cruelty* inherent in the “collectivization” of narcissism. To which we can add the ambivalence of the “goal,” or the structural antithesis of self-destruction and heterodestruction.²⁵ Laplanche is insistent on the primacy of *self-destruction* over aggressivity, the narcissistic component of sexual life, which gives its full meaning to the *Todestrieb*: in every aggressive impulsion aiming at the destruction of the “object,” a tendency towards self-destruction is already at work. It is obviously attractive to look for applications of this idea in the field of politics, where most analysts believe that heterodestructivity or “hatred” is prevalent, whereas in fact self-destructivity could be an essential component as well: this would be the case with Nazism, or Capitalism. However, there are difficulties with such formulations: they make it possible to go beyond a “Freudian politics” where the Oedipian scheme (the wish for the father’s death) is merely transposed from the individual to the collective (the wish for the other’s death, *qua* internal enemy); but this generates a “psycho-biology” where the “subject” for the *Trieb* is a collective “individual” instead of the personal subject. As before, I would suggest reversing the order of definition: the theory does not discover a specific *new pulsion* whose goal is death, or the absolute “end,” combining the destruction of self and others. Rather, it defines *Todestrieb* as a structural articulation within the pulsion, where ultimately self-destruction becomes the unconscious *condition* for every tendency to destroy the other or the “object.” The “destructivity” may take different forms, which are not always bloody or physically violent, but it is always rooted in self-destruction. This would explain why the new theory must recast the very idea of “pulsion”: despite the insistence on the ambivalent character of the goal and the continuous displacements of the object which (according to *Triebe und Triebchicksale*) form part of the very definition of a pulsion, such a notion remained *divided* between two separate channelings for the *libido* (“object libido” versus “narcissistic libido”), whereas *Todestrieb* tends to emerge *beyond* this opposition, as it is *beyond* the opposition between pleasure and displeasure or pain (the “pleasure principle”). Which makes it possible for *Todestrieb* to work as a quasi-transcendental foundation for the oppositions themselves. On

such grounds we could look at various cases where “impossible” communities or societies – such as *nations*, *capitalism*, *humankind* itself in its relationship to the natural environment – appear to harbor a power of self-destruction in their principles emphasizing life, productivity and creativity, which it is impossible to eliminate *in the end*.

The remainder: one’s own death

However, we must constantly return to the same enigmatic point. It became manifest when we put together the formula that Freud borrowed from Barbara Low (the quest for *nirvana*) and the sentence from *Jenseits* which can be read as a symptom: “the organism wants to die in its own fashion.” *Nirvâna* is a strange name indeed, permeated with what today we would call “orientalism”: it indicates a “thing” beyond mourning and melancholia, where there can be no longer a question of a “loss,” not even the loss of self-esteem or self-love. Practicing psychoanalysts may find it difficult to admit that we find in Freud a thesis according to which *a will to die* exists as a genuine *modality of desire*: the desire to *finally put an end* to the “violence of life” itself, therefore a desire which illustrates a neutralization of the antagonism between activity and passivity. Is there, accordingly, a *violence of life* which is such that we may (or even must) desire to become liberated from its grip once and for all? This would be the violence of the “battle” that is life for the survival of the individual and the species, or the violence of the compulsory *reproduction* of life, for which in *Jenseits* Freud develops the metaphor of a necessity to replace one death with another, to “sacrifice” the life of the *soma* to the essential “eternity” or “immortality” of the *germen* in the form of reproduction.²⁶ Facing this continuous violence of life, *Todestrieb* appears now paradoxically as a principle of *anti-violence*. In the end it must become unbearable to survive, this is the arch-violence.²⁷ To understand the paradoxical idea of a death drive which forms a protection against life, we may think of such titles as Kierkegaard’s *Sickness Unto Death* (1849) or Marguerite Duras’ *La maladie de la mort* (1982). Rather than “metapolitical,” the relationship of *Todestrieb* to politics appears now as “impolitical” in the words inherited by Roberto Esposito from Thomas Mann and the German tradition of the critique of culture, which seem particularly adapted to an epoch like ours, in which *mass cruelty* leads to the systematic production of a life that is *worse than death* – a life which does not find an “end” for oneself. This is also an epoch in which the industrialization of medicine has created a situation where citizens are institutionally dependent on “biopower” that, in Foucault’s words, makes the distinctions

between “to make live” and “to let die” lose their relevance, when, for example, care becomes “therapeutic obstinacy” as well as abandonment.²⁸

