



Tendency, Repetition, and the Activity of the Mind in Traumatic Experiences

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Accepted: 24 February 2024
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Abstract

The study of traumatic experiences led Freud to investigate what he termed a compulsion to repeat. The present paper takes up the idea of a tendency to repeat something that reinforces psychic pain and asks which kind of agency is possible in the light of traumatic repetitions. First, the experiential roots of repetitive doings induced by trauma are investigated. Might a compulsion to repeat belong to the sphere of the kind of tendencies which Husserl terms “generally unconscious”? And if so, does this sphere bring us to the limit of phenomenology where we might need to cooperate with psychoanalysis to make sense of the manifestations of such an unconscious sphere? This is proposed in section two. In section three, Freud’s notion of the compulsion to repeat is discussed. At this point, the repetitive activity of the mind is investigated as the traumatized person’s ongoing struggle to survive with the trauma and as a struggle to understand what survival in this case even means. In section four, an attempt is made to describe the kind of agency involved in the repetitive activity of the mind. The paper concludes that weak agency is possible in traumatic repetition when understood as the person’s ongoing attempt to compose a future for what has been lost.

Keywords Compulsion to repeat · Trauma · Self-disruptive activity · Agency · Phenomenology · Psychoanalysis

“Sphere of tendency”—The Limit of Phenomenology?

How do we conceive of such a thing as tendency? In what follows, I will look at the tendency which Freud termed *the compulsion to repeat*. Might a compulsion to repeat belong to *the sphere of tendencies*, which Husserl termed generally

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unconscious? And if yes, does this sphere bring us to the limit of phenomenology where we might need to cooperate with psychoanalysis to make sense of the manifestations of such an unconscious sphere?

According to Dan Zahavi: “[t]he moment phenomenology moves beyond an investigation of object-manifestation and act-intentionality, it enters a realm that has traditionally been called the unconscious” (Zahavi, 1999: 207). In Husserl’s phenomenology, the unconscious is considered “nothing more than a pre-conscious field in which processes, tendencies, activities might or might not become conscious” (Zahavi, 1999: 207). In this way, “the problems of passivity and activity could well carry the title ‘a phenomenology of the unconscious’” (Zahavi, 1999: 208).

For Husserl, so Zahavi argues, the unconscious “is a dimension of opaque passivity which makes up the foundation of our self-aware experience. It is exactly *in* and *not behind* or *outside* or *independently* of our conscious experience that we find these impenetrable elements” (Zahavi, 1999: 210). The phenomenological field of the unconscious covers pre-conscious mental phenomena that might or might not become conscious. In Husserl’s own words, the pre-conscious passivity is described as follows:

The Ego always lives in the medium of its "history;" all its earlier lived experiences have sunk down, but they have aftereffects in tendencies, sudden ideas, transformations or assimilations of earlier lived experiences, and from such assimilations new formations are merged together, etc.—just as in the sphere of primal sensibility, whose formations also pertain to the medium of the Ego, to the Ego’s actual and potential possession.¹ (Husserl, 1989/1952: 338)

This kind of non-egoic tendencies and associations operate in a sphere of passivity (Husserl, 1989/1952: 340); they repeat themselves and affect the conscious subject (Husserl, 1989/1952: 339). Whereas Husserl distinguishes between various kinds of tendencies, the focus in the following is on the non-egoic (*ich-lose*) tendencies that occur in a sphere of passivity. Not only is the sedimented bodily memory a field of pre-conscious meaning, Husserl argues in *Studien zur Struktur des Bewusstseins* that a general unconscious *sphere of tendency* is coextensive with our intentional acts:

We have a sphere of tendency which is a sphere of passivity—a generally "unconscious" one, a sphere beyond the pure ego and the acts that spring from it -, and a sphere of ego-acts, in particular of ego-willings. As far as the tendencies extend and the corresponding interweaving of positive and negative

