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Freud, the Economy, the War

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The “echoes” emitted by the first “Freudian message”, Lacan writes, remained as if “suffocated in the deaf collapses of the First World War” and “its propagation resumed with the immense human wrenching that fomented the second and was its most powerful vehicle”.¹ It is “on the panic-stricken breath of war”, he concludes “that the voice of Freud reached us”.²

The historical nexus that unites Freudian theory to the experience of total European war could not have been more strongly enunciated. To reiterate it is excessive. It is more interesting to observe, in an opportunely delimited context, the way the war took possession, so to speak, of the theory and impressed upon it a characteristic mark.

The economy of war, as is known, draws profits from wartime production, that is, from factories that menace the very sense of life. At first it seems paradoxical, but it isn't, because the threat of life in no place touches on its effective negation. To threaten means here “to exploit”: it involves exploiting life all the way to death. The intensive exploitation of life is that which includes even death inside it. Of course, it involves reaping profits also from the pure and simple negation of life, but once forced to flow within this artificial canal, the negation changes into its opposite, it becomes affirmation. The economy of war affirms life *together* with death. What is more: in a certain way it restores death to life and forces us to change radically, as Freud observes in a famous essay of 1915, “our attitude towards death”.³ This is the “novelty” of war. War, in effect, renews the sense of the most ancient thing, the sense of death. *Zeitgemäßes über*

¹ Jacques Lacan, *La chose freudienne ou Sens du retour à Freud en psychanalyse* [1955], in *Écrits*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1999, vol. I, p. 399; *The Freudian Thing, or the Meaning of the Return to Freud in Psychoanalysis*, in *Jacques Lacan. Ecrits*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 2006, p. 335.

² *Ibidem*.

³ Sigmund Freud, *Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod*, in *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur und andere Kulturtheoretische Schriften*, Fischer, Frankfurt a.M. 2013, pp. 149 ss.; *Reflections on War and Death*, Moffat, Yard & Co., New York 1918, p. 40 ss.



Krieg und Tod is a strange title – this indeed is paradoxical – because it means, it would seem, *Novelties on War and Death*. On the basis of the war and its peculiar economy, Freud announces to the world the novelty of death.

Death is “new” because its nature is no longer biological but economic. Now it is known that the economic principle, in Freud, is the very pleasure principle. The management of the psychic house is economic: it involves, according to the literal sense of the word, “domesticating” displeasure, lowering or reducing it to its minimal yield (“the economic principle of saving on waste [*Aufwandersparnis*]”)⁴. Perhaps, however, we haven’t reflected enough on the fact that the pleasure principle is above all a phenomenon of “equilibration”.⁵ Freud defines it the “principle of constancy”⁶ and Lacan, opportunely, evokes the homeostatic system.⁷ Equilibrating the minimum of energy, in fact, is a *constant* exploitation of the forces at play. From the viewpoint of energy, the “yield” or “profit of pleasure” [*Lustgewinn*]⁸ is constant and this entails the regulation of the flow of pleasure according to a stable and therefore continuous measure. One can express the same concept in another, more sophisticated way: that which stability is in a spatial sense, continuity is in a temporal

⁴ Id., *Formulierungen über die zwei Prinzipien des psychischen Geschehens*, in «Jahrbuch für psychoanalytische und psychopathologische Forschungen», III (1911), p. 4; *Formulations on the Two Principles of Psychic Functioning*, in *The Freud Reader*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 1995, p. 303.

⁵ I take the term from Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre II. Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse* [1954-1955], Jacques-Alain Miller, ed., Éditions du Seuil, Paris 2001, p. 88; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan. Book II: The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, Press Syndicate, Cambridge (UK), p. 60.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* [1920], Lothar Bayer and Hans-Martin Lohmann, eds., Reclam, Stuttgart 2013, p. 11. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1961, p. 3. A rather meaningful sketch of this concept, which in fact traverses like a *fil rouge* all of Freud's speculative work, is found already in *Entwurf einer Psychologie* [1895], in *Aus den Anfängen der Psychoanalyse 1887-1902. Briefe an Wilhelm Fließ*, Fischer, Frankfurt a.M. 1975, pp. 305-306.

⁷ Jacques Lacan, *Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*, cit., pp. 109, 115; *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, cit., pp. 66, 75.

⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, cit., p. 17; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cit., p. 17. [The official translation here cited understands “yield” in the sense of “profit” – translator's note].



sense. And here, of course, it is inevitable to agree with Heidegger, according to whom continuous time reveals itself, in reality, to be a quality of space: “the continuity of time”, that is, the “continuous and gapless” succession of “nows”, is to be understood, Heidegger writes in famous pages, “in the horizon of the idea of objective presence”,⁹ where the “simple presence”, which in his language is *Vorhandenheit*, coincides with the “ordinary notion of natural homogeneous space”.¹⁰ We will see later on what are the consequences of this primacy of space in the psychic economy. Let us limit ourselves for now to describing a more delicate mechanism: drawing a constant profit from displeasure means managing the “crisis of pleasure” and this precisely in the sense that the minimal yield of displeasure will coincide *per negationem* with the maximal yield of pleasure. If the task of the pleasure principle is in fact that of “lowering” the threshold of displeasure, it follows that pleasure does not possess its own autonomous positivity and that it is determined only in function of a decrease of the opposite force. The negative nature of pleasure places itself, as a result, at the origin of a perpetual state of psychic crisis. And yet Freud invites us to consider the psychic crisis not as a condition of mere depression, but of gain. The psychic house will exploit the crisis to “optimize” the “profit of pleasure”. Thus, projecting the inquiry “beyond” the pleasure principle means probing the conditions of psychic gain inherent in the state of crisis, as it were *in partibus infidelium*. It is not a matter of certifying the check of pleasure grappling with the forces that negatively affect the psyche – above all the traumatic neuroses, the neuroses of transfer and repetition compulsion, whose treatment corresponds precisely with the first three chapters of *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* and delimits in a certain way the “pre-speculative” area of the text. It is a matter instead of evaluating the psychic gain in the crisis of pleasure, that is, even inside the hard positivity of displeasure; it is an evaluation that is in itself problematic, even disconcerting, whose articulation is produced

⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* [1927], in *Gesamtausgabe*, Klostermann, Frankfurt a.M. 1977, vol. II (Friedrich-Wilhelm von Herrmann, ed.), section I, p. 559; *Being and Time*, State University of New York, 1996, p. 387.

¹⁰ Eugenio Mazzarella, *Tecnica e metafisica. Saggio su Heidegger*, Guida, Napoli 2002, p. 92.



without residue within the “speculative” area of the text. Starting from the fourth chapter, Freud warns, *was nun folgt, ist Spekulation*: what follows, from here on out, is speculation.¹¹

The crisis of pleasure configures the possibility of gain beyond the natural limits of the psyche. And because the natural limits of the psyche are none other than its own biological limits, the crisis of pleasure heralds the exploitation of resources of another nature, and that is, more exactly, of resources posed beyond nature, since the resources in question are those available to the work of death. There is in effect at least one passage of the tormented text of Freud in which *Todestrieb* and *Lustprinzip*, the death drive and the pleasure principle, prove to be aligned along the same axis, as in a sinister astral conjunction; let’s reread it together:

The dominating tendency of mental life, and perhaps of nervous life in general is the effort to reduce, to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli (the „Nirvana Principle“, to borrow a term from Barbara Low¹² – a tendency which finds expression in the pleasure principle; and our recognition of that fact is one of our strongest reasons for believing in the existence of death instincts.¹³

The “lowering” of psychic energy functions more or less like a process of depreciation in the course of a classic economic crisis: the energy depression is instrumental, because it will serve to sustain a greater capacity of investment of pleasure on the external world. Depression is thus translated into gain. In this sense, psychic energy proves at once preserved and increased, just as one gleans from the

¹¹ Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, cit., p. 28; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cit., p. 18.

¹² Barbara Low, *Psycho-Analysis. A Brief Account of the Freudian Theory*, Allen & Unwin, London 1920, p. 73: “It is possible that deeper than the Pleasure-principle lies the Nirvana-principle, as one may call it – the desire of the newborn creature to return to that stage of omnipotence, where there are no non-fulfilled desires, in which it existed within the mother’s womb”.

¹³ Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, cit., p. 67; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cit., pp. 49-50.



meaning that Hegel attributed to the word *supersession* [*Aufhebung*],¹⁴ the same that Freud also uses here. The successive step regards the use of the term *Spekulation*. Freud emphatically tends towards the philosophical use of the term, but the economic context remains in the forefront. In the psychic context as well, in fact, as in certain sectors of the financial market, the risk is maximal, because every time the pleasure principle manages to “overcoming” its external limit, that is, the “reality principle” [*Realitätsprinzip*], what is at stake, Freud observes, is the fitness “of the organism as a whole”.¹⁵

Now we need to understand better the functioning of the “speculative” logic, to which the pleasure principle responds. Also on this point Lacan has wished to take Freud literally. If the task of the nervous system is to “bring excitement back to the lowest level”, then we must urgently ask this question: “*To a minimum*, what does that mean?”¹⁶ Freud is not clear; this Lacan argues, “puts some analytic authors under some difficulty. Read them, you’ll see them slide down the slope which Freud’s way of rendering the question dialectical opens to them”.¹⁷ But from what does the embarrassment derive that beleaguers the very workers themselves of psychoanalysis? It must involve something extraneous to psychoanalysis, an extraneous body. Identifying this extraneous body introduced by Freud into psychoanalytic theory is the most difficult task. Let us follow Lacan again:

The minimum tension can mean one of two things, all biologists will agree, according to whether it is a matter of the minimum given a certain definition of the equilibrium of the system, or of the minimum purely and simply, that is to say, with respect to the living being, death.¹⁸

¹⁴ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford University Press, Oxford 1977, pp. 114-115: consciousness “supersedes in such a way as to preserve and maintain what is superseded, and consequently survives its own supersession”.

¹⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, cit., p. 12. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cit., p. 4.

¹⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*, cit, pp. 115; *The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book II, The Ego in Freud’s Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis 1954-1955*, W. W. Norton & Co., New York 1991, p. 90.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.



