

■ UNCLAIMED
Cathy Caruth

EXPERIENCE
Trauma, Narrative, and History

THE JOHNS HOPKINS UNIVERSITY PRESS BALTIMORE AND LONDON

■ INTRODUCTION: THE WOUND AND THE VOICE

*Though chilled with horror,
with a second blow
He struck it, and decided then to look.*

Torquato Tasso, *Jerusalem Liberated*

In the third chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud describes a pattern of suffering that is inexplicably persistent in the lives of certain individuals. Perplexed by the terrifyingly literal nightmares of battlefield survivors and the repetitive reenactments of people who have experienced painful events, Freud wonders at the peculiar and sometimes uncanny way in which catastrophic events seem to repeat themselves for those who have passed through them. In some cases, Freud points out,

2 Introduction

these repetitions are particularly striking because they seem not to be initiated by the individual's own acts but rather appear as the possession of some people by a sort of fate, a series of painful events to which they are subjected, and which seem to be entirely outside their wish or control. "The most moving poetic picture of a fate such as this," Freud writes, "can be found in the story told by Tasso in his romantic epic *Gerusalemme Liberata*":

Its hero, Tancred, unwittingly kills his beloved Clorinda in a duel while she is disguised in the armour of an enemy knight. After her burial he makes his way into a strange magic forest which strikes the Crusaders' army with terror. He slashes with his sword at a tall tree; but blood streams from the cut and the voice of Clorinda, whose soul is imprisoned in the tree, is heard complaining that he has wounded his beloved once again.¹

The actions of Tancred, wounding his beloved in a battle and then, unknowingly, seemingly by chance, wounding her again, evocatively represent in Freud's text the way that the experience of a trauma repeats itself, exactly and unremittingly, through the unknowing acts of the survivor and against his very will. As Tasso's story dramatizes it, the repetition at the heart of catastrophe—the experience that Freud will call "traumatic neurosis"—emerges as the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind.

I would like to suggest here, however, that the literary resonance of Freud's example goes beyond this dramatic illustration of repetition compulsion and exceeds, perhaps, the limits of Freud's conceptual or conscious theory of trauma. For what seems to me particularly striking in the example of Tasso is not just the unconscious act of the infliction of the injury and its inadvertent and unwished-for repetition, but the moving and sorrowful *voice* that cries out, a voice that is paradoxically released *through the wound*. Tancred does not only repeat his act but, in repeating it, he for the first time hears a voice that cries

out to him to see what he has done. The voice of his beloved addresses him and, in this address, bears witness to the past he has unwittingly repeated. Tancred's story thus represents traumatic experience not only as the enigma of a human agent's repeated and unknowing acts but also as the enigma of the otherness of a human voice that cries out from the wound, a voice that witnesses a truth that Tancred himself cannot fully know.

It is the moving quality of this literary story, I would suggest—its striking juxtaposition of the unknowing, injurious repetition and the witness of the crying voice—that best represents Freud's intuition of, and his passionate fascination with, traumatic experiences. If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience precisely meet. The example offered by the poetry of Tasso is indeed, in my interpretation, more than a literary example of a vaster psychoanalytic, or experiential, truth; the poetic story can be read, I will suggest, as a larger parable, both of the unarticulated implications of the theory of trauma in Freud's writings and, beyond that, of the crucial link between literature and theory that the following pages set out to explore.

A DOUBLE WOUND

As the repeated infliction of a wound, the act of Tancred calls up the originary meaning of trauma itself (in both English and German), the Greek *trauma*, or "wound," originally referring to an injury inflicted on a body.² In its later usage, particularly in the medical and psychiatric literature, and most centrally in Freud's text, the term *trauma* is understood as a wound inflicted not upon the body but upon the mind. But what seems to be suggested by Freud in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* is that the

wound of the mind—the breach in the mind's experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that, like Tancred's first infliction of a mortal wound on the disguised Clorinda in the duel, is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor.³ Just as Tancred does not hear the voice of Clorinda until the second wounding, so trauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on.⁴

What the parable of the wound and the voice thus tells us, and what is at the heart of Freud's writing on trauma, both in what it says and in the stories it unwittingly tells, is that trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.

