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Trauma, Absence, Loss

Dominick LaCapra

A recent conference at Yale brought together scholars, journalists, and public intellectuals working on the Holocaust or on the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC), as well as members of the latter body. The New Haven Hotel, in which many participants stayed, had a floor that was indicated on the elevator by the initials TRC, standing for Trauma Recovery Center. At first the encounter with the acronym on the elevator created an uncanny impression, especially in recently arrived guests from South Africa. But it belatedly became evident that the TRC in the hotel had an elective affinity with the TRC at the conference. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission was in its own way a trauma recovery center. Its awe-inspiring and difficult, if not impossible, project was to provide a quasi-judicial setting in which the truth was sought and some measure of justice rendered (at least retrospectively) in a larger context where former victims were now rulers who were trying to find ways and means of reconciling themselves with former rulers and at times with perpetrators of oppression. The TRC also provided a forum for the voices—often the suppressed, repressed, or uneasily accommodated voices—of certain victims who were being heard for the first time in the public sphere. Indeed, as a force in the public sphere the TRC itself was attempting to combine truth seeking in an open forum with a collective ritual, requiring the acknowledgement of blameworthy and at times criminal activity, in the interest of working through a past that had severely divided groups and caused damages to victims (including damages in-

flicted by victims on other victims). This complicated past was now to be disclosed truthfully in order for a process of working it through to be historically informed and to have some chance of being effective ritually and politically in creating both a livable society and a national collectivity. Perhaps the most salient dimension of the TRC has been its attempt to engage this collective ritual process of mourning losses in order to create conditions for a more desirable future. It might even be seen as attempting what others have repeatedly called for in postwar Germany in the 1986 Historians' Debate and again in the controversy stirred up a decade later by responses to Daniel Jonah Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust*.¹

I begin with this anecdote and my reflections about it in order to indicate the stakes of a distinction I would like to draw and elaborate—the distinction between absence and loss. These stakes certainly include intellectual clarity and cogency, but they also have ethical and political dimensions. Postapartheid South Africa and post-Nazi Germany face the problem of acknowledging and working through historical losses in ways that affect different groups differently. Indeed, the problem for beneficiaries of earlier oppression in both countries is how to recognize and mourn the losses of former victims and simultaneously to find a legitimate way to represent and mourn for their own losses without having a self-directed process occlude victims' losses or enter into an objectionable balancing of accounts (for example, in such statements as "Don't talk to us about the Holocaust unless you are going to talk about the pillage, rape, and dislocation on the eastern front caused by the Russian invasion toward the end of the war" or "Don't talk to us about the horrors of apartheid if you say nothing about the killing of civilians and police by antiapartheid agitators and activists"). A crucial issue with respect to traumatic historical events is whether attempts to work through problems, including rituals of mourning, can viably come to terms with (with-

1. See Daniel Jonah Goldhagen, *Hitler's Willing Executioners: Ordinary Germans and the Holocaust* (New York, 1996). On these issues, see *Reworking the Past: Hitler, the Holocaust, and the Historians' Debate*, ed. Peter Baldwin (Boston, 1990) and *Unwilling Germans? The Goldhagen Debate*, ed. Robert R. Shandley (Minneapolis, 1998), as well as my *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1994) and *History and Memory after Auschwitz* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1998).

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out ever fully healing or overcoming) the divided legacies, open wounds, and unspeakable losses of a dire past.²

Of course the situations in Germany and South Africa have their historical particularity, not least of which is the near total elimination of Jews in Germany as opposed to the majority status, as well as the rise to power, of blacks in South Africa. Without slighting this difference or other significant differences, a basic point is that individuals and groups in Germany and South Africa (as well as in other countries) face particular losses in distinct ways, and those losses cannot be adequately addressed when they are enveloped in an overly generalized discourse of absence, including the absence of ultimate metaphysical foundations.³ Conversely, absence at a “foundational” level cannot simply be derived from particular historical losses, however much it may be suggested or its recognition prompted by their magnitude and the intensity of one’s response to them. When absence is converted into loss, one increases the likelihood of misplaced nostalgia or utopian politics in quest of a new totality or fully unified community. When loss is converted into (or encrypted in an indiscriminately generalized rhetoric of) absence, one faces the impasse of endless melancholy, impossible mourning, and interminable aporia in which any process of working through the past and its historical losses is foreclosed or prematurely aborted.⁴

2. One may relate trauma in collectivities to what René Girard discusses as sacrificial crisis accompanied by the threat or occurrence of generalized mimetic violence, which sacrifice, at times unsuccessfully, functions to stabilize by concentrating violence on one (or a delimited set of) scapegoated victim(s). See especially his *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (1972; Baltimore, 1977) and *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, trans. Stephen Bann and Michael Metteer (1978; Stanford, Calif., 1987). Girard, however, remains committed to reductionism and monocausal explanations. In his brief discussion of mourning, he follows his general practice of moving from a possible connection (for example, with respect to the tomb as the site of the victim of stoning) to a necessary derivation, and he presents mourning as the result of mimetic reconciliation polarized around the sacrificial victim; see *Things Hidden since the Foundation of the World*, p. 81. He usefully stresses the interaction between life and death in mourning but does not explore the broader problem of the relation of mourning to ways of working through the past. Moreover, he provides little insight into the process of secularization in terms of displacements of the sacred and sacrifice, including their role in the Nazi genocide, about which he is surprisingly silent.

3. Eric Santner touches on a similar point when he indicates his reservations concerning certain responses (including Jacques Derrida’s) to the discovery of Paul de Man’s World War II journalistic writings: “Central to all of these texts is the notion that to attend to, and even in a certain sense to mourn, the death that de Man has explicitly identified as a fundamentally ‘linguistic predicament,’ is an adequate mode of coming to terms with one’s complicity, however indirect or ambivalent, in a movement responsible for the extermination of millions” (Eric L. Santner, *Stranded Objects: Mourning, Memory, and Film in Postwar Germany* [Ithaca, N.Y., 1990], p. 19).

4. The distinction between absence and loss would also apply critically to Bill Readings’s *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge, Mass., 1996). In it the current, putative university in ruins is contrasted with a university of culture that is conceived as a (welcome) loss but that would more accurately be understood as an absence—a status that places in doubt the

To blur the distinction between, or to conflate, absence and loss may itself bear striking witness to the impact of trauma and the post-traumatic, which create a state of disorientation, agitation, or even confusion and may induce a gripping response whose power and force of attraction can be compelling. The very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss). Indeed, in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realize one is living in the here and now with future possibilities. I would argue that the response of even secondary witnesses (including historians) to traumatic events must involve empathic unsettlement that should register in one's very mode of address in ways revealing both similarities and differences across genres (such as history and literature). But a difficulty arises when the virtual experience involved in empathy gives way to vicarious victimhood, and empathy with the victim seems to become an identity. And a post-traumatic response of unsettlement becomes questionable when it is routinized in a methodology or style that enacts compulsive repetition, including the compulsively repetitive turn to the aporia, paradox, or impasse. I would like to argue that the perhaps necessary acting-out of trauma in victims and the empathic unsettlement (at times even inducing more or less muted trauma) in secondary witnesses should not be seen as foreclosing attempts to work through the past and its losses, both in victims or other agents and in secondary witnesses, and that the very ability to make the distinction between absence and loss (as well as to recognize its problematic nature) is one aspect of a complex process of working-through.

It should be emphasized that complex, problematic distinctions are not binaries and should be understood as having varying degrees of strength or weakness.⁵ Without conceiving of it as a binary opposition, I am pointing to the significance, even the relative strength, of the distinction between absence and loss. (I shall later elaborate the relation of this distinction to two further distinctions: between structural trauma and

idea of ruins that is its correlate and raises questions about the rather empty utopia that is proposed as its alternative. See my discussion in "The University in Ruins?" *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Autumn 1998): 32-55.

5. Of course, distinctions may operate ideologically as binaries and have important social and political functions, for example, in shoring up identity and fostering exclusion of those deemed outsiders. Indeed, binaries may be seen as excessively rigid defenses against the incidence or recurrence of trauma—defenses that are always dubious and that become especially fragile when they do not have institutional support. A scapegoat mechanism both depends on and performatively generates binary oppositions by localizing alterity (involving things one resists recognizing in oneself) and projecting it, as well as attendant anxiety, onto discrete others, and it may conceal both absences and losses in oneself or one's group.

historical trauma—onto which it may perhaps be mapped—and between acting out and working through the past—to which it is connected in complex ways that resist mapping.) My contention is that the difference (or nonidentity) between absence and loss is often elided, and the two are conflated with confusing and dubious results. This conflation tends to take place so rapidly that it escapes notice and seems natural or necessary. Yet, among other questionable consequences, it threatens to convert subsequent accounts into displacements of the story of original sin wherein a prelapsarian state of unity or identity—whether real or fictive—is understood as giving way through a fall to difference and conflict. As I have intimated, it also typically involves the tendency to avoid addressing historical problems, including losses, in sufficiently specific terms or to enshroud, perhaps even to etherealize, them in a generalized discourse of absence. Still, the distinction between absence and loss cannot be construed as a simple binary because the two do indeed interact in complex ways in any concrete situation, and the temptation is great to conflate one with the other, particularly in post-traumatic situations or periods experienced in terms of crisis.⁶

In an obvious and restricted sense losses may entail absences, but the converse need not be the case. Moreover, I would situate the type of absence in which I am especially (but not exclusively) interested on a transhistorical level, while situating loss on a historical level.⁷ In this transhistorical sense absence is not an event and does not imply tenses (past, present, or future). By contrast, the historical past is the scene of losses that may be narrated as well as of specific possibilities that may conceivably be reactivated, reconfigured, and transformed in the present or future. The past is misperceived in terms of sheer absence or utter annihilation. Something of the past always remains, if only as a haunting presence or revenant. Moreover, losses are specific and involve particular events, such as the death of loved ones on a personal level or, on a broader scale, the losses brought about by apartheid or by the Holocaust in its effects on Jews and other victims of the Nazi genocide, including both the lives and the cultures of affected groups. I think it is misleading

6. Absence and loss could not form a binary in that the opposite of absence is presence and that of loss is gain. Presence is, of course, often identified or correlated with gain, and presence/gain may be opposed to absence/loss in a broader binary configuration. The problem, which cannot be formulated in binary terms, is the mutual interaction and marking of presence/absence and gain/loss in what Derrida terms a larger economy, and the difficult issue is to elaborate distinctions that do not function as binaries or sheer dichotomies.