The extraneous body thus has a name, it is called *Todestrieb*. Earlier we saw how Freud places the pleasure principle in line with the death drive. The subtle *variatio* introduced by Lacan consists of dislocating along the same line two principles which are apparently incompatible: the economic or quantitative principle of the “minimum”, an example of which is the Fechnerian law¹⁹ of energy savings, and the philosophical or qualitative principle – “the minimum purely and simply” [(*le plus bas pur et simple*), says Lacan, or also: the “extremely speculative” [*le spéculatif pur*]²⁰ – introduced surreptitiously by the *Todestrieb*. It is here that the Lacanian “reclaiming” denounces a fertile infidelity with respect to the original model. Between the first and second topic there is a fracture, this is undeniable: it is necessary to highlight it not to denounce a contradiction in the Freudian “system”, but to show how the Freudian theory presents within it passages from one level to another, sudden and unpredictable, which however do not compromise its general integrity. The unconscious of the first topic is not the Id of the second; likewise, desire does not coincide with enjoyment – which Lacan called *jouissance*. The separation seems a precise one, the “drama” is not accidental but “essential”: “desire comes from the Other”, it pertains, that is, to the intersubjective dialectic (and the desire for “recognition”), while “jouissance is located on the side of the Thing [*la jouissance est du côté de la Chose*]”.²¹ Yet not for this reason, however, is enjoyment extraneous to the unconscious and the Id to desire. In synthesis, the speculative element can be pure or impure, depending on whether it corresponds to the qualitative element of the death drive or the quantitative action of libido. But what is important to underline is that in both cases the consciousness does not come into play.

¹⁹ The hypothesis of Gustav Theodor Fechner, cited by Freud, is that which aligns pleasure with “complete stability” and displeasure with its negation (cfr. *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, cit., pp. 10-11; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cit., p. 2). Freud draws here on the *Einige Ideen zur Schöpfungs- und Entwicklungsgeschichte der Organismen* (Leipzig 1873).

²⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le moi dans la théorie de Freud et dans la technique de la psychanalyse*, cit., pp. 100; *The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis*, cit., p. 77.

²¹ Id., *Du “Trieb” de Freud et du désir du psychanalyste* [1964], in *Écrits*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1999, vol. II, p. 333; *On Freud's Trieb and the Psychoanalyst's Desire*, in *Écrits*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 2006, p. 724.



In the great text of 1920, consciousness undergoes a relentless attack and its prerogatives, ironically patterned on the measures of the opposite principle, that is, the pleasure principle, are effectively reduced to a “minimum”. What pays the price is first of all its universalistic status. “Psycho-analytic speculation”, Freud writes, “takes as its point of departure the impression, derived from examining unconscious processes, that consciousness may be, not the most universal attribute of mental processes, but only a particular function of them”.²² This function is dictated primarily by its position in the psychic geography. In his writings, Freud ceaselessly uses spatial metaphors; his reasonings on the “topographical model” of the psychic apparatus are too well-known to be reproduced here. But in the case of consciousness, the spatial localization answers also to the meaning of its function. The “distal” position of consciousness (its “exposed situation”²³) with respect to the totality of the psychic system contains, that is, the specific reason of its secondary role. The smallness of its space of action, the functional impossibility to widen its territory, coincides with a substantial condition of passivity. Consciousness marks the inert border, thickened and thus unsusceptible to further developments²⁴, between the external world dominated by the reality principle and the internal world dominated by the pleasure principle. In this way, surprisingly, consciousness becomes an immutable, definitive reality; it is, so to speak the “stable” side of the psychic apparatus, but stable because it is devitalized. The consequences of this redefining of the prerogatives of consciousness are considerable. On one hand the Freudian mechanism removes the foundation of the universalism of consciousness, but on the other it comes to opposite results with regard to computational reductionism. It is not a matter, in fact, of denouncing the fiction of consciousness²⁵ – for Freud, who discovered the unconscious, this is too

²² Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, cit., p. 29. *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cit., p.18.

²³ *Ibidem*, p. 31; *ibidem*, p. 20.

²⁴ *Ibidem*; *ibidem*.

²⁵ On this absolutely central topic in the cognitivist context, one may read, for its exemplary character, the book of Daniel C. Dennett, *Sweet Dreams. Philosophical Obstacles to a Science of Consciousness*, The MIT Press, Cambridge 2005.



obvious – but of reducing its function to the “minimum”. It is a completely different perspective, which should discourage at the outset the attempt to reconcile or even simply align, perhaps in consideration of their shared scientific basis (deep down Freud and Damasio start from the same discipline, neurology), analytic and cognitive thought. We will return later on to this aspect of our question.

The Freudian topography of consciousness suggests, meanwhile, a geographic equivalence: consciousness and the psychic apparatus are in relation to one another like Europe and Asia. The position of Europe, like that of consciousness, appears entirely peripheral with respect to the huge mass of the Asian continent. As an author very far from Freud has noted, Europe and Asia are not only two geopolitical realities, but also two psychic “residences”, “two stratifications of the human being, which everyone bears in himself”.²⁶ Europe forms the most superficial layer, it is the “most exposed” integument. Unfortunately, the etymology of the word remains uncertain. In the name Εὐρώπη one mainly grasps the presence of a root, “optic” (ὄψ-), which refers to the generic function of sight: *wide* (εὐρύς) *gazing* (ὄψ-) or *weithin blickend*.²⁷ Europe with a “wide gaze” does not mean much for us, it is a mute image. But things change if we assume that the gaze of the nymph comes in reality from “another” subject and more precisely from a “subject within the subject”,²⁸ that in the attentive Lacanian transcription is the unconscious: the gaze of consciousness, and its direction, depend on the eye of the unconscious. In mythical terms this means that the gaze of the nymph is formed elsewhere, it comes from the dark eye of Asia. On this delicate point we can be helped by the indication of Semerano, who extracts the word “from the same base of ἔρεβος, Akkadian

²⁶ Ernst Jünger, *Der gordische Knoten* [1953], in *Sämtliche Werke*, Klett-Cotta, Stuttgart 2002², vol. VII, section II, pp. 389-390 (own translation).