In this book I explore the ways in which texts of a certain period—the texts of psychoanalysis, of literature, and of literary theory—both speak about and speak through the profound story of traumatic experience. Rather than straightforwardly describing actual case studies of trauma survivors, or attempting to elucidate directly the psychiatry of trauma, the chapters that follow explore the complex ways that knowing and not knowing are entangled in the language of trauma and in the stories associated with it. Whether the texts I read concern, as in Freud, the theory of trauma in individual or collective history or, as in Duras and Resnais, the story of two people bonded in and

around their respective catastrophic experiences, each one of these texts engages, in its own specific way, a central problem of listening, of knowing, and of representing that emerges from the actual experience of the crisis. If traumatic experience, as Freud indicates suggestively, is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs, then these texts, each in its turn, ask what it means to transmit and to theorize around a crisis that is marked, not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness. Such a question, I will argue, whether it occurs within a strictly literary text or in a more deliberately theoretical one, can never be asked in a straightforward way, but must, indeed, also be spoken in a language that is always somehow literary: a language that defies, even as it claims, our understanding.

In my own endeavor at interpretation, likewise, in the chapters on psychoanalytic writing and in the chapters on literature and literary theory, I attempt not just to follow each author's argument in its explicit reference to traumatic experience (Freud's theory of trauma as outlined in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, the notion of reference and the figure of the falling body in de Man, Kleist, and Kant, the mutual narratives of personal catastrophe in Duras and Resnais's *Hiroshima mon amour*, Lacan's rethinking of trauma in his interpretation of Freud's texts). My main endeavor is, rather, to trace in each of these texts a different story, the story or the textual itinerary of insistently recurring words or figures. The key figures my analysis uncovers and highlights—the figures of “departure,” “falling,” “burning,” or “awakening”—in their insistence, here engender stories that in fact emerge out of the rhetorical potential and the literary resonance of these figures, a literary dimension that cannot be reduced to the thematic content of the text or to what the theory encodes, and that, beyond what we can know or theorize about it, stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound.

THE STORY OF AN ACCIDENT

At the heart of these stories is thus an enigmatic testimony not only to the nature of violent events but to what, in trauma, resists simple comprehension. And it is in way that we can also read one of the central lessons in Freud's recurrent attempts to grapple with the description and conceptualization of trauma. For what returns to haunt the trauma victim in Freud's primary example of trauma, as I emphasize in my readings of Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*, is not just any event but, significantly, the shocking and unexpected occurrence of an accident. The example of the train accident—the accident from which a person walks away apparently unharmed, only to suffer symptoms of the shock weeks later—most obviously illustrates, for Freud, the traumatizing shock of a commonly occurring violence. Yet the recurring image of the accident in Freud, as the illustration of the unexpected or the accidental, seems to be especially compelling, and indeed becomes the exemplary scene of trauma *par excellence*, not only because it depicts what we can know about traumatizing events, but also, and more profoundly, because it tells of what it is, in traumatic events, that is *not* precisely grasped. The accident, that is, as it emerges in Freud and is passed on through other trauma narratives, does not simply represent the violence of a collision but also conveys the impact of its very incomprehensibility. What returns to haunt the victim, these stories tell us, is not only the reality of the violent event but also the reality of the way that its violence has not yet been fully known.

The story of the accident thus refers us, indirectly, to the unexpected reality—the locus of referentiality—of the traumatic story. It is this link between narrative and reality that I explore in my chapter on Paul de Man's notion of referentiality, a notion that indeed associates reference with an impact, and specifically the impact of a fall. In my analysis of de Man's work,

through his readings, in particular, of the philosophical texts of Immanuel Kant and the literary texts of Heinrich von Kleist, I attempt to show how de Man's critical theory of reference ultimately becomes a narrative, and a narrative inextricably bound up with the problem of what it means to fall (which is, perhaps, de Man's own translation of the concept—of the experience—of trauma). The story of the falling body—which I read through de Man's texts as the story of the impact of reference—thus encounters, unexpectedly, the story of a trauma, and the story of trauma is inescapably bound to a referential return.⁵ This interpretation of reference through trauma, therefore, this understanding of trauma in terms of its indirect relation to reference, does not deny or eliminate the possibility of reference but insists, precisely, on the inescapability of its belated impact.⁶