¹ „Immerfort lebt das Ich im Medium seiner „Geschichte“, alle seinen früheren Lebendigkeiten sind herabgesunken und wirken nach, in Tendenzen, in Einfällen, Umbildungen oder Verähnlichungen früherer Lebendigkeiten, aus solchen Verähnlichungen zusammenschmolzenen neuen Gebilden etc.—ganz wie in der Sphäre der Ursinnlichkeit, deren Gebilde auch zum Ichmedium, zu seiner aktuellen und potentiellen Habe gehören“ (Husserl, 1952: 338).

tendencies and the occurrences of the tendencies' self-termination and self-discharge, so far extends the sphere of possible acts of will.² (Husserl, 2020: 80; my translation)

How, we might ask, does this sphere of tendency affect us? How does it become part of the sphere of my conscious willing? According to Zahavi: “This influence can hardly be called conscious. Nor do we have any awareness of the very formation of concepts and habitualities. Thus, my intentional life is affected by an obscure underground. We are dealing with constitutive processes which remain inaccessible for direct appropriation. [...] It [the ‘dark limit of early childhood’] cannot be reappropriated from a first-person perspective” (Zahavi, 1999: 207f.). The sedimentation of lived experiences, the formation of habitualities, and experiences from our early childhood are beyond our conscious grasp, they cannot be comprehended by the conscious I. I cannot come to grasp, remember, or appropriate the way I learned to speak, ride a bike, walk, or talk. In the sphere of tendency, the I has no access; rather, my intentional life might be *affected* by it—but how?

These processes of obscure and blind passivity (Zahavi, 1999: 208) suggest “we are dealing with feeble processes of pre-affective passive syntheses which are only accessible to consciousness through an elaborate ‘archaeological effort,’ an effort, however, which has its obvious point of departure in that which is conscious” (Zahavi, 1999: 208; see also Mishara, 1990: 35f., 39). It seems the archaeological effort will probably be similar to the one Husserl undertakes in his meticulous *Studien zur Struktur des Bewusstseins*. But the question remains, how the unconscious sphere of tendency manifests itself in our actions and unreflective doings, and thus how the sphere of tendency affects us in our conscious lives. If these “impenetrable elements” are exactly in and neither behind, outside, nor independent from our conscious experience, we must ask how the sphere of tendency manifests itself within our conscious experience. That is, what is the phenomenological relevance and role of the sphere of tendency that concerns our sedimented lived experiences for our conscious lives?

According to Zahavi, “one can argue in favour of the existence of a pervasive self-awareness and still take self-comprehension to be an infinite task” (Zahavi, 1999: 211). Indeed, these lines give us a hint. Even if the sphere of tendency cannot be appropriated directly by the conscious mind, and if the passivity at stake is so basic that it cannot be reappropriated from a first-person perspective, self-comprehension can still be an infinite task. When we are confronted with the limits of our self-understanding, as when we deal with “subjective components, which remain ambiguous, obscure, and resist comprehension,” (Zahavi, 1999: 211) we still would not need, according to Zahavi, to assume a Freudian concept of the unconscious. *However, if the archaeology of the mind's sphere of tendency is tied to an infinite*

² „Wir haben eine Sphäre der Tendenz, die eine Sphäre der Passivität ist—eine im Allgemeinen ‘unbewusste’, eine außerhalb des reinen Ich und seiner ihm entquellenden Akte gelegene-, und eine Sphäre der Ichakte, speziell der Ichwollungen. Soweit die Tendenzen reichen und die entsprechenden Verflechtungen positiver und negativer Tendenzen und die Vorkommnisse der Selbstausslöschung, Selbstentladung der Tendenzen, soweit reicht die Sphäre möglicher Willensakte“ (Husserl, 2020: 80).