²⁷ *Der kleine Pauly. Lexikon der Antike in fünf Bänden*, Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, Munich 1979, s.v.

²⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Psychoanalysis and Its Teaching*, in *Ecrits*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 2006, 364: “In the unconscious, which is not so much deep as it is inaccessible to conscious scrutiny, *it speaks, ça parle*: the notion of a subject within the subject, transcending the subject, has raised questions for philosophers since Freud wrote *The Interpretation of Dreams*”.



erebu (occident)”, for which reason “for the very ancient peoples who look from the Orient”, Europe “is the kindgom of the dead”.²⁹ This affirmation places us unexpectedly back on the track of the *Todestrieb*.

The peculiar position of consciousness within the Apparatus suggests yet another connection. Freud insists several times on the “exceptional” character of consciousness. The explanation for this belongs to the dynamic register. While in the other psychic systems adjacent to consciousness, excitement leaves a “permanent trace”³⁰ (of the kind of trace “in them which form the foundation of memory”³¹), in consciousness nothing like this occurs. Consciousness does not hold anything back, on the contrary it “*arises instead of a memory-trace*”.³² This psychic mechanism therefore implies “an exception [...] to the general rule”.³³ According to Freud, we have already seen this; the phenomenon should be linked to the threshold position of consciousness. This position of consciousness, together with the exception that it implies, configures a kind of “state of exception”. With respect to the dynamics of the psychic processes, consciousness functions in effect like a state of exception, because it imposes an exception upon the normal exercise of psychic policies. Giorgio Agamben, who has studied in-depth this concept of international law, likens the state of exception to a “no man’s land”, placed in between “the juridical order and life”.³⁴ And this causes the state of exception to present itself “like the legal form of what cannot have a legal form”.³⁵ Analogous is the status of consciousness

²⁹ Giovanni Semerano, *L’infinito: un equivoco millenario. Le antiche civiltà del Vicino Oriente e le origini del pensiero greco*, Bruno Mondadori, Milan 2001, p. 226. On p. 85 Εὐρώπη is called “the brunette” and “as a name of the Occident, of our continent, it recalls the semitic: Assyrian arāpu, erēpu (to darken), erebu (occident)” (own translation).

³⁰ Sigmund Freud, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, cit., p. 30; *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, cit., pp. 18-19.

³¹ *Ibidem; ibidem*.

³² *Ibidem; ibidem*, p. 19.

³³ *Ibidem*, p. 31; *ibidem*, pp. 19-20.

³⁴ Giorgio Agamben, *Stato di eccezione. Homo sacer II*, Bollati Boringhieri, Turin 2012², p. 10 (own translation).

³⁵ *Ibidem*.



with respect to the world of drives: it strives to confer legality, that is to say comprehensibility, on those psychic contents that cannot have them, since, of course, they are unconscious contents. The order of consciousness is therefore fictitious. It is a temporal order superimposed on a psychic situation in which time has no sovereignty. In vain, Freud writes, would one seek in the Id something “that corresponds to the idea of time”.³⁶ In the Id, in particular, there is “no alteration in [...] mental processes [...] produced by the passage of time”: “that is most remarkable and awaits consideration in philosophical thought”³⁷ In the context of drives, consciousness is therefore a temporal exception. That is, it introduces the exception of time into an apparatus in which spatial juxtaposition dominates.³⁸ The state of exception, too, whose historical roots are found in the Roman institute of dictatorship, is a provision subjected to time. Carl Schmitt informs us that the dictator “was nominated for six months”³⁹ an arch of time during which he had to confront war or internal seditions. But the question is dubious. One may suppose that with respect to the urgencies of the republic, the state of exception did not manage to perform its task more than the temporality of consciousness manages to handle the energy regime imposed by the pleasure principle – Silla and Caesar broaden *sine die* the dictatorial appointment.

³⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Vorlesungen zur Einführung in die Psychoanalyse* [1916-1933], Nikol, Hamburg 2010, p. 512 ; *New Introductory Lectures On Psycho-Analysis*, The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, London 1999, vol. XXII, p. 73.

³⁷ *Ibidem*; *ibidem*.

³⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 511-512: ; *ibidem*, p. 72: “The logical laws of thought do not apply in the id, and this is true above all of the law of contradiction. Contrary impulses exist side by side, without cancelling each other out or diminishing each other”. According to the unconscious aesthetics “the succession stipulates a co-existence [*die Sukzession bedingt eine Koexistenz mit*]» (Id., *Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod*, cit., p. 146; *Reflections on War and Death*, cit., p. 31).

³⁹ Carl Schmitt, *Die Diktatur. Von den Anfängen des modernen Souveränitätsgedankens bis zum proletarischen Klassenkampf* [1921], Dunker & Humblot, Berlin 1964, p. 2; *Dictatorship. From the Origin of the Modern Concept of Sovereignty to Proletarian Class Struggle*, Polity Press, Cambridge (UK) 2014, p. 2.