7. There are, of course, absences on an ordinary or historical level as well as ambivalently situated absences. Moreover, by transhistorical I do not mean absolute or invariant. I mean that which arises or is asserted in a contingent or particular historical setting but which is postulated as transhistorical. In a different setting, the terms of the postulation may vary even though the postulation is meant as transhistorical.

to situate loss on a transhistorical level, something that happens when it is conflated with absence and conceived as constitutive of existence.

When absence itself is narrativized, it is perhaps necessarily identified with loss (for example, the loss of innocence, full community, or unity with the mother) and even figured as an event or derived from one (as in the story of the Fall or the oedipal scenario). Here there is a sense in which such narrative—at least in conventional forms—must be reductive, based on misrecognition, and even close to myth.⁸ But this also suggests a reason why nonconventional narratives addressing the problem of absence, for example those of Samuel Beckett or Maurice Blanchot, tend not to include events in any significant way and seem to be abstract, evacuated, or disembodied.⁹ In them “nothing” happens, which makes them devoid of interest from a conventional perspective.

Absence appears in all societies or cultures, yet it is likely to be confronted differently and differently articulated with loss. In terms of absence, one may recognize that one cannot lose what one never had. With respect to the critique of foundations, one may argue that absence (not loss) applies to ultimate foundations in general, notably to metaphysical grounds (including the human being as origin of meaning and value).¹⁰

8. I would define this form of myth as the attempt to derive a structure (for example, the structure of guilt in the story of the Fall from Eden or in Freud's primal crime) from an event that performatively enacts it.

9. Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. Ann Smock (1980; Lincoln, Nebr., 1986) tends to treat absences and losses (such as those of the Shoah) in relatively undifferentiated terms. This is to some extent in contrast with the more complex treatment of absence in Blanchot's *L'Entretien infini* (Paris, 1969), trans. Susan Hanson, under the title *The Infinite Conversation* (Minneapolis, 1993) or in narratives such as his *Death Sentence*, trans. Lydia Davis (1948; Barrytown, N.Y., 1978). I have noted that the mingling of absence and loss may bear witness to experience in closest proximity to trauma wherein confusion itself may be a telling post-traumatic sign or symptom of radical disorientation. On the other hand, the ability to distinguish (without simply opposing) absence and loss may be related to at least a partial working-through of problems related to trauma or extreme disruption.

10. Absence would also apply to the penis in woman (in critical contrast to its interpretation as loss or lack within the context of the oedipal complex) and to the phallus as a transcendental signifier. One might argue that it also applies to all forms of radical transcendence. It is debatable whether separation from the mother after the rupture or dissolution of the putative pre-oedipal unity of mother and child—as it is played out, for example, in the *fort/da* game—should be seen as an absence or a loss. Freud observed this much-discussed game in the behavior of his one-and-a-half-year-old grandson. In it the child compensates for the uncontrolled comings and goings of the mother by playing with a bobbin attached to a string that it throws over the side of its crib while uttering the sound “ooo” and retrieving it with the sound “aaa.” Sometimes the first gesture (throwing) takes place without the second. Freud interprets the sounds as meaning “fort” and “da” and speculates that the child is substituting the bobbin (which might perhaps be seen as a transitional object, in the words of D. W. Winnicott) for the mother; see Sigmund Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London, 1958), 18:14–16. One might speculate that the game would seem to combine a compulsive repetition that is acted out as well as an

In this sense, absence is the absence of an absolute that should not itself be absolutized and fetishized such that it becomes an object of fixation and absorbs, mystifies, or downgrades the significance of particular historical losses. The conversion of absence into loss gives rise to both Christian and oedipal stories (the Fall and the primal crime)—stories that are very similar in structure and import (for example, in attempting to explain the origin of guilt). When understood as lost, divinity becomes hidden or dead—lost because of some sin or fault that could be compensated for in order for redemption or salvation to occur, allowing a return to unity with the godhead. Paradise lost could be regained, at least at the end of time. One might ask whether the conversion of absence into loss is essential to all fundamentalisms or foundational philosophies. In any case, the critique of ultimate or absolute foundations is best understood as related to an affirmation or recognition of absence, not a postulation of loss.¹¹

Within the oedipal complex, the penis in woman is fantasized as lacking or even as having been once present in a totalized, fully integral or intact phallic mother; it would have been lost through some mishap that may also occur to men if they do not overcome castration anxiety in the “proper” way by finding a substitute for the mother. A golden or paradisiac age fulfills a similar function to the divinity or the phallic mother in that—either as a putative reality or a fiction—it is situated at a point of origin that could be recuperated or regained in an ideal future. The fully unified community or *Volksgemeinschaft* in which there is no conflict or

attempt to achieve some control over events and, to some extent, work through them. It would thus be suspended between melancholia and mourning with respect to an absent object that is easily experienced or interpreted as lost. (Insofar as the pre-oedipal symbiosis or bond is a fictive projection from a post-oedipal position, one may argue that, in the separation from the mother, one is dealing with an absence that is readily misperceived or experienced as a loss that can somehow be recuperated or made good.) When the first part of the game is autonomized, one would seem caught up in a melancholic loop that comes close to endless grieving. If these speculations are correct, the game is a crucial instance of what Clifford Geertz refers to as “deep play”—play that is quite serious and even a matter of life and death (Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* [New York, 1973], p. 432).

11. Note that, in contrast to the famous assertion “God is dead” (whose relation to Nietzsche’s voice is complex), one may argue that one finds an affirmation of absence as absence in the final passage of Nietzsche’s “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable,” in *Twilight of the Idols*: “The true world—we have abolished. What world has remained? The apparent one perhaps? But no! *With the true world we have also abolished the apparent one.* (Noon; moment of the briefest shadow; end of the longest error; high point of humanity; INCIPIT ZARATHUSTRA)” (Friedrich Nietzsche, “How the ‘True World’ Finally Became a Fable,” *Twilight of the Idols*, in *The Portable Nietzsche*, trans. and ed. Walter Kaufmann [New York, 1954], p. 486). One would have to read closely the entire section that concludes with this passage, including the interplay of principal text and parentheses in which what is included as seemingly marginal in the parentheses becomes increasingly insistent and important. The implications of the passage are explored, as Nietzsche intimates, in *Thus Spake Zarathustra*.

difference is another avatar of the essential foundation, and anti-Semitism or comparable forms of prejudice against so-called polluters of the city are projective modes of displacing anxiety away from the self. The oceanic feeling, correlated with the presymbolic, pre-oedipal imaginary unity (or community) with the mother, would presumably also be lost by separation from the (m)other with the intervention of (the name of) the father and the institution of the symbolic under the sway of the phallus.¹² When they are interpreted in a certain way, a similar conflation of absence and loss occurs with respect to the passage from nature to culture, the entry into language, the traumatic encounter with the “real,” the alienation from species-being, the anxiety-ridden thrownness and fallenness of *Dasein*, the inevitable generation of the aporia, or the constitutive nature of melancholic loss in relation to the genesis of subjectivity.

Eliding the difference between absence and loss is also crucial to conventional narrative structure, dialectical sublation (or *Aufhebung*), and sacrifice (which might be seen as displacements of one another). In a conventional narrative, a putatively naive or pure beginning—something construed as a variant of full presence, innocence, or intactness—is lost through the ins and outs, trials and tribulations, of the middle only to be recovered, at least on the level of higher insight, at the end. In speculative dialectics, an original identity is lost as it is dismembered or torn apart through contradiction and conflict, to be recovered on a higher level through *Aufhebung*—the movement of negation, preservation, and lifting to a higher level. In sacrifice an innocent or purified victim is violently torn apart in order that communicants may be regenerated or redeemed and attain a higher unity or proximity to the godhead. Regeneration through violence may of course itself be displaced or find a substitute in secular scenarios that disguise—or even deny—their relation to sacrifice.

Loss is often correlated with lack, for as loss is to the past, so lack is to the present and future. A lost object is one that may be felt to be lacking, although a lack need not necessarily involve a loss. Lack nonetheless indicates a felt need or a deficiency; it refers to something that ought to be there but is missing. Just as loss need not be conflated with absence,

12. This is, of course, the story Freud tells in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, at points in ways that render it problematic and that Jacques Lacan repeats and further problematizes in his own register. In *Civilization and Its Discontents*, the coherence of the story, beginning with the oceanic feeling and seeking the origin of civilization and its discontents, is continually disrupted by the indirections and interrupted movements of the narrative, and in Lacan the pre-oedipal unity with the mother is explicitly situated as imaginary. Even if the oceanic feeling relates to a misrecognition (of absence as loss) and an imaginary union with the (m)other, Freud's assertion that he “cannot discover this ‘oceanic feeling’” in himself remains suspect. It is nonetheless significant that he remarks that the oceanic feeling “seems something rather in the nature of an intellectual perception, which is not, it is true, without an accompanying feeling-tone” and that he “could not convince” himself of “the primary nature of such a feeling” (Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents* [1930], trans. and ed. Strachey [New York, 1962], p. 12).

for example, by not construing historical losses as constitutive of existence or as implying an original full presence, identity, or intactness, so lack may be postulated without the implication that whatever would fill or compensate for it was once there. But, I would argue, this inference is commonly drawn, and lack is frequently understood as implying a loss, especially in conventional narrative, dialectical, and sacrificial scenarios. Moreover, absence may be converted into a lack, a loss, or both.

Here an example may be useful. Martha Nussbaum writes:

Saul Bellow's rhetorical question—where would we find “the Tolstoy of the Zulus, the Proust of the Papuans”—has been widely repeated as a normative statement critical of the cultural achievements of these societies. The person who repeats it in this spirit is to a degree observing accurately; many non-Western cultures do lack a form comparable to the novel.¹³

Nussbaum goes on to criticize the attempt to privilege the novel and is manifestly trying to counter forms of ethnocentrism and chauvinism. But her formulation threatens to incorporate what she is opposing or to be implicated in a transference repetition. It would clearly be more accurate to say that forms comparable to the novel are absent rather than lacking in other cultures (if indeed they are in fact absent). Such a formulation might be best for all cross-cultural comparisons unless one is willing to argue that the absence represents a lack. How to make this argument concerning lack in nonethnocentric terms, which do not simply privilege something presumably distinctive of, or unique to, one's own culture, poses a difficult problem in normative thinking. Of course, on an empirical level, an absence may be experienced as a lack if members of the culture in question come to hold that position, for example, as a result of their contact with another culture and perhaps through the need to express, more or less ambiguously, resistance to the domination of that culture by making critical use of its forms (such as the novel).