task of self-comprehension, then the manifestations of the unconscious concern us in a much more profound way than merely as impenetrable subconscious processes or forgotten events that might or might not be accessible to conscious reflection. That is, we need something more than immediate self-awareness and self-luminosity to understand the role of the sphere of tendency and its manifestations in our lives. As argued by Freud, the unconscious is *not reducible* to the pre-conscious (Freud, 1915), and thus the premise for accepting an incomplete self-comprehension is different from accepting the unconscious as a temporal precondition of what we are *not yet* attending to. The unconscious for Freud is not the same as what “goes on in our mental lives” (Zahavi, 1999: 211) without us paying attention to it. It is not a matter of not-yet seeing, not-yet understanding, or discovering what others might ascribe to us already (that we are in love with this person, that we deny this or that about ourselves (Zahavi, 1999: 212f.)). The disjunction, however, that either the unconscious is reducible to something pre-conscious, or it is stipulated as a reification of consciousness patterns (Zahavi, 1999: 213) seems to be less concerned with the kinds of manifestations of the unconscious that matter to our self-comprehension. As emphasized by Merleau-Ponty: the unconscious cannot be reduced to “what we decide not to assume” or to “a hesitation of imaginative freedom” (1970: 49). Such a reduction overlooks “the idea of a symbolism which is primordial, originary, the idea of a ‘non-conventional thought’ [...] enclosed in a ‘world for us,’ which is the source of dreams and more generally of the elaboration of our life” (Merleau-Ponty, 1970: 49)

What is meant by an elaboration of our life in this particular setting? How might the manifestations of an unconscious sphere of tendencies be a possible source of elaboration of our lives? Whereas I will not go further into Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the Freudian unconscious (see Phillips, 2017), nor further into detail with Freud concerning this matter, I will mainly take up Merleau-Ponty’s idea of the role of the unconscious as a possible source for an elaboration of our lives. This elaboration, as I see it, requires that we live with an impenetrable sphere of tendencies and passivity that concerns us in our infinite task of self-understanding. The indestructible sphere is not hidden or sealed off, but actively influences our conscious lives. I understand Merleau-Ponty’s idea of an elaboration of one’s life to mean that we can never directly translate any primordial sphere of symbolism or tendencies into language, this sphere is originary and irreducibly foreign to conventional thought. This sphere, however, is not absent in our lives or hidden underneath and behind our conscious life, rather it manifests itself as real questions in our lives. The kind of question I have in mind is not the manifestations of some pre-conscious matter, but the questions that arise from the presence of something incomprehensible, something intemporal, indestructible, and enigmatic (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 71) that we live with and embody, something that is present in our interpersonal relations, our language and actions which is impenetrable to conventional thought. As such the unconscious itself does not translate into a concrete question, but as I understand it, the manifestations of the unconscious concern us as a source for elaboration of our lives.

For Merleau-Ponty “the Freudian unconscious” was considered an “archaic or primordial consciousness, the repressed as a zone of experience that we have not integrated, the body as a sort of natural or innate complex” (1994: 67) and he

understood phenomenology as well as psychoanalysis to be aiming toward the same latency (1994: 71). That is, the sphere of tendency that we find described by Husserl might aim at the same latency within consciousness that Freud aimed at, at least if we follow Merleau-Ponty. Importantly, the notion of latency which “phenomenology implies or unveils as its limits” (1994: 71) as it “descends into its own substratum” (1994: 70) involves a tension between what can come to the fore, what can become manifest, what can become consciously understood and what on the other hand remains veiled. Just as the sphere of tendency entails a latency towards becoming active and conscious, it remains a sphere of passivity enigmatically incomprehensible to consciousness. The latency aimed at in both phenomenology and psychoanalysis will thus remain impenetrable for thought but the matter of our own intransparency to ourselves remains a matter of concern for psychoanalysis and philosophy alike (see also Phillips, 2017: 89f.).

Phenomenology and the Unconscious

Let me unfold this idea of latency and argue why it brings us closer to an understanding of the sphere of tendencies. Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of *embodied regions of silence with regards to traumatic experiences* provides us with an idea of how to conceive of the latency of the unconscious and the consonance between phenomenology and psychoanalysis (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 71).