Consciousness corresponds to the minimum of energy required by the homeostatic machine as *locus minoris resistentiae*; the same relationship appears now also from another angle: the “legal form of what cannot have a legal form” – consciousness itself – is prolonged in the death drive understood as “law beyond any law.”⁴⁰ This configures a constant energy regime, a continual flow, a “stationary tension”,⁴¹ in which pleasure is not pleasure (it is “profit of pleasure”), consciousness is not conscious (it is “inconscious”) and death is not death (it is “death drive”). In this process marked by the indicated stages, half of the drive is nothing other than “the return into the circuit”,⁴² in the sense that “the course of the drive is the only form of transgression that is permitted to the subject in relation to the pleasure principle”.⁴³ Between the death drive and the pleasure principle the transmission is homokinetic.

Starting from the First World War, from the characteristic sign that it imprinted on Freudian consciousness, the state of exception becomes permanent and the crisis loses the instable characteristic of “displeasure”. As Karl Korsch summarizes, “‘states of emergency’ and ‘states of exception’ have become the rule: wars and civil wars are the ‘normal’ form of existence in today’s rule of life”.⁴⁴ The Apparatus is reorganized on this new base: it welcomes the novelty of endless death, it prepares for the new “life of death”. The structure of the second topic (Id-Ego-Super-ego) is imprinted with the sense of this processuality. “The front”, writes the historian Eric J. Leed in his now classic study, “is a place that dissolved the clear distinction between life and death” and transforms the latter into a “continuum

⁴⁰ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre VII. L'éthique de la psychanalyse* [1959-1960], Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1986, p. 29; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis 1959-1960. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, Routledge, London 1992, p. 21.

⁴¹ Jacques Lacan, *Le Séminaire. Livre XI. Les quatre concepts fondamentaux de la psychanalyse* [1964], texte établi par Jacques-Alain Miller, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1990, pp. 202-203; *The Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book XI*, W.W. Norton & Co. 1998, p. 181.

⁴² *Ibidem*, p. 201; *ibidem*, p. 192.

⁴³ *Ibidem*, p. 205; *ibidem*, p. 197.

⁴⁴ Karl Korsch, *Karl Marx* [1938], Götz Langkau, ed., Europäische Verlagsanstalt, Frankfurt a.M. 1969², p. 66 (own translation).



of experience”.⁴⁵ The metaphor of no man’s land expresses adequately the estranging motive of this continuity and uniformity. The famous observation of Freud, too, according to which the unconscious “does not believe in its own death”,⁴⁶ must be remodeled on the Lacanian notes of the “panic-stricken breath of war” – the unconscious, simply, does not believe in the positivity and givenness of life.

As was anticipated at the start of this discussion, war has taken possession of theory, in this case of psychoanalytic theory, and has impressed upon it an unmistakable mark. It is not a question only of the macabre mark of anonymous and generalized death, as one deduces at first glance. The Great War, as we said before, introduced the economic or processual character of death. Now there is no doubt that the processuality has above all the characteristic of temporality, but without the asymmetrical articulation offered by life, without the splintered fractures imposed by the “lived experience”, time retires behind the continuity of the “nows” about which Heidegger reasons in *Being and Time*; it is a spatialized time, in which the complexity of life, its jagged architecture, is articulated *sine intermissione*. We can also understand in this way the “novelty” foreshadowed by Freud when it presents death as a “current” phenomenon. In grammatical terms, the current nature connotes the continuative and imperfect aspect of time. In contraposition to aoristic and punctual time, let’s say also to the time of consciousness, the iterative time of the unconscious takes shape and expands. This is not without its effects on the speculative level, and even more on the level of the “*spéculatif pur*”, upon which Lacan’s reflection invites us to pause. This liquefaction of time takes on, in fact, also the sense of the *liquidation* of time. In a speculative key, the current nature of death denounced by Freud in 1915 designates the “death of time”. As a consequence, perceptive modalities of an archaic nature surface, entirely unhinged from conscious and individual perception. In the

⁴⁵ Eric J. Leed, *No Man’s Land. Combat and Identity in World War I*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1981, p. 20.

⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Zeitgemäßes über Krieg und Tod*, cit., p. 157; *Reflections on War and Death*, cit., p. 62.



book that elevated the Great War to a system, Ernst Jünger offers a consideration that fits our context: “The renunciation of individuality”, he writes in *Arbeiter*, “is the key of access to spaces whose cognition had long been lost”.⁴⁷ Life remodelled on the “panic-stricken breath of war” places in the forefront the spatial - or unconscious - characteristic of perception. It will then be a matter of understanding what implies this alternation of the dominion of the sensorial and how the backdrop changes if the relation between consciousness and the world, mediated by time, is replaced by the relation between the unconscious and space, in which the general statue of the subject suffers an epochal eclipse. With the words of Goethe: *Der Schauplatz verwandelt sich durchaus*: “The scene transforms completely”.⁴⁸

The text that starts up from the both uncertain and fruitful results of *Jenseits des Lustprinzips* is from 1924 and is called *The Economic Problem of Masochism*.⁴⁹ What must be said first of all regarding this brief writing is that masochism is not the real issue of the treatise. The real issue, in fact, is found in the adjective that qualifies the object of the study. The economic issue, and its relation with psychoanalytic research, is presented once more. But the terms of the question now become more radical. Since the economy is the very articulation of the pleasure principle, masochism, understood as “the pleasure of displeasure”, as the affirmation of pleasure on the very terrain of displeasure, does not contradict but confirms at the highest level the economic processuality of pleasure. So that Freud can utilize the expression *Lust-Unlustprinzip*, the “pleasure-displeasure principle”,⁵⁰ to

⁴⁷ Ernst Jünger, *Der Arbeiter. Herrschaft und Gestalt* [1932], in *Sämtliche Werke*, cit., vol. VIII, section II, p. 239.