One may observe that there are forms of narrative that do not unproblematically instantiate the conventional beginning-middle-end plot, which seeks resonant closure or uplift and tends to conflate absence with loss or lack. In fact there are forms that both contest it and suggest other modes of narration that raise in probing and problematic ways the ques-

13. Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p. 132. I would also mention a singularly objectionable example of invoking lack instead of absence. It is found in Keith Windschuttle, *The Killing of History: How a Discipline Is Being Murdered by Literary Critics and Social Theorists* (Paddington, 1996), pp. 276–77. For Windschuttle, the fact that the Maori were devastated by invading Europeans proves that the Maori lacked something, to wit, a historical sense that would have enabled them to recognize the effects of “contact” with Europeans. Here the putative absence of a historical sense is construed as lack and inserted into an “argument” that amounts to blaming the victim.

tion of the nature of the losses and absences, anxieties and traumas, that called them into existence. Indeed, most significant novelists from Flaubert through Joyce, Musil, Woolf, and Beckett to the present experimentally explore alternative narrative modalities that do not simply rely on a variant of a conventional plot structure, and their novels have earlier analogues, especially in the picaresque and carnivalesque traditions (novels such as *Don Quixote* and *Tristram Shandy*, for example). (One may suggest that narratives in other cultures that differ from the conventional narrative may show more striking resemblances to experimental, open-ended novels than to the stereotypical conventional novel.) In a somewhat comparable fashion, one may point to a dialectic that does not reach closure but instead enacts an unfinished, unfinalizable interplay of forces involving a series of substitutions without origin or ultimate referent—an interplay that may enable more desirable configurations that cannot be equated with salvation or redemption.¹⁴ With respect to sacrifice, which typically combines oblation and victimization, one may distinguish the element of gift giving from victimization and attempt to valorize the former while situating it in possible modes of interaction and subject-positioning that do not entail victimization or the construction of the victim as the gift to a deity or godlike being.¹⁵

14. This type of open dialectic was sought by Maurice Merleau-Ponty and, in more insistently negative terms, allowing for an impossibly utopian or redemptive hope against hope, by Theodor Adorno. It may also be found in an important dimension of Marx's work. On Marx in this respect, see my *Soundings in Critical Theory* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1989), chap. 6.

15. The work of Derrida is crucially concerned with the problem of absence and would seem to valorize the gift as distinguished from victimization. But, in his important *The Gift of Death*, trans. David Wills (1992; Chicago, 1995), Derrida's analysis of sacrifice is limited by the fact that he focuses on the gift without thematizing the question of its relation to victimization. (For example, he has nothing significant to say about Isaac as victim and his relation to his father.) The result may be a vision of relations in terms of supererogatory virtues (perhaps even a secular analogue of grace) in which generosity (or gift giving) beyond all calculation is extended to every other figured as totally other (on the model of a radically transcendent divinity). (In the phrase Derrida repeatedly employs, "*tout autre est tout autre*"—every other is totally other. And as he puts it in rendering his understanding of Kierkegaard's view, with which he seems to agree: "what can be said about Abraham's relation to God can be said about my relation without relation to every other (*one*) as every (*bit*) other [*tout autre comme tout autre*], in particular my relation to my neighbor or my loved ones who are as inaccessible to me, as secret and transcendent as Jahweh" [pp. 77–78, 78].) One may initially contest this view by arguing that, whatever one's relation to a radically transcendent divinity, one's relation to others in society is based on a variable combination of distance or strangeness and intimacy, solidarity, or proximity, as Kierkegaard himself seemed to intimate when he restricted lifelong indirect communication to the God-man and asserted that "we human beings need each other, and in that there is already directness" (Søren Kierkegaard, *Søren Kierkegaard's Journals and Papers*, trans. and ed. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong, 5 vols. [Bloomington, Ind., 1970], 2:384). In addition, from the perspective Derrida here elaborates, one has little basis to investigate victimization and its relation to the gift, including the difficult problem of distinguishing between the two and valorizing the latter while criticizing the former. One may also be ill-equipped to pose the problem of the tense relation between ethics (based on justice, normative limits, and reci-

The affirmation of absence as absence rather than as loss or lack opens up different possibilities and requires different modes of coming to terms with problems. It allows for a better determination of historical losses or lacks that do not entail the obliteration of the past (often a past seen as subsequent to a fall or hyperbolically construed as sheer absence or as utterly meaningless).¹⁶ Historical losses or lacks can be dealt with in ways that may significantly improve conditions—indeed effect basic structural transformation—without promising secular salvation or a sociopolitical return to a putatively lost (or lacking) unity or community. Paradise absent is different from paradise lost: it may not be seen as annihilated only to be regained in some hoped-for, apocalyptic future or sublimely blank utopia that, through a kind of creation *ex nihilo*, will bring total renewal, salvation, or redemption. It is not there, and one must therefore turn to other, nonredemptive options in personal, social, and political life—options other than an evacuated past and a vacuous or blank, yet somehow redemptive, future.¹⁷

For Freud, anxiety had the quality of indefiniteness and absence or

procuity) and what “generously” exceeds ethics—with the possibility that a vision focused if not fixated on excess relates to a society of saints or an elect group who may not have limiting norms that interact with and, to some extent, check excess, perhaps including the excess of violence and the gift of death. One may further note that one of the early Derrida’s most quoted statements is “il n’y a pas de hors-texte” [there is no outside-the-text], wherein the text is not the book or the written word in the ordinary sense but a relational network of instituted traces (Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak [1967; Baltimore, 1974], p. 158). The apparent contradiction between this statement and the assertion that every other is totally other (which one might understand to signify that every other, in a relation without relation, is “hors-texte”) may be addressed in two ways. First, the early statement may be read to mean that there is nothing outside the text, that is to say, radical transcendence or total otherness indicates an absence. Second, the apparent contradiction might be converted into a necessary paradox if one affirmed, on a very basic (erased or quasi-foundational?) level, both the transcendence (infinite distance) and the immanence (closest proximity) of the other. One enters here into paradoxes related to displacements of the sacred, which Lacan treated in terms of *extimité* (external intimacy of the traumatic Thing) and Derrida explored in terms of the elusive, internal-external center in “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (1967; Chicago, 1978).

16. This entailment may at times be found in Hayden White’s more hyperbolic moments, for example in “The Politics of Historical Interpretation: Discipline and De-Sublimation,” *Critical Inquiry* 9 (Sept. 1982): 128–29; rpt. in *The Content of the Form: Narrative Discourse and Historical Representation* (Baltimore, 1987), pp. 72–73. The vision of the past as utterly meaningless may be conjoined with a radical constructivism (at times in decisionist form) that presents the human being as “endowing” the past or the other with meaning and value. Radical constructivism might be interpreted as a form of secular creationism in which the human being becomes an ultimate foundation and the displaced repository of quasi-divine powers.

17. In part as a defense against the equivocal threat (and allure) of the total community, one finds blank or empty utopian (or messianic) longing in the early Walter Benjamin as well as in recent figures such as Fredric Jameson. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), p. 11.

indeterminacy of an object; for Kierkegaard and Heidegger, it was the fear of something that is nothing. In these conceptions, the idea that there is nothing to fear has two senses. There is no particular thing to fear. And anxiety—the elusive experience or affect related to absence—is a fear that has no thing (nothing) as its object. A crucial way of attempting to allay anxiety is to locate a particular or specific thing that could be feared and thus enable one to find ways of eliminating or mastering that fear. The conversion of absence into loss gives anxiety an identifiable object—the lost object—and generates the hope that anxiety may be eliminated or overcome. By contrast, the anxiety attendant upon absence may never be entirely eliminated or overcome but must be lived with in various ways. It allows for only limited control that is never absolutely assured; any cure would be deceptive. Avoidance of this anxiety is one basis for the typical projection of blame for a putative loss onto identifiable others, thereby inviting the generation of scapegoating or sacrificial scenarios. In converting absence into loss, one assumes that there was (or at least could be) some original unity, wholeness, security, or identity which others have ruined, polluted, or contaminated and thus made “us” lose. Therefore, to regain it one must somehow get rid of or eliminate those others—or perhaps that sinful other in oneself.

Acknowledging and affirming—or working through—absence as absence requires the recognition of both the dubious nature of ultimate solutions and the necessary anxiety that cannot be eliminated from the self or projected onto others. It also opens up empowering possibilities in the necessarily limited, nontotalizing, and nonredemptive elaboration of institutions and practices in the creation of a more desirable, perhaps significantly different—but not perfect or totally unified—life in the here and now. Absence is in this sense inherently ambivalent—both anxiety producing and possibly empowering, or even ecstatic.¹⁸ It is also ambivalent in its relation to presence, which is never full or lost in its plenitude but in a complex, mutually marking interplay with absence.¹⁹

18. The unconscious and the drives might be apprehended as active or generative absences that are ambivalent. They may not be recovered as if they were losses or lacks and made fully present to consciousness. Rather, they may be best construed as destructive and enabling absences—potentiating and annihilating forces—that are recurrently displaced. They create gaps or vortices in existence that both threaten to consume the self or others and may be sources of activity, even sublimity or elation and *jouissance*. In this sense, the most telling, disorienting instance or effect of the so-called death drive is in the endlessly compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes—scenes in which the distinction between absence and loss, as well as between structural and historical trauma, threatens to be obliterated. Moreover, the status of one's own—in contrast to another's—death and of the unconscious as absences may be a reason why Freud believed one could never accept one's own death on an unconscious level. Such an acceptance might not make any sense since nothing—no ego—could do the accepting.