Normally, the body schema is shaped by bodily habits and forms of bodily memory. A responsive dynamic between embodied memory and the perceived affordances of objects, people, and situations makes us capable of responding to the many perceived solicitations of the world. Without having to think first, we grab teacups and door handles with ease, just as we jump over fences and stones when they are in our way. Present as latency, Merleau-Ponty links the phenomenon of a phantom limb to organic repression in the following way. The habitual body remains responsive according to an embodied past, even if, due to injuries, a limb is lost:

[M]y usual world gives rise to habitual intentions in me, I can no longer actually unite with it if I have lost a limb. Manipulable objects, precisely insofar as they appear as manipulable, appeal to a hand that I no longer have. Regions of silence are thus marked out in the totality of my body. The patient knows his disability precisely insofar as he is ignorant of it, and he ignores it precisely insofar as he knows it. This is the paradox of all being in the world. (1994: 84)

Merleau-Ponty argues that we can come to *embody a silence*, when a responsive link is broken to a practical field, that is, to the world we inhabit. What constitutes a region of silence?

First of all, it seems that the habitual body schema and the actual experience of one’s own body can come apart (Merleau-Ponty, 1994: 84). Merleau-Ponty is not investigating the various kinds of momentarily experienced self-estrangement when aspects of being and having a body come apart (see for instance Plessner,

1970). Moreover, the roots of the bodily ruptures Merleau-Ponty has in mind are *temporal*, it seems. To explain how this is the case, Merleau-Ponty refers to psychoanalysis:

For psychoanalysis, repression consists in the following: the subject commits to a certain path (a love affair, career, or work of art) encounters along this path a barrier and, having the force neither to overcome the obstacle nor to abandon the enterprise, he remains trapped in the attempt and indefinitely employs his forces to renew it in his mind. The passage of time does not carry away impossible projects, nor does it seal off the traumatic experience. The subject still remains open to the same impossible future, if not in his explicit thoughts, then at least in his actual being. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 85)

The temporal roots of the traumatic experience, as referred to in the quote, in both cases allow us to compare the phantom limb with forms of repression studied by psychoanalysis. I will return to the experiential structure of traumatic experience in the next section, for now, I will mainly focus on the relation between embodied regions of silence as illustrative of what is meant by latency. In general, we find that a habitual body memory remains active also in non-traumatic cases, what is highlighted in the case of the phantom limb is the issue of desynchronisation which I will return to in greater detail in the next section.

To the extent that our embodied past remains part of who we are today but is somehow opaque to us as a sphere of tendencies, we embody what Merleau-Ponty calls an innate complex; the fact that we embody an operative body schema that is however shaped and formed by our actual body and whereas the latter might be injured, the former keeps responding habitually. There is, however, a further temporal issue at stake which explicitly concerns the desynchronicity of traumatic experience itself and which will be further discussed in the next section. When traumatic experiences have not been stored by memory they are not sealed off, that is, they keep being active in a certain sense. As a filter that colours our active perceptions (see also van der Kolk, 2014: 16–19), or better, as a *readiness to perceive in a particular way*, namely in the light of the repressed traumatic experience which can remain active. The “temporal omnipresence of the trauma” radically changes the lived subjectivity of the traumatized person (Micali, 2022: 216f.). As a mode of perception, the repressed perception keeps the wound, i.e., the trauma, open. However, at the same time, the past is kept and preserved *as* active, because the traumatic experience itself has not been placed in memory (Merleau-Ponty, 2010: 176). This is how Merleau-Ponty can say that personal time is arrested while impersonal time keeps flowing; we keep open to the same impossible future, as we remain stuck in repetition:

We remain the person who was once committed to this adolescent love, or the person who once lived within the parental universe. New perceptions replace previous ones, and even new emotions replace those that came before, but this renewal only has to do with the content of our experience and not with its structure. Impersonal time continues to flow, but personal time is arrested. Of course, this fixation is not to be confused with a memory, it even excludes

memory insofar as memory lays a precious experience out before us like a painting. On the contrary, this past that remains our true present does not move away from us; rather, in lieu of being displayed before our gaze, it always hides behind it. Traumatic experience does not subsist as a representation in the mode of objective consciousness and as a moment that has a date. Rather, its nature is to survive only as a style of being and only to a certain degree of generality. (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 85)