TRAUMA AND HISTORY

The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of a belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality—the escape from a death, or from its referential force—rather attests to its endless impact on a life. In Tasso's story, indeed, as we read it in Freud, Tancred does not escape the reality of death's impact—of the wounding accident and of Clorinda's death—but rather has to live it twice. The crisis at the core of many traumatic narratives—as I show concretely in my readings of Freud, Duras, and Lacan—often emerges, indeed, as an urgent question: Is the trauma the encounter with death, or the ongoing experience of having survived it? At the core of these stories, I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival. These two stories, both incompatible and absolutely inextricable, ultimately define the complexity of what I refer to as *history* in the texts that I read: in *Moses and Monotheism*, the intricate relation between the story

of the Jews and the story of the Christians; in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the intertwining of the confrontation with death and the confrontation with life; in *Hiroshima mon amour* and in Lacan's interpretation of the dream of the burning child, the profound link between the death of the loved one and the ongoing life of the survivor. In these texts, as I suggest, it is the inextricability of the story of one's life from the story of a death, an impossible and necessary double telling, that constitutes their historical witness.⁷

THE VOICE OF THE OTHER

The theoretical and literary thrust of the present book can thus be illustrated in another way as well through Tasso's story—and through Freud's example—of the crying wound. For while the story of Tancred, the repeated thrusts of his unwitting sword and the suffering he recognizes through the voice he hears, represents the experience of an individual traumatized by his own past—the repetition of his own trauma as it shapes his life—the wound that speaks is not precisely Tancred's own but the wound, the trauma, of another. It is possible, of course, to understand that other voice, the voice of Clorinda, within the parable of the example, to represent the other within the self that retains the memory of the “unwitting” traumatic events of one's past. But we can also read the address of the voice here, not as the story of the individual in relation to the events of his own past, but as the story of the way in which one's own trauma is tied up with the trauma of another, the way in which trauma may lead, therefore, to the encounter with another, through the very possibility and surprise of listening to another's wound.

I would suggest that such a listening to the voice and to the speech delivered by the other's wound is what takes place, indeed, in Freud's own text, whose theory of trauma is written not only about but in the midst of trauma. The story of Tancred is thus equally, I would suggest, the story of psychoanalytic

writing itself. The figure of Tancred addressed by the speaking wound constitutes, in other words, not only a parable of trauma and of its uncanny repetition but, more generally, a parable of psychoanalytic theory itself as it listens to a voice that it cannot fully know but to which it nonetheless bears witness.⁸

This listening to the address of another, an address that remains enigmatic yet demands a listening and a response, is what, in other ways, is also at the heart of the texts of Duras and of Lacan. In *Hiroshima mon amour* it is at the heart of the encounter between the woman and the man, between the French woman who has watched her German lover die in the war and the Japanese man whose family has been decimated by the bomb at Hiroshima and who turns out, profoundly and significantly, to be the only one able to hear and to receive, across the distance of their cultures and through the impact of their very different traumas, the woman's address. Likewise, this listening to another who addresses us forms the center of Lacan's reinterpretation of Freud's narrative of the dream of the burning child, through the emphasis it lays on the encounter between father and child: between a child who has died from a fever and whose corpse catches fire from an accidentally overturned candle; and a sleeping father, unconscious of this burning in the next room, who hears in his dream the voice of his dead child pleading for him to see the fire by whispering the words, “Father, don't you see I'm burning?” It is this plea by an other who is asking to be seen and heard, this call by which the other commands us to awaken (to awaken, indeed, to a burning), that resonates in different ways throughout the texts this book attempts to read, and which, in this book's understanding, constitutes the new mode of reading and of listening that both the language of trauma, and the silence of its mute repetition of suffering, profoundly and imperatively demand.