19. This relationship of mutual marking that places in question notions of full being, pure identity, and binary opposition is crucial to Derrida's notion of *différance*. In line with

Desire has a different impetus and configuration with respect to absence and to loss or lack. In terms of loss or lack, the object of desire is specified: to recover the lost or lacking object or some substitute for it. If the lost object is divine or edenic, the goal may be a new god or heavenly city, possibly a secular hero and/or a utopia that will save the people and legitimate the self as well as confirm the identity of the follower. Especially with respect to elusive or phantasmatic objects, desire may be limitless and open to an infinite series of displacements in quest of a surrogate for what has presumably been lost. Moreover, desire may give way to melancholic nostalgia in the *recherche du temps perdu*. By contrast, the object or direction of desire is not specified in relation to absence. The problem and the challenge become how to orient and perhaps limit desire, which is inherently indeterminate and possibly limitless. Desire may again become infinite (as the desire of or for desire). But the foregrounding of the question of desire and the problematization of its objects may at least enable a distinction between desire and desirability (or the normative articulation of desire) as well as the attempt to generate a viable interplay between desirable limits to desire and the role of excess, ecstatic transgression, or transcendence of those limits. It would also require the specification of historical losses or lacks and the differential ways they may be addressed, for example, through structural change in the polity, economy, and society.²⁰

I have intimated that, especially in a secular context, a commonly desired ultimate foundation or ground is full unity, community, or consensus, which is often, if not typically, figured as lost or perhaps lacking, usually because of the intrusive presence of others seen as outsiders or polluters of the city or the body politic. One may, however, insist that such unity, community, or consensus is absent and that the sociopolitical

Derrida's thought, one may also observe that the ambivalence of absence and its interinvolvement with nonfull presence prevent the absolutization or reification of absence in some analogue of negative theology.

20. Here one might suggest that in Lacan desire is related to absence, although the oedipal scenario and the status of the phallus as the ultimate, elusive object of desire may induce a slippage of desire in the direction of loss or lack (the absence or gap in being [*béance*] deceptively being misrecognized as a constitutive lack [*manque à être*]). Desire would more definitely be related to loss or lack as well as to future possibilities when it is specified in terms of demand (which Lacan distinguishes from desire). It is worth noting that in Émile Durkheim's work the key problem is the generation and establishment of legitimate limits to desire that are themselves normatively desirable and able to turn desire back upon or against itself in the interest of collective morality and the mutual articulation of rights and duties. Desirable normative limits would define legitimate demands but be open to anomic excess or transgressive challenge, ideally in terms that both tested and reinvigorated or renewed limits. Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the functioning of the carnivalesque in a relatively stable and legitimated society might be argued to share similar assumptions, but with a different stress than Durkheim's more "serious" and ethically motivated conception of desirable social life.

problem is how to deal with that absence as well as the differences and forms of conflict that accompany it. In the terms suggested by Jean-Luc Nancy, this is a problem of being in common without common being.²¹ Not acknowledging this problem is quite compatible with an ideology of consensus in which differences and conflicts are not recognized, and groups or individuals who are in fact not part of the presumed consensus are excluded or drastically underrepresented in the political arena. A related problem is how to provide a means of symbolizing and expressing difference and conflict, thereby making possible the limiting or lessening of violence that may increasingly become an option to the extent that other options are not available. In other words, violence in unmediated form may be more likely when there are no accepted or legitimated modes of symbolizing difference and conflict in an effective manner that enables them to be addressed and to some extent dealt with.²² One could even argue that the provision of modes of symbolizing difference and conflict—not full consensus or community—is basic to democracy and that the dialogic itself in a democratic context must have an agonistic component.

One may contend that the absence of absolute or essential foundations, including consensus, does not eliminate all room for agreement or all possibility of good (in contrast to absolute or ultimate) grounds for an argument. But one need not confound agreement with full consensus, a uniform way of life, an avoidance of strenuous argument, or the exclusion or elimination of all significant differences. One form of agreement that would seem important has as its object a (written or unwritten) constitution that sets certain ground rules that would be transgressed only when differences become so pronounced, and conflict so great, as to lead to a civil war. Especially in the current neoconservative and conservative-liberal context, one might also advocate agreement at least on the essentials of the welfare state as well as the attempt to make its role compatible with internationalism.²³ Still, even short of a situation of extreme crisis, grounds would be contestable and would have to be developed in and through discussion and argument involving dialogic relations both to others and within the self. Dialogic relations are agonistic and non-authoritarian in that an argument is always subject to a response or counterargument; it may be answered or criticized in an ongoing give-and-take (in contrast to an authoritarian command or to what may be

21. See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans. Peter Connor et al., ed. Connor (1986; Minneapolis, 1991).

22. On this issue, see Françoise Gaillard, "The Terror of Consensus," trans. Jennifer Curtiss Gage, in *Terror and Consensus: Vicissitudes of French Thought*, ed. Jean-Joseph Goux and Philip R. Wood (Stanford, Calif., 1998), pp. 65–74. Gaillard seems to assume that consensus is always absent and functions as an ideology, but she does not explicitly make this point.

23. On this issue, see Bruce Robbins, *Feeling Global: Internationalism in Distress* (New York, 1999).

termed a hit-and-run riposte that evasively flees dialogic engagement with the other).²⁴ Criticism may be telling and entail the need for basic change, but it may also reinvigorate or validate an argument able to withstand it.

Given the force of narcissism and the limits of insight into the self, concrete others are crucial in discussing the bases of certain judgments, policies, and practices. Indeed, a particularly contestable object of discussion and argument is precisely the kinds of difference one judges desirable (or possibly preferred, or at least permitted) and those one judges undesirable (but not necessarily subject to exclusion) in a collectivity or a life. Such debate might go on within the self as well as between selves, and one might not be able to reach agreement with others or a unified position within the self on all important issues. But incommensurability in the sense of nonnegotiable difference (what Jean-François Lyotard terms a *différend*) need not be prematurely generalized as characteristic of all relations between groups, positions, or issues. Nonnegotiable difference might, rather, be seen as the limit-case of incommensurability in another sense: that of the ability to translate from perspective to perspective and perhaps to reach agreement or decision on certain issues without having some superordinate master language, absolute foundation, or final arbiter (divinity, the sovereign, the community, reason, or what have you). Hence relativism (at least if it is understood either as absolute non-communication or nonnegotiability of perspectives or as “anything goes”) need not be inevitable on a normative level.²⁵

Nor need relativism be seen as inevitable on a cognitive level. The

24. The nondialogic riposte has become typical of such genres as the talk show, the letter to the editor, and the book review.

25. Recently, Lyotard has seemed to postulate a *différend* (or antinomy) between writing as a sublimely impossible, ultimately solitary, indeed abject and terrorized encounter with excess or the unrepresentable and politics as the art of the collectively possible. As he puts it,

terror and the abjection that goes hand in hand with it should be excluded from the political dispensation of the community to the very extent that it should be undergone and singularly embraced in writing, as the condition of the latter. . . . We are asked to help settle the injustices that abound in the world. We do it. But the anguish that I am talking about is of a different caliber than worrying about civics. It resists the Republic and the system; it is more archaic than either; it both protects and flees from the inhuman stranger that is in us, the “rapture and terror,” as Baudelaire said. [Jean-François Lyotard, “Terror on the Run,” trans. Wood and Graham Harris, in *Terror and Consensus*, pp. 32, 35]

Lyotard (like Adorno in this respect) formulates problems in their limit-form, and one can recognize the value of his remarks even if one resists seeing problems only in terms of the extreme limit (or excess) and argues for a greater variety of possible and legitimate relations between politics and writing. One may also raise doubts about Lyotard’s tendency at times (as in the ironic reference to civics) to situate political problems that are open to some measure of resolution on a seemingly inferior level as compared with writing or avant-garde art.

idea that there are no pure facts and that all facts have interpretive (or narrative) dimensions does not entail the homogeneity of interpretation. In other words, one might agree that there is in some sense interpretation all the way down but argue that interpretation is not homogeneous all the way down. Indeed, some dimension of fact may be so basic that one might argue that any plausible or even any conceivable interpretation (or narrative) addressing a problem or series of events (such as the Holocaust) would have to accommodate it, hence that it would make little sense even to refer to this level as interpretive. Generally this is the level of simple declarative statements involving observations (“Hitler had a moustache”) or well-validated assertions (“The Wannsee conference was held in January 1942”). These statements are often banal and depend on conventions that may in certain contexts be questioned (for example, the role of a calendar oriented around the birth of Christ), but they are nonetheless important and indispensable in discourse and life. (For example, it is not acceptable to justify being late for an appointment on the grounds that one objects to the hegemony of a certain calendar, although different conceptions of time may indeed be crucial in cross-cultural misunderstandings.) Moreover, such statements or assertions may at times bear on extremely significant issues that are resolvable in principle but difficult to resolve in fact (for example, whether and when an explicit, top-down decision on genocide was made in Nazi Germany and who made it).

As noted earlier, not all narratives are conventional, and the history of significant modern literature is in good part that of largely nonconventional narratives—narratives that may well explore problems of absence and loss. It is curious that theorists who know much better nonetheless seem to assume the most conventional form of narrative (particularly nineteenth-century realism read in a rather limited manner) when they generalize about the nature of narrative, often to criticize its conventionalizing or ideological nature.²⁶ Moreover, not all discourse is narrative, and a crucial problem is the relation of narrative to other modes of discourse. Indeed, nonconventional narratives often explore in critical ways their relation to myth as well as to nonnarrative genres or modes such as the lyric, image, conceptual analysis, argument, or essay.²⁷ In my judg-

26. The view of narrative as conventionalizing is crucial to Sande Cohen's argument in *Historical Culture: On the Recoding of an Academic Discipline* (Berkeley, 1986). One might, however, contend *both* that historiography has stricter theoretical limits than the novel in experimenting with narrative (for example, with respect to inventing events, as well as on more structural levels, such as the use of free indirect style) *and* that it probably has not been as experimental as it could be. On these issues, see White, *The Content of the Form*; Philippe Carrard, *Poetics of the New History: French Historical Discourse from Braudel to Chartier* (Baltimore, 1992); Robert J. Berkhofer, Jr., *Beyond the Great Story: History as Text and Discourse* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995); and my *History and Criticism* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1985).