In this passage, Merleau-Ponty gives us a further clue as to how we might understand the term ‘regions of silence’. Whereas the lived body is normally an expressive space that “rises up toward” the worldly objects in various pre-reflective ways, a silent region is one in which a certain past “remains our true present” and a way of perceiving where the traumatic event survives as a style of being (see van der Kolk, 2014: 147–162.) In this region or style of being personal time is ‘arrested’ and incapable of flowing (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 86). The silent regions are fields of memories un-stored that remain active; they remain responsive only to the un-stored event, which then becomes our true present. As Merleau-Ponty describes it: “[T]he specific past, which is our body, can only be recovered and taken up by an individual life because this life has never transcended it, because it secretly feeds this past and uses a part of its strength there, because this past remains its present” (2012: 87). The parallel between the phantom limb and repression in general shows how in repressed experiences present experiences are lived through revived past experiences that cannot be forgotten but cannot be recalled either: “The memories called back before the amputee’s mind induce a phantom limb not in the manner in which one image calls forth another in associationism, but because *every memory reopens lost time and invites us to again take up the situation that it evokes*” (Merleau-Ponty, 2012: 88; my italics). How are we to imagine this invitation? How can a previous experience stay active as a filter through which we still perceive? It is not in the manner of blind association. Rather, I embody a latency that structures the totality of my embodied being. Traumatized memory is disorganized and the physical reaction to the invitation of recollection is overwhelming and involuntary (van der Kolk, 2014: 232; Herman, 2015; Brison, 2002: 69–77; Micali, 2021). Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of the phantom limb and his comparison of it with psychological denial and repression shows how a temporal disintegration keeps previous experiences alive and prevents them from being properly remembered. A disintegrated region of silence is an active habituated past that remains active in the present either as a form of perceptive filter or as a form of blocked time zone where the disintegration keeps taking place between one’s past and one’s present. What is different from regular narrative memory, which might have a similar invitational structure, is that in regular narrative memory, we know that our memories belong to the past; we might even remember when and how something happened. In the case of traumatic memories that belong to a silent region, however, we seem ignorant of this, as we keep re-experiencing the invitation from a past arrested, a past that remains present, active, disorganized, involuntary, and overwhelming.

Merleau-Ponty’s analysis shows that, as far as a sphere of tendency goes, we are affected by it in our daily lives. We are addressed by situations, other people, and

sometimes even historical sites that might activate our disintegrated experiences and silent regions. We perceive situations and other people through certain perceptive filters of which we are unaware. As just argued, traumatic experiences leave their mark on us; we embody them as silent regions that seem to entail a *readiness to perceive* the present through past experiences that cannot be placed in the past. At this point, we must distinguish between silent regions in general, that is regions of disintegrated experiences, we might say, and traumatic silent regions that more actively haunt us in our daily lives. I will return to the latter in the next section. To elaborate on the former, however, I will turn to Thomas Fuchs's idea of the dynamic interpersonal embodied sphere of the unconscious.

Thomas Fuchs describes how the memory of the body differs from representational memory in that the former doesn't take us back to the past in the sense of representing events to us that have taken place; rather, body memory affects us and is effective in the present (2018). "The body is this ensemble of organically developed predispositions and capacities to perceive, to act, but also to desire and to communicate. Its experiences, anchored in body memory, blanket the environment like an invisible network which relates to things and people" (Fuchs, 2012: 73). Fuchs translates this effectiveness into a horizontal understanding of the dynamic unconscious. We live and move in magnetic fields of attraction and repulsion, the meaning of which is sedimented through a whole life of intersubjective relatedness:

The unconscious pre-history of intersubjective relations is re-enacted through the intercorporeal memory. However, this unconscious is not a hidden chamber of the psyche anymore, but is interwoven in the lifestyle, in the bodily conduct of a person, as a sub-structure which remain hidden from her personally, but becomes visible to others because, in the final analysis, it is always implicitly directed to those others themselves. (Fuchs, 2012: 79)

For Fuchs too, the unconscious and the sphere of tendency are parts of our own alienness (2012: 77), our own embodied silent regions. Just as Husserl spoke of sedimented layers of prehistoric meaning, Fuchs spells out how this sphere of tendency also translates into an intersubjective fabric of the dynamic unconscious. This means that not only does my body rise to habitual intentions in me, as Merleau-Ponty writes, but these habitual intentions are embedded in an unconscious relational pre-history which is re-enacted as part of an intercorporeal memory.