⁴⁸ Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Faust II* [1832], S. Lowe 1839, pp. 129.

⁴⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Das ökonomische Problem des Masochismus*, in «Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse», X (1924), pp. 121-133; *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, in *Essential Papers on Masochism*, ed. by A. Margaret-H. Fitzpatrick, New York University Press, New York-London 1995.

⁵⁰ The expression occurs already in another and preceding text and in an even more incisive way, given that the “pleasure principle” appears there as a formula that contains within it two opposing principles: the primary processes, Freud writes, that is, the “unconscious psychic processes”, answer to a “supreme tendency”, that “can be defined as the pleasure-displeasure principle (or, more briefly, as the pleasure principle) [*als das*



characterize also under a rhetorical, and even graphic, aspect the absolute continuity between the two domains, the impalpable passing of one into the other. In return, the pleasure principle is no longer only the “watchman over our mental life”, but the “watchman over our life [as such]”,⁵¹ therefore its sphere of action no longer has limits or if it does, as in the exemplary case of masochism, they represent as many incentives to an inexorable processuality.

If we consider the structural contiguity between the concepts of *Lustprinzip* and *Todestrieb*, it is licit to suppose that the extension of the former corresponds to an analogous development of the latter. This dual growth, which we can also imagine as a concentric expansion, regards death however, not life. The growth of death is in question, its development, of which the Great War is the external, historical-political, “phenomenical” equivalent; in paradoxical terms it involves the “life of death”. The notion of *Todestrieb*, with the accent placed symptomatically on the dynamic of death, that is, on its nature as a drive, means, in particular, that life becomes processuality by renouncing its own prerogatives – primarily finiteness and discontinuity. The process of life (life *as* process) implies its own dissolution in the iterative dynamic of death. In other words, it is thanks to the work of death that life becomes a process. Now the “liquidation” of life, which is paired with that of death, is precisely the source from which the pleasure principle derives its profit [*Lustgewinn*]. In this sense, *Lustgewinn* and *Todestrieb* are perfectly integral concepts, that is, integral with the economy of pleasure, which is founded on the crisis of life and develops thanks to the flow of dynamic death.

As was said, the Great War translates into dramatic, historical-political terms, the unconscious primacy of space. In another great book of war, *The Decline of the West* by Oswald Spengler, whose first part dates to 1918, the same concept is reiterated in icastic terms. Life gives way to death like time does to space: like the soul to the

Lust-Unlust-Prinzip (oder kürzer als das Lustprinzip)]”, Formulierungen über die zwei Prinzipien des psychischen Geschehens, cit., p. 2; Formulations on the Two Principles of Psychic Functioning, cit., p. 301.

⁵¹ Sigmund Freud, *Das ökonomische Problem des Masochismus, cit., p. 121; The Economic Problem of Masochism, cit., p. 276.*



spirit, like the becoming to the become, like *Kultur* to *Zivilisation*. What derives is that *Zivilisation*, the status of which coincides with the “disanimating” dominion of world technology (the same power that made the “war of materials” possible), does not have a real “duration” and even if Spengler, putting on the by-now worn out clothes of the prophet, fixes its hypothetical end in the year 2200, in reality its confines remain indefinite, “interminable”, so much so that it can transform “a moribund humanity [...], in its intimate structure [*in seiner ganze Substanz*]”.⁵² Thus, more than attesting the decadence of a *Kultur*, the phase of *Zivilisation* reveals its “unconscious”, that is to say, the spatial dimension. And in effect, both for Spengler and for Freud in their wartime writings the contemporaneity is characterized by the growing weight of the spatial factor. The reason is of Nietzschean origin and refers to the famous image of the “growing desert”, situated in the last part of *Zarathustra*.⁵³ Heidegger, it is known, discussed the Nietzschean passage in a *Vorlesung* of the 1951-1952 winter semester.⁵⁴ The discussion is an integral part of his peculiar way of facing the topic of nihilism, a topic for which Freud furnished an often neglected analytical basis. We owe to him the “localization”, within the psychic apparatus, of the space of nihilism: it coincides with the vast psychic region called the unconscious or more precisely the Id.

Before this notable theoretical effort, to whose real political and cultural bearing it will be necessary to come back and reflect, the position of Antonio Damasio, a key exponent of the neurosciences, reveals a characteristic censure. It finds refuge in an apparently mar-

⁵² Oswald Spengler, *Der Untergang des Abendlandes. Umriss einer Morphologie der Weltgeschichte* [1918-1923], C.H. Beck, Munich 1990, p. 44; *The Decline of the West. Form and Actuality*, Alfred A. Knopf, New York 1926, p. 32.

⁵³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra. Ein Buch für Alle und Keinen* [1883-1885], in *Kritische Studienausgabe*, Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari, eds., de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1999, vol. IV, p. 380: “Die Wüste wächst: weh Dem, der Wüsten birgt!”; *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Courier Corporation, Chelmsworth (MA) 1999, p. 219: “The deserts grow: woe him who doth them hide!”.