27. Here it would be useful to return to and try to develop further the reflections on the essay found in the work of Georg Lukács, Adorno, and Robert Musil.

ment, it is dubious to assert with Fredric Jameson or Paul Ricoeur (who themselves paradoxically often write in an essayistic form) that narrative is *the* basic instance of the human mind or that all discourse (at least all historical discourse) is ultimately narrative in nature. Such assertions usually rely on a very attenuated or overly expansive notion of narrative and are interesting as hyperbole only when they enable a far-ranging inquiry into the different possibilities and modalities of narrative (as they do in the work of Jameson and Ricoeur).

By contrast to absence, loss is situated on a historical level and is the consequence of particular events. The nature of losses varies with the nature of events and responses to them. Some losses may be traumatic while others are not, and there are variations in the intensity or devastating impact of trauma. There are of course also particular losses in all societies and cultures, indeed in all lives, but the ways in which they might be confronted differ from the responses more suited to absence. When absence and loss are conflated, melancholic paralysis or manic agitation may set in, and the significance or force of particular historical losses (for example, those of apartheid or the Shoah) may be obfuscated or rashly generalized. As a consequence one encounters the dubious ideas that everyone (including perpetrators or collaborators) is a victim, that all history is trauma, or that we all share a pathological public sphere or a "wound culture."²⁸ (As a recent public service message would have it, "Violence makes victims of us all.")²⁹ Furthermore, the conflation of absence and loss would facilitate the appropriation of particular traumas by those who did not experience them, typically in a movement of identity-formation that makes invidious and ideological use of traumatic series of events in foundational ways or as symbolic capital.

Losses occur in any life or society, but it is still important not to specify them prematurely or conflate them with absences. Historical losses can conceivably be avoided or, when they occur, at least in part be compensated for, worked through, and even to some extent overcome. Absence, along with the anxiety it brings, could be worked through only in the sense that one may learn better to live with it and not convert it into a loss or lack that one believes could be made good, notably through the elimination or victimization of those to whom blame is imputed. Conversely, it is important not to hypostatize particular historical losses or lacks and present them as mere instantiations of some inevitable absence or constitutive feature of existence. Indeed, specific phantoms that possess the self or the community can be laid to rest through mourning only

28. For a critical investigation of the latter concepts, see Mark Seltzer, *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (New York, 1998). For an account of uses and abuses of the concept of trauma in the 1890s and the 1990s, see Kirby Farrell, *Post-Traumatic Culture: Injury and Interpretation in the Nineties* (Baltimore, 1998). Ruth Leys will soon publish a much-needed critical genealogy of the concept of trauma.

29. I thank Richard Schaefer for this example.

when they are specified and named as historically lost others. And particular, at times interacting, forms of prejudice (such as anti-Semitism, racism, or homophobia) can be engaged ethically and politically only when they are specified in terms of their precise, historically differentiated incidence (including the different ways in which they may involve the conversion of absence into loss with the identity-building localization of anxiety that is projected onto abjected or putatively guilty others).

I would also distinguish in nonbinary terms between two additional interacting processes: acting-out and working-through, which are interrelated modes of responding to loss or historical trauma. As I have intimated, if the concepts of acting-out and working-through are to be applied to absence, it would have to be in a special sense. I have argued elsewhere that mourning might be seen as a form of working-through, and melancholia as a form of acting-out.³⁰ Freud compared and contrasted melancholia with mourning. He saw melancholia as characteristic of an arrested process in which the depressed, self-berating, and traumatized self, locked in compulsive repetition, is possessed by the past, faces a future of impasses, and remains narcissistically identified with the lost object. Mourning brings the possibility of engaging trauma and achieving a reinvestment in, or recathexis of, life that allows one to begin again. In line with Freud's concepts, one might further suggest that mourning be seen not simply as individual or quasi-transcendental grieving but as a homeopathic socialization or ritualization of the repetition compulsion that attempts to turn it against the death drive and to counteract compulsiveness—especially the compulsive repetition of traumatic scenes of violence—by re-petitioning in ways that allow for a measure of critical distance, change, resumption of social life, ethical responsibility, and renewal. Through memory-work, especially the socially engaged memory-work involved in working-through, one is able to distinguish between past and present and to recognize something as having happened to one (or one's people) back then that is related to, but not identical with, here and now. Moreover, through mourning and the at least symbolic provision of a proper burial, one attempts to assist in restoring to victims the dignity denied them by their victimizers.³¹ In any case, I am suggesting

30. See my *Representing the Holocaust and History and Memory after Auschwitz*.

31. A particularly vexed problem for perpetrators and those benefitting from, or burdened by, their legacy is the estimation of victims such that they may become valued objects of mourning. In immediate postwar Germany, effective mourning was blocked or impeded by confusion or insufficient specificity about the object of mourning, for example, whether and how it referred to oneself, the lost glories of Hitler and the *Hitlerzeit*, or the victims of the Nazi genocide—victims who might still not be properly valued. This point does not imply, in the case of a sufficiently removed later generation, the desirability of a simple repudiation of one's historical relation to perpetrators and the identification with, and assumption of the status of, the victims. (This process of simple repudiation of the Nazi past and identification with the victim played, I think, a role in the admittedly overdetermined success in Germany of Goldhagen's *Hitler's Willing Executioners*.)

that the broader concepts that include, without being restricted to, melancholia and mourning are acting-out and working-through—concepts whose applicability must of course be further specified in different contexts and with respect to different subject-positions.³²

Mourning is not the only modality of working-through, although it is a very important one. Among a variety of possible modalities, one may mention certain forms of nontotalizing narrative and critical, as well as self-critical, thought and practice. For example, Beckett may be read as a novelist and dramatist of absence and not simply loss, indeed, as a writer whose works deploy ways of both acting out and working through absence. One might perhaps say that his world is one of paradise absent, not paradise lost. He is the non-Milton, not simply the anti-Milton, of narrative. In Beckett, any intimation of a lost or a future utopia becomes evanescent and insubstantial. Seen in a certain light, deconstruction is itself a way of working through and playing (at times acting) out absence in its complex, mutually implicated relations to nonfull presence. (In this respect it may be similar to Buddhism.)³³ The distinction between absence and loss would permit the rereading of many figures and movements in order to understand their relations to these concepts and related processes.³⁴

32. See Freud, “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through (Further Recommendations on the Technique of Psycho-Analysis II)” (1914), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 12:145–56 and “Mourning and Melancholia” (1917), *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 14:237–60. I would agree with Judith Butler that “in *The Ego and the Id* [Freud] makes room for the notion that melancholic identification may be a *prerequisite* for letting the object go” (Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* [Stanford, Calif., 1997], p. 134; hereafter abbreviated *PL*). But I think this is already implied by the analysis of the complex, ambivalent relation of melancholia and mourning in “Mourning and Melancholia.” Moreover, acting-out in general may be a prerequisite of working-through, at least with respect to traumatic events, although, as I shall later argue, I do not think that melancholia should be given an originary position as constitutive of the socialized psyche.

33. Wood notes the resemblance between Derrida’s notion of *différance* and the Buddhist notion of “dependent arising” or “dependent coorigination” in which the “emptiness” or nonfull presence of each thing implies its interinvolvement with others and the absence of any ultimate ground, foundation, or *sub-jectum* (metaphysical subject as foundation) (Wood, “‘Democracy’ and ‘Totalitarianism’ in Contemporary French Thought: Neoliberalism, the Heidegger Scandal, and Ethics in Post-Structuralism,” in *Terror and Consensus*, p. 98). He quotes Nagarjuna, the second-century founder of the Madhyamika school as stating: “When emptiness ‘works,’ then everything in existence ‘works’” (*ibid.*, p. 98 n. 48).

34. I would also note that, on the level of belief and practice, the line of thought I am suggesting might lead to a seemingly paradoxical, nonfanatical religious atheism that is not the simple negation, opposite, or reversal of established religions (as most atheisms tend to be). Instead, it might indicate the value of elements of religion (for example, certain rituals) and even seek to honor the name of God in God’s absence. An important tendency in both religious and secular thought might be seen as going in this direction, for example, in Heidegger, Levinas, and Derrida. See also the discussion of post-Holocaust Jewish theology in Zachary Braiterman, *(God) After Auschwitz* (Princeton, N.J., 1998). Braiterman’s emphasis

Poststructuralism in general, and deconstruction in particular, often involve forms of traumatic writing or post-traumatic writing in closest proximity to trauma, and they variably engage processes of acting-out and working-through. In one sense, however, deconstruction is misunderstood when it is applied to historical losses. Historical losses call for mourning—and possibly for critique and transformative sociopolitical practice. When absence, approximated to loss, becomes the object of mourning, the mourning may (perhaps must) become impossible and turn continually back into endless melancholy. The approximation or even conflation of absence and loss induces a melancholic or impossibly mournful response to the closure of metaphysics, a generalized “hauntology,” and even a dubious assimilation (or at least an insufficiently differentiated treatment) of other problems (notably a limit-event such as the Holocaust and its effects on victims) with respect to a metaphysical or meta-metaphysical frame of reference. In another sense, deconstruction in certain of its registers may also be understood as a form of immanent critique that is applicable to historical phenomena and practices, including losses. It is especially significant politically in undoing pure binary oppositions that subtend and are generated by a scapegoat mechanism involving the constitution as well as the victimization of the other as a totally external, impure contaminant or pollutant; it also enables one to pose more precisely the problem of distinctions that are not pure binary opposites.³⁵ In this sense it does not entail a homogenizing reprocessing of all texts and phenomena or the blurring of all distinctions (including that between absence and loss) but instead the recognition that the problem of distinctions becomes more—not less—pressing in light of the unavailability or dubiousness of binary oppositions. Moreover, deconstruction may be extended in the direction of modes of social and political practice that address losses, lacks, and possibilities that are neither conflated with absence nor taken to imply a redemptive full presence in the past or future.³⁶ If it is so understood, the mourning deconstruction

is, however, on the critique of theodicy, an issue already rehearsed in pre-Holocaust thought.

35. As indicated earlier, theoretical or discursive undoing is not in and of itself tantamount to practical transformation, and it should not blind one to the empirically effective role of binary oppositions.