To conclude the first two sections, we can say that whereas the unconscious marks a limit to phenomenological research and analysis, its manifestations do not. These manifestations concern us, not only as "illogical trains of thought, in forgetting, in the fantastic formations of phantasies and manifest dream content, in phobias and other neurotic symptoms" (Bernet, 2002: 329) but also and in particular as manifestations we embody. As we have seen, the phenomenological conceptions of the unconscious vary and some of them are compatible with psychoanalysis. An encounter between phenomenology and psychoanalysis concerning the unconscious sphere of tendency thus enables a theoretically more solid grip on the challenges of practical self-understanding, i.e., the infinite task of self-comprehension. Such an encounter not only allows us to identify these challenges and their experiential structure (see Ingerslev, 2020). More importantly for our present question, the encounter

provides us with phenomenological concepts that are applicable within a psychoanalytic framework. In this way, we can spell out *how we embody and perceive through silent regions* that structure the way we live in the present, and at the same time, we can make sense of the idea that *time can reopen and invite us to take up certain situations again and again*; that is, we can understand how we are *responsive* to the invitational gestures of our surroundings that bring to live past experiences that we embody but might not remember in a straight forward way. With these methodological tools at hand, we can move on to the question of the kind of agency involved in traumatic experiences.

Repetition

In what follows, I turn to Freud and his discovery of the compulsion to repeat. Having survived an emotional or physical trauma creates a temporal gap between a pre-traumatic and a post-traumatic reality. As Freud shows, the terror of the trauma repeats itself in dreams and in intrusive memories and occurs as an alertness and readiness to perceive terrors in the everyday lives of traumatized persons. That is, temporally, a traumatized person is caught in traumatic repetition that makes the future impossible. Whereas present research on trauma has criticised and moved beyond Freud for various reasons (Hermann, 2015; van der Kolk, 2014; Frewen & Lanius, 2015), it remains fruitful to go back to Freud to understand what motivated him to think along the lines of *a compulsion* to repeat. If such a thing as a compulsion to repeat is at stake, how do we describe traumatized *agency* and traumatized temporality? Within trauma-induced patterns of repetition, what does it mean experientially to live with and within repetition such that, temporally, one's future seems blocked and impossible? In this section, I look at the repetitive activity as part of the struggle to survive and as part of the struggle to understand what survival even means in this case. That is, the destructive aspect of repetition might as well be conceived of as *an ongoing struggle* to come to terms with *what it means to survive* a traumatic experience (see Brison, 2002: 110 ff.) The feelings of having lost one's former identity and of no longer being the person one was before the traumatic event suggest that survival is not merely a biological fact, but an existential struggle to find meaning in being who one has become. The compulsion to repeat in the case of trauma might indicate a possible and relevant way in which the sphere of tendency influences our conscious lives.

In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud wonders why we are not more shocked by the fact that traumatized persons are held captured as it were by their traumas as they return to haunt them:

A condition has long been known and described which occurs after severe mechanical concussions, railway disasters and other accidents involving a risk to life; it has been given the name of ‘traumatic neurosis’. (Freud, 1920: 222; 1955: 12³)

Now dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back into the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little. (Freud, 1920: 223; 1955: 13⁴)