⁵⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Was heisst denken?*, in *Gesamtausgabe*, Klostermann, cit., vol. VIII (Paola-Ludovika Coriando, ed.), section I, pp. 51 ss.; *What is Called Thinking?* Harper & Row, New York 1968, p. 51ff.



ginal passage of his important work on Descartes and the genesis of the emotions.⁵⁵ In reality, every passage of this and of other books by Damasio and in general of every moderate exponent of those philosophies that are dominant today⁵⁶ that go by the label of the neurosciences, “appear” marginal. This manifest understatement serves, in fact, to hide or at least nuke a deadly hyperbole, one that is perhaps unsustainable even in the eyes of their supporters:⁵⁷ the conviction, never openly spoken but constantly suggested, that each theory must sooner or later be accredited on a neural basis. In Freud’s case, Damasio reveals a rare bluntness. Probably because he feels that his interlocutor is not only a fanciful thinker, but a scientist, and what’s more a neurologist, that is, an individual who has substantially undertaken the same studies as he. The topic is the central one of the book: the “control of animal inclination” through thought,⁵⁸ an activity that presupposes, but does not demonstrate, the scission between the body and the mind. Descartes denounces his “error” when he entrusts this fundamental task to “a nonphysical agent”,⁵⁹ This is an excrescence, Damasio affably explains, or rather a *petitio principii*, since the “biological operation structured within the human organism” is not at all “less complex, admirable or sublime” than that which we could imagine in an incorporeal being.⁶⁰ In short, we cannot exit the body; the mind makes up part of it. This is why the hypothesis of the Super-ego, ventured by Freud, is a mistaken way of resolving the Cartesian impasse: it, in fact, is not demonstrated “in neural terms”.⁶¹ Of course, this does not mean “reducing social phe-

⁵⁵ Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error. Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Avon Books, New York 1994.

⁵⁶ The exercise moderated by a dominant position does not translate into a contradiction in terms; it furnishes, rather, the adequate expression of the effective bearing of the phenomenon in act: the dominion of the neurosciences, in fact, has reached the point of producing itself its own antibodies: the critique of the neurosciences is today fed by neurologists endowed with good philosophical training.

⁵⁷ With a few “healthy” exceptions, for example Daniel Clement Dennett.

⁵⁸ Antonio R. Damasio, *Descartes’ Error*, cit., p. 124.

⁵⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁰ *Ibidem*.

⁶¹ *Ibidem*.



nomena to biological phenomena”, it means rather to “discuss the powerful connection between them”.⁶² For that matter, the biological overdetermination regards, if anything, individuals, not communities. “Culture and civilization could not have arisen from single individuals and thus cannot be reduced to biological mechanisms”.⁶³ In this case, neurobiology must be flanked by the “methodologies of the social sciences”.⁶⁴ All this is very reasonable, perhaps too much so. Damasio does not touch on, in any point of his reasoning, the speculative culmination of Freud’s work, that is, that concept of the death drive that surfaces in sinister fashion from the pages of the text that we have here placed in the forefront, *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*. And the reason is simple: this concept is born from the indisputable primacy of a biological factor – Freud calls it the pleasure principle – but, at the same time, in a single stroke, transcends it. This transcending does not however configure in any case a jump into the incorporeal, but is presented rather as a dramatic descent towards the “lowest level” of corporeity, the “lowest pure and simple”, to take up Lacan: rather, “*le spéculatif pur*”. The complexity of the concept leaps out: the “*spéculatif pur*” does not cross the borders of the body, but nestles in its most hidden-away folds. Similarly, the ancient Greeks conceived transcendence as the passage from ὕλη to αἴσθησις: from matter to sensibility, from the atom to aesthetics. Such transcendence “ignores” the moment of the incorporeal. Well, where can we find the neural foundations of such a phenomenon? – Are they located in the kingdom of ὕλη or of αἴσθησις? Here a logical problem surfaces, and specifically a problem of philosophical logic. Αἴσθησις is the logical *prius* with respect to ὕλη, just as the “act” is the logical *prius* with respect to “potency”. The *beyond* Freud aims at is not the place of the spirit, that goes without saying, but to be precise it is not even the place of the material, hylozoic body; it is a question instead of the profound body, that participates “spatially” in unjoinable opposites; it withdraws itself from the “mental” or “temporal” evalu-

⁶² *Ibidem.*

⁶³ *Ibidem.*

⁶⁴ *Ibidem.*



ation of events, but is also dangerously familiar with the relations that consciousness weaves ceaselessly in the waking state. We are in the dominion of the Id. Its shadows widen “beyond” the biological bases offered by the pleasure principle, but without neutralizing them and if anything, empowering them. And here is the point: another formulation of the “materialistic” hypothesis is in question. It, we suppose, is not at all the contrary or the opposite of a philosophical attitude that can be traced back to the action of a “non-physical agent”. From the viewpoint of the Id – supposing that the Id can have one – even the refusal of Cartesian dualism conserves a dualistic logic. To see a synthesis instead of an artificial scission is, in fact, the same thing. It is the same thing articulated in time. But in the case of the Id, the words of the Wagnerian Gurnemanz hold true: *zum Raum wird hier die Ziet*.