36. Here one may refer to the deconstruction and critique of humanism in its historically specific form that represents the human being as the absolute center of meaning and value and justifies any practice insofar as it serves human interests. This critique does not amount to a simple antihumanism, nor does it entail a rejection of agency, subjectivity, or responsible action, as some critics seem to assume. See, for example, Luc Ferry and Alain Renaut, *French Philosophy of the Sixties: An Essay on Antihumanism*, trans. Mary H. S. Cattani (1985; Amherst, Mass., 1990). It does, however, situate these important concerns differently, and it is open to a reconception of human rights in relation to the claims of other beings and the environment.

enables, especially in post-traumatic contexts, need not merge with quasi-transcendental, endless grieving that becomes altogether impossible. Even in terms of absence, deconstruction may open other possibilities of response, including more affirmative, carnivalesque, and generally complex ones (for example, in terms of a displaced wake in which the carnivalesque has a role in mourning itself). In any case, losses would have to be specified or named for mourning as a social process to be possible. (This point may provide some insight into the desire of intimates to locate the bodies and determine the names of victims so that they may be given a proper burial.) When mourning turns to absence and absence is conflated with loss, then mourning becomes impossible, endless, quasi-transcendental grieving, scarcely distinguishable (if at all) from interminable melancholy. If mourning applies to absence in a manner that resists conflation with loss, it would have to be in some unheard-of, radically unfamiliar sense that does not simply foster an indiscriminate, unmodulated rhetoric (in which loss blurs vertiginously into absence, and apartheid or the Shoah are discussed in much the same manner as texts by Rousseau or Benjamin) or fold back into interminable (even originary or constitutive) melancholy or quasi-transcendental grieving. In any case, the relation of deconstruction to problems of absence and loss (as well as to structural and historical trauma) should be posed and explored as an explicit object of inquiry.³⁷

In acting-out, the past is performatively regenerated or relived as if it were fully present rather than represented in memory and inscription, and it hauntingly returns as the repressed. Mourning involves a different inflection of performativity: a relation to the past that involves recognizing its difference from the present—simultaneously remembering and taking leave of or actively forgetting it, thereby allowing for critical judgment and a reinvestment in life, notably social and civic life with its demands, responsibilities, and norms requiring respectful recognition and consideration for others. By contrast, to the extent someone is possessed by the past and acting out a repetition compulsion, he or she may be incapable of ethically responsible behavior. Still, with respect to traumatic

37. In *Mourning Becomes the Law: Philosophy and Representation* (Cambridge, 1996), Gilian Rose writes:

Post-modernism in its renunciation of reason, power, and truth identifies itself as a process of endless mourning, lamenting the loss of securities which, on its own argument, were none such. Yet this everlasting melancholia accurately monitors the refusal to let go, which I express in the phrase describing post-modernism as 'despairing rationalism without reason'. One recent ironic aphorism for this static condition between desire for presence and acceptance of absence occurs in an interview by Derrida: 'I mourn, therefore I am.' [P. 11]

I do not agree with all aspects of Rose's analysis and critique, but I share her concern about an insistence on impossible mourning that continually loops back into inconsolable melancholy, thereby providing little room for even limited processes (including political processes) of working through problems.

losses, acting-out may well be a necessary condition of working-through, at least for victims. Possession by the past may never be fully overcome or transcended, and working-through may at best enable some distance or critical perspective that is acquired with extreme difficulty and not achieved once and for all. In some disconcertingly ambivalent form, trauma and one's (more or less symbolic) repetition of it may even be valorized, notably when leaving it seems to mean betraying lost loved ones who were consumed by it—as seemed to be the case for Charlotte Delbo who resisted narrative closure and engaged in hesitant post-traumatic writing as an act of fidelity to victims of the Holocaust.

Moreover, the secondary witness (including the historian) who resists full identification and the dubious appropriation of the status of victim through vicarious or surrogate victimage may nonetheless undergo empathic unsettlement or even muted trauma. Indeed the muting or mitigation of trauma that is nonetheless recognized and, to some extent, acted out may be a requirement or precondition of working through problems. Acting-out and working-through are in general intimately linked but analytically distinguishable processes, and it may be argued that a basis of desirable practice is to create conditions in which working-through, while never fully transcending the force of acting-out and the repetition compulsion, may nonetheless counteract or at least mitigate it in order to generate different possibilities—a different force field—in thought and life, notably empathic relations of trust not based on quasi-sacrificial processes of victimization and self-victimization.

There is at times a tendency in certain contemporary approaches to eliminate or obscure the role of problematic intermediary or transitional processes (including the very interaction between limits and excess) and to restrict possibilities to two extremes between which one may oscillate or be suspended: the justifiably rejected or criticized phantasm of total mastery, full ego-identity, definitive closure, “totalitarian” social integration, redemption, and radically positive transcendence (whether poetic or political), on the one hand, and endless mutability, fragmentation, melancholia, aporias, irrecoverable residues or exclusions, and double binds, at times with the acting-out of repetition compulsions, on the other. I find this all-or-nothing tendency in different ways in the works of Paul de Man, Lawrence Langer, and Slavoj Žižek among others.³⁸ Even Judith Butler, in her important and thought-provoking book *Bodies That Matter*:

38. The all-or-nothing tendency (including the somewhat histrionic idea that one should “never say never”) also appears in the assumption that any critique of excess must eventuate in an indiscriminate affirmation of a *juste milieu* or a blandly general belief that one must never exaggerate, be hyperbolic, or go too far. On the contrary, one may recognize that, in certain contexts (notably post-traumatic ones), one must undergo at least the temptation of excess and even engage in forms of hyperbole but still attempt to signal the importance of, and help bring about, a viable interaction between excess and legitimate normative limits.

On the Discursive Limits of "Sex," at one point delineates theoretical possibilities in terms of phantasmatic total mastery and the disruptive repetition compulsion when she stresses the "difference between a repetition in the service of the fantasy of mastery (i.e., a repetition of acts which build the subject, and which are said to be the constructive or constituting acts of a subject) and a notion of repetition compulsion, taken from Freud, which breaks apart that fantasy of mastery and sets its limits."³⁹ In this formulation, the repetition compulsion sets limits to the fantasy of total mastery, but there is no indication of forms of working-through that check, or generate counterforces to, compulsive repetition but are not tantamount to total mastery or definitive closure. Is one confined to two extremes—total mastery and the shattering effect of an endless repetition compulsion—extremes that attest to the predominance of an all-or-nothing logic? Are critical theory and conceptions of performativity confined to impossible mourning and modalities of melancholic or manic acting-out of post-traumatic conditions?

Butler returns to these problems in her recent *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection*. If it is taken as a "stark and hyperbolic construction" (as she puts it in passing), I find persuasive her account of the formation of (rigid) heterosexual identity on the basis of a "melancholic" repudiation of homosexual desire that involves an inability to mourn abjected losses (such as victims of AIDS) (*PL*, p. 136). But I would question the tendency, especially in her final chapter, to generalize an account of the formation of subjectivity on the basis of a constitutive or originary melancholy.⁴⁰ Moreover, for Butler melancholia itself is the disguised precipitate of social power as a lost object.⁴¹ Although one may certainly recognize the importance of (always already) internalized (and often occulted) social power in the generation of subjectivity and subjection, one may ask whether Butler's analysis is overly restricted or insufficiently

39. Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York, 1993), p. 10 n. 7. See also p. 22 n. 19, where she further elaborates her view. Relevant to the issues I discuss is the analysis in Peter Starr, *Logics of Failed Revolt: French Theory after May '68* (Stanford, Calif., 1995), which I read only after completing this article. Of special interest is Starr's discussion of Lacan (chap. 3).

40. Here her strategy is one of reversal in the form of metaleptic performativity: melancholy, which would seem to be the effect of the superego insofar as melancholia (as analytically distinguished from mourning) involves self-criticism and even self-berating, is the cause of the superego—indeed a terroristic superego as a vehicle of the death drive—in its distinction from the ego.

41.

By withdrawing its own presence, power becomes an object lost—"a loss of a more ideal kind." . . . The subject is produced, paradoxically, through this withdrawal of power, its dissimulation and fabulation of the psyche as a speaking topos. Social power vanishes, becoming the object lost, or social power makes vanish, effecting a mandatory set of losses. Thus, it effects a melancholia that reproduces power as the psychic voice of judgment, addressed to (turned upon) oneself, thus modeling reflexivity on subjection. [*PL*, pp. 197–98]

specific in its one-sided view of the superego, its rather unmediated derivation of the psyche from occulted social power, and its minimal account of critical judgment (seemingly a sort of residue with respect to internalized social power). Her account may even represent one of the latest avatars of the long story of conflating absence with loss that becomes constitutive instead of historical: the notion of loss related to melancholia as originary or constitutive of the subject and of the socialization of the psyche.⁴² This account would seem to be in some sense yet another secular displacement of the fall or original sin. An absence, gap, or structural trauma (related to anxiety and perhaps to radical ambivalence) is converted into, or equated with, a constitutive or originary loss (of social power and homosexual desire) as an unexamined presupposition for the postulation of melancholy as the origin or source of subjectivity. As Butler at points seems to intimate, absence not conflated with loss would not entail the postulation of melancholy as the source of subjectivity; by contrast, it would allow for various modes of subjectivity (of course including melancholy, which may indeed be especially pronounced in modernity).⁴³ In any event, if a special status were to be claimed for melancholy as a

42. In the penultimate chapter, by contrast, melancholia is more dynamically related to arrested mourning without being given an originary or constitutive status. Adam Phillips's critique, which was addressed to a version of the penultimate chapter and which separates the two last chapters in the book, may have prompted a change in Butler's argument—a questionable change, in my judgment. Phillips justifiably objects to facile, redemptive ideas of mourning but, in the process, almost threatens to foreclose working-through and simultaneously to see melancholia as the more radical option.