This fragile and ultimate protection that is *Todestrieb* was probably insistent in Freud’s own imaginary when, putting together the amoeba and the human as two extremities of the same “kind,” he wrote the sentence: *jeder Organismus will seinen eigenen Tod sterben* – as a symbolic protest against the *disowning of death* that he witnessed around him, a dispossession of something that, in reality, we can never really “own,” taking the form of violent death in war, but also the coercion to live, in which we are obliged to identify with a perpetual will to overcome threats and oppositions in whatever form. Having written this, I must ask myself: is it really possible to hear this disturbingly “negative” voice in Freud’s text, or is it something that I am *projecting* into it? I must let the reader judge and decide for herself. *If*, however, she agrees to follow my suggestion, this would mean that Freud the materialist did not reject every “placating illusion”: under the pressure of the circumstances of war, he sought to give the consolation he needed a theoretical form. This was *Todestrieb*, or the secret “remainder” of the invention of a principle of destruction and self-destruction, an “absolute” source of violence in the human *psyche*. My reason to propose this subjective interpretation also derives from the inevitable comparison with a verse in Rainer Maria Rilke’s poem from 1903, *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode*: “*O Herr, gib jedem seinen eigenen Tod*” (Lord, give to each of us his own death). Did Freud “translate” this verse permeated with Christian mysticism into his materialist ethics? Did he simply know it? I would guess so, since they had a common friend (Lou Andreas-Salomé) and belonged to the same culture.²⁹ We may suggest that, in some modality, he was “remembering” the poem when writing *Jenseits* and at the very moment of inscribing the symptomatic sentence in its center. Thus the Christian praying, where the subject is calling for the Savior’s mercy, is transformed into an elucidation of the “will” of life, or nature, the all-encompassing kingdom within which an individual may seek both identity and dissolution. It would be a case of practicing *Deus sive Natura*... However, I also submit that this will not completely silence the other proposition, this time from Pascal: whatever you may imagine, the end is always bloody.³⁰ Where pessimism reigns, more pessimism looms.

¹ A previous version of this paper (in French) was presented on April 7, 2018, at the Conference « *Pulsions de mort ici et ailleurs* », Dixième Rencontre de la Société Internationale de Psychanalyse et Philosophie, Université de Paris-Diderot. It is being published in the proceedings of the conference (forthcoming). In this English version of my essay, owing to the difficulties of translation regarding the Freudian category of the *Trieb*, which was rendered as “instinct,” “drive” or “pulsion,” but also to the *singularity* that is referred to by this term, I will mostly leave the German *Todestrieb* untranslated and use it as a proper name.

² This was already my thesis in an essay from 2006: “Freud and Kelsen in 1922: The Invention of the Superego,” now included in Balibar, *Citizen Subject: Foundations for Philosophical Anthropology*.

³ At the time of the elaboration of this essay, I could not have known that Jacqueline Rose was about to address the issue of the “invention” of the *Todestrieb* in Freud in a Public Lecture delivered at the Freud Museum in Vienna, under almost exactly the same title: see “To Die One’s Own Death: Jacqueline Rose on Freud and his daughter.” This is a marvelous coincidence, which calls for further exchanges. For now, I prefer to remain with my own line of argument, if only to make its limitations more visible.

⁴ This is Hubback’s translation (Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). The Strachey translation (Standard Edition) has: “What we are left with is the fact that the organism wishes to die only in its own fashion” (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Volume XVIII, 1920–1922).

⁵ In this moment of his work (and this part of the essay), Freud is being strongly influenced by the theory of reproduction elaborated by August Weismann, which distinguishes between two lineages of cells in the organism with antithetic roles in the heredity of characters: “germinal cells” and “somatic cells,” in abbreviation the *germen* and the *soma* (Weismann, *Das Keimplasma: Eine Theorie der Vererbung*). Each of the lineages can be portrayed as a conflict of “interest” (survival of the species, preservation of the individual).

⁶ One is of course reminded of the famous allegorical name of death in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “the Absolute Master.” However, although Freud’s denials that he knew Schopenhauer and Nietzsche are clearly untrustworthy, there is no reason to believe that he was interested in Hegel. The comparison came later in the history of psychoanalysis (especially with Lacan).

⁷ In the aftermath of World War I, General Erich Ludendorff, general chief of staff of the German Armies, coined the notion of “total war” (Ludendorff, *Der totale Krieg*).

⁸ Freud, *Thoughts for the Times on War and Death*.

⁹ Spielrein, “Destruction as the Cause of Coming into Being.”

¹⁰ Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*.