Even a cursory reader of Lacan knows that Freud never intended to speak of *instincts*. Freud spoke of *drive*, not of instinct. The expression *Todestrieb*, for example, does not mean death instinct, but death drive. The difference is not negligible: from a slight translational twist there can arise, and in fact there arises, a grave speculative distortion. The neuroscientific reading of *Civilization and Its Discontents* slides in this direction:

The creation of a superego which would accommodate instincts to social dictates was Freud’s formulation, in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which was stripped of Cartesian dualism but was nowhere explicit in neural terms.⁶⁵

“The drive”, Lacan writes, “as it is constructed by Freud on the basis of the experience of the unconscious”, “prohibits psychologizing thought from resorting to ‘instinct,’ with which it masks its ignorance by assuming the existence of morals in nature”.⁶⁶ What does this mean? Every theory of instinct implies a moralization of nature. Nor is it of use, on the other hand, to distinguish between a

⁶⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶⁶ Jacques Lacan, *Du “Trieb” de Freud et du désir du psychanalyste*, cit., p. 331; *On Freud’s Trieb and the Psychoanalyst’s Desire*, in *Ecrits*, cit., p. 722.



good and bad instinct, because in both cases, clearly, we are facing moral categories. It is useless to contrapose Rousseau and Hobbes. In this regard, Freud's position is the same as that expressed by Spinoza.⁶⁷ Instinct does not exist; there exists pulsion, the *conatus*, that is, a certain amount of energy, the color of which, Lacan comments, “*est couleur-de-vidé*”.⁶⁸ It is surely significant that in the only text of Freud's cited by Damasio, *Civilization and Its Discontents*,⁶⁹ there never occurs the word *Instinkt*. This elementary verification should put us back on the right path. What accommodation⁷⁰ can be imputed to the Freudian Super-ego? It, in fact, is not a moral need, any more than nature is. As Lacan reveals again, “it would be no more than a banal play of words” if the “term superego, *Über-ich*, [...] were merely an alternative way of designating that what has been called the moral conscience or something analogous”.⁷¹ What Freud, therefore, calls Super-ego, with the accent placed on the peculiarity of this expression (Ernest Jones was the first to recall, not only phonetically, the Nietzschean *Über-Mensch*), in no way regards a certain censoring treatment of instinct. Once again, the text that projects an oblique light onto the scenes opened by the work of 1920 is *The Economic Problem of Masochism*.

⁶⁷ In a letter of June 26, 1931, to the assimilationist Jew Lothar Bickel, the student of Constantin Brunner, Freud affirms: “I confess without hesitation my dependence on the teachings of Spinoza” (cfr. Siegfried Hessing, *Freud's Relation with Spinoza*, Heley, Boston 1977, p. 224).

⁶⁸ Jacques Lacan, *Du “Trieb” de Freud et du désir du psychanalyste*, cit., p. 331.

⁶⁹ Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur*, Internationaler psychoanalytischer Verlag, Vienna 1930; *Civilization and Its Discontents*, W. W. Norton & Company, New York 2005.

⁷⁰ Damasio's terminological choice is a strange one: *Accommodation* is a technical term from Reformed theology (in German *Kondeszendenz Gottes*), which means the act through which God in a certain way “bends down” over men to celebrate the unity of the divine and the earthly. *Kondeszendenz* was originally a concept of Greek rhetoric (*syngkatabasis*) indicating the capacity of the orator to adapt to his public. A strange choice, we repeat, since, intentionally or not, it intensifies the “moralizing development”, as Lacan would say, of the whole context.

⁷¹ Jacques Lacan, *L'éthique de la psychanalyse*, cit., p. 88; *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis. The Seminar of Jacques Lacan, Book VII*, W.W. Norton & Co., New York 1997, 66.



It is in these pages that the Super-ego appears intimately connected to the region of the Id and as a result, given the findings of the second topic, to the death drive. The Super-ego, Freud says here, is “the representative” [*Vertreter*] of the Id.⁷² Let’s pause a moment on this term with the help of the great German dictionaries. From Grimm we learn that the verb *vertreten* originally blends with the sense of *zertreten*, which means “to step on”, “crush” (*exculcare, proculcare*); the *Vertreter* is however also the “defender”, the “proponent”.⁷³ The Super-ego represents and defends the cause of the Id, as if to say a cause vowed to “crushing” the prerogatives of consciousness. Extracting from this oppression the sense of the moral need is, according to Nietzsche, the historical-political operation of Christianity, inasmuch as it is a product of the *Ressentiment-Gefühl*. It should be recalled that Freud shares, in substance, this Nietzschean diagnosis. From the Diefenbach-Wülcker we learn yet another piece of information useful to our inquiry: the term *Vertreter* skims the sense of *für-treter* and means *oeconomus*.⁷⁴ The “economy” promoted by the Id, we have already seen, is an economy of war and concerns the extension of pleasure in the state of generalized crisis. It thus involves deriving the “profit of pleasure” from its very negation. Beyond the pleasure principle there is no death drive; it, in fact, is “in axis” with the pleasure principle, it moves along the same line. The path from one to the other is carried out *sine intermissione*. The interminable trenches imposed by the war of position furrow the No man’s land in the same way the death drive cuts the boundless region of the Id.

Translation from the Italian: Peter Waymel

⁷² Sigmund Freud, *Das ökonomische Problem des Masochismus*, cit., p. 129.

⁷³ Jacob Grimm, Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*, Salomon Hirzel, Leipzig 1864-1961, s.v.

⁷⁴ Lorenz Diefenbach, Ernst Wülcker, *Hoch- und Nieder-Deutsches Wörterbuch der Mittleren und Neueren Zeit, zur Ergänzung der vorhandenen Wörterbücher insbesondere des der Brüder Grimm*, Benno Schwabe, Basel 1885, p. 570.