43. As Butler puts it in her penultimate chapter,

I would argue that phenomenologically there are many ways of experiencing gender and sexuality that do not reduce to this equation [of melancholic gender identity derived from the repudiation of homosexual desire and its incorporation as a lost identity], that do not presume that gender is stabilized through the installation of a firm heterosexuality, but for the moment I want to invoke this stark and hyperbolic construction of the relation between gender and sexuality in order to think through the question of ungrieved and ungrivable loss in the formation of what we might call the gendered character of the ego. [*PL*, p. 136]

The difficulty is that the "stark and hyperbolic construction" tends to govern the entire analysis and may severely restrict or even foreclose the attempt to "think through" other possibilities that may, to a greater or lesser extent, even constitute countervailing forces in existing society. Among these possible modes of subjectivity is trust, which of course applies differently with respect to a subject's relations with different others and groups of others. Along with working-through, trust is a category that may not hold a sufficiently prominent place in certain forms of critical theory. To avoid certain inferences, I would note that trust is not purely positive or related to a pollyanna view of existence. The attitude of trust, which is, I think, common in people and especially evident in children, opens one to manipulation and abuse. The prevalence of the confidence man (or, more generally, the trickster figure) as a social type in both history and literature is one sign of the openness of trust to abuse. Yet trust also has other possibilities in child care and in social relations more generally. Indeed, one might suggest that the intensity and prevalence (not the mere existence) of melancholia may be related to the abuse or impairment of trust, and melancholia is often pronounced in those who have experienced some injury to trust.

mode of subjectivity, this claim would be sociocultural and would have to be investigated and substantiated not in seemingly universalistic but in differentiated historical terms.⁴⁴

Sometimes evident as well in recent thought is a perspective fixated on failed transcendence or irremediable, even inconsolable and constitutive, loss or lack, in which any mode of reconstruction or renewal is seen as objectionably totalizing, recuperative, optimistic, or naive.⁴⁵ What is not theorized in this frame of reference is the possibility of working-through in which totalization (as well as redemption—whether putatively successful or failed) is actively resisted and the repetition compulsion counteracted, especially through social practices and rituals generating normative limits that are not conflated with normalization—limits that are affirmed as legitimate, yet subject to disruption, challenge, change, and even radical disorientation.⁴⁶ Without this notion of working-

44. On these problems, see, for example, Juliana Schiesari, *The Gendering of Melancholia: Feminism, Psychoanalysis, and the Symbolics of Loss in Renaissance Literature* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992); Winfried Schleiner, *Melancholy, Genius, and Utopia in the Renaissance* (Wiesbaden, 1991); Mitchell Robert Breitwieser, *American Puritanism and the Defense of Mourning: Religion, Grief, and Ethnology in Mary White Rowlandson's Captivity Narrative* (Madison, Wisc., 1990); and especially Wolf Lepenies, *Melancholy and Society*, trans. Jeremy Gaines and Doris Jones (1969; Cambridge, Mass., 1992). One may, of course, argue that Butler is postulating melancholic loss in transhistorical terms comparable to those I employ for absence. This is, however, a postulation I am trying to question and resist.

45. After completing the present article, I read a work that parallels this line of argument: Allison Weir's *Sacrificial Logics: Feminist Theory and the Critique of Identity* (New York, 1996). Weir, however, tends to use interchangeably the concepts of the sacrificial and the binary without further elucidating their relationship. On de Man, see my "The Temporality of Rhetoric," *Soundings in Critical Theory*, pp. 90–124.

46. Normalization involves the postulation of the statistical average (or perhaps the dominant) as normative. This postulation is certainly open to criticism, but its critique does not imply the avoidance or delegitimation of all normativity, including alternative normativities. Indeed, a crucial problem with respect to homophobia would be the development of a normativity that did not "abjectify" homosexual desire and practice—for example, a normativity that engaged the problems of commitment and trust without simply taking the conventional family as its model. It may be noted that Derrida, while recognizing that "there is nothing but" normativity, also states his suspicion of normativity "in the ordinary sense of the term" and observes that what he suggests about responsibility "signals instead in the direction of a law, of an imperative injunction to which one must finally respond *without norm*" (Derrida, "A 'Madness' Must Watch over Thinking," interview with François Ewald, *Points . . . Interviews, 1974–1994*, trans. Peggy Kamuf et al., ed. Elisabeth Weber [1992; Stanford, Calif., 1995], pp. 361–62). He also asserts that "each time a responsibility (ethical or political) has to be taken, one must pass by way of antinomic injunctions, which have an aporetic form, by way of a sort of experience of the impossible" (*ibid.*, p. 359). One may agree with him yet also insist (as he sometimes does) on the tense interaction between norms (distinguished from normalization) and what escapes or exceeds them, thereby calling for something like "an imperative injunction" that leads to a "responsible" decision in the context of antinomic injunctions—a decision that cannot be convincingly justified through normatively based reasoning. But this eventuality, which exists to some extent in every moral decision and is particularly accentuated in extreme cases, does not diminish

through, mourning may be treated only as endless grieving and not as a social process involving not simply alterity in the abstract but actual others—possibly empathic, trustworthy others. I have noted that mourning, if linked to an originary or constitutive loss, would necessarily seem to merge with endless, quasi-transcendental grieving that may be indistinguishable from interminable melancholy.⁴⁷ The possibility of even limited working-through may seem foreclosed in modern societies precisely because of the relative dearth of effective rites of passage, including rituals or, more generally, effective social processes such as mourning. But this historical deficit should neither be directly imputed as a failing to individuals who find themselves unable to mourn nor generalized, absolutized, or conflated with absence, as occurs in the universalistic notion of a necessary constitutive loss or lack or an indiscriminate conflation of all history with trauma.⁴⁸

A related point bears on the problematic but, I think, important distinction between structural trauma and historical trauma—a distinction that enables one to pose the problem of relations between the two in other than binary terms.⁴⁹ One may argue that structural trauma is re-

the importance of norms setting legitimate limits that are crucial in ethico-political education and reasoning. Without a countervailing stress on limiting norms that articulate social and political relations, one's concern with an "experience of the impossible" may become all-consuming, and tension may be resolved or distended in the direction of a decisionist messianism (or messianicity) without a messiah—an ethics or politics of "imperative injunctions" that come from nowhere (like leaps of religiously atheistic faith) and repeatedly point to the promise of a blank, ever-to-come future (an *avenir* that is always *à-venir* and never in any sense a present, however limited or marked by absence).

47. Walter Benjamin's *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (1928; London, 1977) may have provided an important model for what has become a prevalent move in recent theory. *Trauerspiel* would be better translated as "mourning play" and understood in terms of an impossible mourning in closest proximity to interminably melancholic grieving. In my judgment, Benjamin's thought is not restricted to a framework that valorizes melancholy and resists mourning (as a mode of working-through), but this framework does play an important role especially in his early work. (This role is discussed by Martin Jay in a forthcoming essay.) Benjamin might be reread against the grain to elicit forms of mourning and working-through intricately related to melancholy as well as for indications of absence not conflated with loss and blank messianic hope. Indeed, a distinctive appreciation of his turn to Marxism would be significant in this rereading.

48. This conflation tends to occur in Shoshana Felman's contributions to the work she coauthored with Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York, 1992).

49. Structuralists such as Claude Lévi-Strauss or Ferdinand de Saussure tended to confine their interest in events to that which could indeed be informed by structures (for example, *la langue* or language as an abstract, systematic structure of differences). Whatever structure did not encompass or inform was seen as merely contingent or particular (for example, *la parole*, or the particular, contingent spoken word). One move of poststructuralism was to focus on the contingent or particular as supplement that could not be seen as mere refuse or negligible residue with respect to structures and the "scientific" structuralism focused on them. Yet the result was at times an extreme stress on contingency, particu-

lated to (even correlated with) transhistorical absence (absence of/at the origin) and appears in different ways in all societies and all lives. As I indicated earlier, it may be evoked or addressed in various fashions—in terms of the separation from the (m)other, the passage from nature to culture, the eruption of the pre-oedipal or presymbolic in the symbolic, the entry into language, the encounter with the “real,” alienation from species-being, the anxiety-ridden thrownness of *Dasein*, the inevitable generation of the aporia, the constitutive nature of originary melancholic loss in relation to subjectivity, and so forth. I would reiterate that one difficulty in these scenarios is the frequent conversion of absence into loss or lack, notably through the notion of a fall from a putative state of grace, at-homeness, unity, or community. One can nonetheless postulate, hypothesize, or affirm absence as absence and recognize the role of something like untranscendable structural trauma without rashly rendering its role in hyperbolic terms or immediately equating it with loss or lack. By not conflating absence and loss, one would historicize and problematize certain forms of desire, such as the desire for redemption and totality or, in Sartre’s words, the desire to be in-itself-for-itself or God.⁵⁰ One would also help prevent the indiscriminate generalization of historical trauma into the idea of a wound culture or the notion that everyone is somehow a victim (or, for that matter, a survivor).

Historical trauma is specific and not everyone is subject to it or entitled to the subject-position associated with it. It is dubious to identify with the victim to the point of making oneself a surrogate victim who has a right to the victim’s voice or subject-position.⁵¹ The role of empathy and empathic unsettlement in the attentive secondary witness does not entail this identity; it involves a kind of virtual experience through which one puts oneself in the other’s position while recognizing the difference of that position and hence not taking the other’s place. Opening oneself to empathic unsettlement is, as I intimated, a desirable affective dimension of inquiry that complements and supplements empirical research and

larity, or singularity in a manner that induced nominalism and a repetitive return to the aporetic interplay of structure and event. More fruitful is the notion that seeming binaries interact and mutually mark one another in ways involving “internal” differences—a perspective that enables the recognition of the actual role of binaries (for example, in more or less repressive or oppressive hierarchies), allows for a critique of that role, and raises the question of nonbinaristic distinctions, including their relative strength or weakness (both in fact and in right). As I intimated earlier, one form of myth is the symmetrical opposite of structuralism that tries to account for it insofar as the myth attempts to “explain” the genesis of structure from an event that performatively enacts it.

50. At least in one movement of his argument in *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (1943; New York, 1953), Sartre did historicize this desire.