¹¹ In a patriotic letter to Abraham following the declaration of war, Freud wrote significantly: “my entire libido is given to Austro-Hungary” (quoted and commented at length in Whitebook, *Freud, An Intellectual Biography*, 317 and s.v.). See also Couliou, “Freud, la psychanalyse et le «tournant» de la Première Guerre Mondiale.”

¹² On the position of Freud within contemporary critiques of the idea of civilization as progress, see Canguilhem, “La décadence de l’idée de progrès.”

¹³ I prefer to use the more recent English translation here: Freud, *Mass Psychology and Other Writings*. In the Standard Edition, the title is translated as “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego.”

¹⁴ On Freud’s contribution to the notion of transindividuality, see my essay on *Massenpsychologie*: “Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego, The Trans-Individual Moment,” and my chapter “Philosophies of the Transindividual: Spinoza, Marx, Freud.” Cf. the interpretation by Jonsson, “After Individuality: Freud’s Mass Psychology and Weimar Politics.”

¹⁵ Freud’s daughter Sophie died in the epidemic of the Spanish Influenza which, immediately after the end of the Great War, killed twice as many people across the world: on the importance of this point, see Rose, “To Die One’s Own Death.”

¹⁶ This idea contradicts Bichat’s romantic definition: “life is the sum total of all functions resisting death” (1800), which strongly influenced Schelling and Hegel.

¹⁷ Freud, *From the History of an Infantile Neurosis*.

¹⁸ Among the contemporary “scientific ideologies” that strongly influenced Freud was Ernst Haeckel’s “biogenetic” law, which asserted that the history of life (phylogenetic evolution) “repeats itself” in the history of the individual organism (ontogenetic development). He regularly transferred it to the “phylogenetic” and “ontogenetic” history of the psychic apparatus. See Bolens, “La théorie de la récapitulation de Haeckel à Freud.”

¹⁹ See David-Ménard, “Les pulsions caractérisées par leur destin: Freud s’éloigne-t-il du concept philosophique de *Trieb*?” The question of a drive (*conatus*) which can be “attached” to different objects with different positive and negative modalities has obvious affinities with the Spinozistic theory of affects.

²⁰ Translated as “Instincts and their Vicissitudes.”

²¹ The deep affinities with Hobbes’ theory of the political as a manipulation of fear against fear (or terror against terror) are well discussed in Roberto Esposito’s *Communitas: The Origin and Destiny of Community*.

²² Balibar, “Freud and Kelsen 1922,” in *Citizen Subject*.

²³ See my essay “The Philosophical Moment in Politics Determined by War: Lenin 1914–16.”

²⁴ Identification in Freud’s explanation involves a “model” (*Vorbild*), which is either a “real” (living) person (a “leader”), or an “abstract” (spiritual) idea, or a combination of both. The *Revolution* (or the anti-State) carried out by a “party” that is both army and church is the perfect (and most immediate realization) of this model in the conjuncture.

²⁵ See Laplanche, *Life and Death in Psychoanalysis*.

²⁶ The terminology arises from the work of Weismann (*Das Keimplasma*). See note 5.

²⁷ At this point it is important to recall that Freud’s cancer was diagnosed as early as 1923, which may have been the starting point of a reflection on euthanasia (how to voluntarily end a life that has become associated with unbearable suffering, which is what he decided with the help of his doctor in 1939).

²⁸ See Stark, *A Death of One’s Own*.

²⁹ Rilke, *Das Buch von der Armut und vom Tode*. I found one essay which attempts a very interesting comparison: Lehmann, “A Conversation between Freud and Rilke.” However, it does not refer to these specific passages. In a very interesting essay (Preface to Pinat, *Les deux morts de Maurice Blanchot: une phénoménologie*), Jérôme de Gramont refers to passages from Maurice Blanchot about the “splitting” or “redoubling” of our relationship to death and quotes the same verses from Rilke, which he calls a “prayer.” Blanchot, he writes, “grants Rilke’s prayer” (*fait droit à la prière de Rilke*). He then goes on to compare the idea of the “double death” with developments in Hegel and Heidegger. Finally, he quotes a very critical commentary by Adorno (in *Minima Moralia*): “Rilke’s prayer about his own death is just a miserable cheat, covering the fact that today humans die like animals (*crèvent*)” (my translation). With the indication of a “transference” and “translation effect” between Rilke and Freud, I am trying to open a third way of elaborating the “prayer.”

³⁰ As always, Pascal is hard to translate. I give the French text: « Le dernier acte est sanglant, quelque belle que soit la comédie en tout le reste. On jette enfin de la terre sur la tête, et en voilà pour jamais » (Pascal, *Pensées*, 210 [Brunschvicg edition] / 165 [Lafuma edition]).

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