51. I find this tendency toward surrogate victim status in Claude Lanzmann as interviewer in his film *Shoah*. See my discussion in “Lanzmann’s *Shoah*: ‘Here There Is No Why,’” *Critical Inquiry* 23 (Winter 1997): 231–69; rpt. in *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, chap. 4.

analysis. Empathy is important in attempting to understand traumatic events and victims, and it may (I think, should) have stylistic effects in the way one discusses or addresses certain problems. It places in jeopardy fetishized and totalizing narratives that deny the trauma that called them into existence by prematurely (re)turning to the pleasure principle, harmonizing events, and often recuperating the past in terms of uplifting messages or optimistic, self-serving scenarios. (To some extent the film *Schindler's List* relies on such a fetishistic narrative.) Empathic unsettlement also raises in pointed form the problem of how to address traumatic events involving victimization, including the problem of composing narratives that neither confuse one's own voice or position with the victim's nor seek facile uplift, harmonization, or closure but allow the unsettlement that they address to affect the narrative's own movement both in terms of acting-out and working-through. Without discounting all forms of critical distance (even numbing "objectivity") that may be necessary for research, judgment, and self-preservation, one may also appeal to the role of empathy in raising doubts about positivistic or formalistic accounts that both deny one's transference implication in the problems one treats and attempt to create maximal distance from them—and those involved in them—through extreme objectification.⁵² But empathy that resists full identification with, and appropriation of, the experience of the other would depend both on one's own potential for traumatization (related to absence and structural trauma) and on one's recognition that another's loss is not identical to one's own loss.⁵³

Everyone is subject to structural trauma. But, with respect to historical trauma and its representation, the distinction among victims, perpetrators, and bystanders is crucial. "Victim" is not a psychological category. It is, in variable ways, a social, political, and ethical category. Victims of certain events will in all likelihood be traumatized by them, and not being traumatized would itself call for explanation. But not everyone traumatized by events is a victim. There is the possibility of perpetrator trauma that must itself be acknowledged and in some sense worked through if perpetrators are to distance themselves from an earlier implication in deadly ideologies and practices. Such trauma does not, however, entail the equation or identification of the perpetrator and the victim. The fact that Himmler suffered from chronic stomach cramps or that his associate Erich von dem Bach-Zelewski experienced nocturnal fits of screaming does not make them victims of the Holocaust. There may, of course, be ambiguous cases in what Primo Levi called the gray zone, but these cases were often caused by the Nazi policy of trying to make accomplices of victims, for example, the Jewish councils or *kapos* in the camps. The gray

52. Compare the formulation in Saul Friedlander, *Memory, History, and the Extermination of the Jews of Europe* (Bloomington, Ind., 1993), pp. 130–34.

53. The type of empathy I am defending is discussed by Kaja Silverman in terms of heteropathic identification. See her *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York, 1996).

zone serves to raise the question of the existence and extent of problematic—at times more or less dubiously hybridized—cases, but it does not imply the rashly generalized blurring or simple collapse of all distinctions, including that between perpetrator and victim. The more general point is that historical trauma has a differentiated specificity that poses a barrier to its amalgamation with structural trauma and that poses particular questions for historical understanding and ethicopolitical judgment.⁵⁴

Structural trauma is often figured as deeply ambivalent—as both shattering or painful and the occasion for *jouissance*, ecstatic elation, or the sublime. Although one may contend that structural trauma is in some problematic sense its precondition, I would reiterate the basic point that historical trauma is related to particular events that do indeed involve losses, such as the Shoah or the dropping of the atom bomb on Japanese cities. The strong temptation with respect to such limit-events is to collapse the distinction and to arrive at a conception of the event's absolute uniqueness or even epiphanous, sublime, or sacral quality.⁵⁵ Perhaps this is the tangled region of thought and affect where one should situate the founding trauma—the trauma that paradoxically becomes the basis for collective and/or personal identity. The Holocaust, slavery, or apartheid—even suffering the effects of the atom bomb in Hiroshima or Nagasaki—can become a founding trauma. Such a trauma is typical of myths of origin and may perhaps be located in the more or less mythologized history of every people. But one may both recognize the need for, and question the function of, the founding trauma that typically plays a tendentious ideological role, for example, in terms of the concept of a chosen people or a belief in one's privileged status as victim. As historical events that are indeed crucial in the history of peoples, traumas might instead be seen as posing the problematic question of identity and as calling for more critical ways of coming to terms with both their legacy and problems such as absence and loss.

A prominent motivation for the conflation of structural and historical trauma is the elusiveness of the traumatic experience in both cases. In historical trauma, it is possible (at least theoretically) to locate traumatizing events. But it may not be possible to locate or localize the experience of trauma that is not dated or, in a sense, punctual.⁵⁶ The belated tempo-

54. Here the cases of Blanchot and de Man pose a similar problem in judgment: whether early, direct, dubious, at times vehement writings receive an adequate critical response in later, indirect, allegorical, at times elusive writings that may indiscriminately mingle historical and structural trauma.

55. I discuss this problem from various perspectives both in *Representing the Holocaust* and in *History and Memory after Auschwitz*, esp. chap. 4.

56. Bessel A. van der Kolk makes the questionable attempt to localize in a portion of the brain the trace or imprint of the experience of trauma. See Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, "The Intrusive Past: The Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of

rality of trauma makes of it an elusive experience related to repetition involving a period of latency. At least in Freud's widely shared view, the trauma as experience is "in" the repetition of an early event in a later event—an early event for which one was not prepared to feel anxiety and a later event that somehow recalls the early one and triggers a traumatic response. The belated temporality of trauma and the elusive nature of the shattering experience related to it render the distinction between structural and historical trauma problematic but do not make it irrelevant. The traumatizing events in historical trauma can be determined (for example, the events of the Shoah) while structural trauma (like absence) is not an event but an anxiety-producing condition of possibility related to the potential for historical traumatization. When structural trauma is reduced to, or figured as, an event, one has the genesis of myth wherein trauma is enacted in a story or narrative from which later traumas seem to derive (as in Freud's primal crime or in the case of original sin attendant upon the fall from Eden).

One may well argue that the Holocaust represents losses of such magnitude that, while not absolutely unique, it may serve to raise the question of absence, for example with respect to divinity. Still, despite the extremely strong temptation, one may question the tendency to reduce, or confusingly transfer the qualities of, one dimension of trauma to the other—to generalize structural trauma so that it absorbs or subordinates the significance of historical trauma, thereby rendering all references to the latter merely illustrative, homogeneous, allusive, and perhaps equivocal, or, on the contrary, to explain all post-traumatic, extreme, uncanny phenomena and responses as exclusively caused by particular events or contexts. The latter move—what one might term reductive contextualism—is typical of historians and sociologists who attempt to explain, without significant residue, all anxiety or unsettlement—as well as attendant forms of creativity—through specific contexts or events, for example, deriving anxiety in Heidegger's thought exclusively from conditions in interwar Germany or explaining structuralism and the turn to the history of the *longue durée* in France solely in terms of the postwar avoidance of Vichy and the loss of national prestige and power.⁵⁷ The former tendency—deriving historical from structural trauma—is a great temptation

Trauma," in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore, 1995), pp. 158–82. Curiously, Caruth, despite her subtle analyses and stress on the elusiveness and belated temporality of the experience of trauma, accepts van der Kolk's literalizing view. Along with her contributions to *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, see her *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore, 1996).

57. The important and influential work of Pierre Bourdieu is sometimes prone to contextual reductionism or at least to a limited understanding of differential responses to contextual (or "field") forces. See, for example, his *L'Ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* (Paris, 1988) and *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (1992; Stanford, Calif., 1995).

for theoretically inclined analysts who tend to see history simply as illustrating or instantiating more basic processes. It should go without saying that the critique of reductive contextualism and theoreticism does not obviate the importance of specific contexts or of theory that addresses them and both informs and raises questions for research.

In *Telling the Truth about History*, the noted historians Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob write:

Once there was a single narrative of national history that most Americans accepted as part of their heritage. Now there is an increasing emphasis on the diversity of ethnic, racial, and gender experience and a deep skepticism about whether the narrative of America's achievements comprises anything more than a self-congratulatory masking of the power of elites. History has been shaken down to its scientific and cultural foundations at the very time that those foundations themselves are being contested.⁵⁸

In this passage, one is close to reductive contextualism involving a variant of a golden age mythology, a variant in which the proverbial past-we-have-lost becomes the metanarrative we have lost. The purpose of the authors' own narrative is to explain current forms of multiculturalism and skepticism, and the contrast between past and present serves to frame or even validate that explanation. Yet we are never told precisely when "there was a single narrative of national history that most Americans accepted as part of their heritage." Nor are we told from what perspective that putative narrative was recounted. How, one might well ask, could one ever have fully reconciled narratives from the perspectives of Plymouth Rock, Santa Fe, and the Alamo? What about the perspective of American Indians in relation to the open frontier and manifest destiny? Where does one place the Civil War and the narratives related to it? I think one might argue that there never was a single narrative and that most Americans never accepted only one story about the past. The rhetorical attempt both to get one's own narrative off the ground and to account for current conflicts or discontents by means of a questionable opposition between the lost, unified past and the skeptical, conflictual present runs the risk of inviting underspecified, if not distorted, views of the past and oversimplified interpretations of the present.

Specificity is also in jeopardy when Žižek, who tends to be preoccupied with structural trauma (often construed as constitutive loss or lack), complements his convincing indictment of reductive contextualism with the comparably reductive assertion: "All the different attempts to attach this phenomenon [concentration camps] to a concrete image ('Holocaust', 'Gulag' . . .), to reduce it to a product of a concrete social order

58. Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt, and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York, 1994), p. 1.

(Fascism, Stalinism . . .)—what are they if not so many attempts to elude the fact that we are dealing here with the ‘real’ of our civilization which returns as the same traumatic kernel in all social systems?”⁵⁹ Here, in an extreme and extremely dubious theoreticist gesture, concentration camps are brought alongside castration anxiety as mere manifestations or instantiations of the Lacanian “real” or “traumatic kernel.”

One way to formulate the problem of specificity in analysis and criticism is in terms of the need to explore the problematic relations between absence and loss (or lack) as well as between structural and historical trauma without simply collapsing the two or reducing one to the other. One may well argue that structural trauma related to absence or a gap in existence—with the anxiety, ambivalence, and elation it evokes—may not be cured but only lived with in various ways. Nor may it be reduced to a dated historical event or derived from one; its status is more like that of a condition of possibility of historicity (without being identical to history, some of whose processes—for example, certain ritual and institutional processes—may mitigate or counteract it). One may even argue that it is ethically and politically dubious to believe that one can overcome or transcend structural trauma or constitutive absence to achieve full intactness, wholeness, or communal identity and that attempts at transcendence or salvation may lead to the demonization and scapegoating of those on whom unavoidable anxiety is projected. But historical traumas and losses may conceivably be avoided and their legacies to some viable extent worked through both in order to allow a less self-deceptive confrontation with transhistorical, structural trauma and in order to further historical, social, and political specificity, including the elaboration of more desirable social and political institutions and practices.

59. Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London, 1989), p. 50.