The fact that we are haunted by our traumas long after they have appeared is something that should strike us much more than it apparently does.⁵ Dreaming takes us back to the traumatic event and we are awakened to be shocked and horrified *anew*. The awakening to new terrors is part of the structure of a trauma; the terrors are never new and always new as the temporality of the traumatic experience is that of an inescapable, endless present; the body reacts as if the traumatizing event is still taking place. As Brison writes, the *inescapable* traumatic terror of repetition constitutes a loss of control: “Whether or not such total loss of control is constitutive of trauma, a daunting, seemingly impossible task faced by the trauma survivor, is to regain a sense of control over her or his life” (Brison, 2002: 73). The temporality of traumatic experience glues the traumatized person to an eternal awakening to the same present, and in this way; emotional traumas turn the future into something impossible for the traumatized person. The traumatic event cannot be recalled as an experience one has had but is repeated and lived through over and over again (Freud, 1920: 223; 1955: 13). The traumatized person „is obliged to *repeat* the repressed material as a contemporary experience instead of, as the physician would prefer to see, *remembering* it as something belonging to the past” (Freud, 1955: 18,⁶ see also Freud, 1914).

The question is why the traumatized person is trapped in this pattern of repetition, why the experience of the natural flow of time is deranged in this way, but first and foremost, why this compulsion to repeat something occurs that entails no possible experience of pleasure?

³ "Nach schweren mechanischen Erschütterungen, Eisenbahnzusammenstößen und anderen, mit Lebensgefahr verbundenen Unfällen ist seit langem ein Zustand beschrieben worden, dem dann der Name „traumatische Neurose“ verblieben ist" (Freud, 1920: 222).

⁴ "Nun zeigt das Traumleben der traumatischen Neurose den Charakter, dass es den Kranken immer wieder in die Situation seines Unfalles zurückführt, aus der er mit neuem Schrecken erwacht. Darüber verwundert man sich viel zu wenig" (Freud, 1920: 223).

⁵ Since Freud wrote *Jenseits des Lustprinzips*, however, much has happened in the field of research on trauma. In the 1980s post-traumatic stress disorder, *PTSD*, was included in the DMS III. The trauma-induced repetitive patterns of behavior occur on different levels such as emotional, physiological, behavioural, and neuroendocrinological (van der Kolk, 1989) Various trauma-induced symptoms like hyperarousal, intrusion, constriction, loss of self, and dissociation (Hermann, 2015; Brison, 2002; Frewen & Lanius, 2015; Micali, 2022; van der Kolk, 1989) are now well-documented and well-researched. The present paper specifically addresses Freud’s discovery of the compulsion to repeat in order to investigate conceptually the form of agency and the temporality involved in the compulsion to repeat, induced by trauma.

⁶ „ist vielmehr genötigt, das Verdrängte als gegenwärtiges Erlebnis zu *wiederholen*, anstatt es, wie der Arzt es lieber sähe, als ein Stück der Vergangenheit zu *erinnern*“ (Freud, 1920: 228).

But how is the compulsion to repeat – the manifestation of the power of the repressed – related to the principle of pleasure? [...] But we come now to a new and remarkable fact, namely that the compulsion to repeat also recalls from the past experiences which include no possibility of pleasure, and which can never, even long ago, have brought satisfaction even to instinctual impulses which have since been repressed. (Freud, 1955: 20⁷)

To answer these questions, we must ask, *what*, in fact, is being repeated? The examples offered by Freud of behavior structured by the compulsion to repeat are different and many, some are pathological, some are situations from everyday life (Freud, 1920: 231–233; 1955: 20–22). In the case of the person who has experienced a violent accident (*der Unfallsneurotiker*), the terrors of the traumatic event repeat themselves in dreams and in daily situations where the dread related to the accident is relived. Waking up to new fears means that the tormented person lives in the repetition of these fears every day. Freud also provides a further non-pathological example of a toddler dealing with the emotional trauma of being separated from his mother. The child of 1½ years tosses his toys away while saying “o–o–o–o”. The “o–o–o–o” is taken to mean “*fort*,” German for “gone”. As he finds his toys back again, he happily shouts “*da*” (“here”). Freud wonders what is at stake in this play of “*fort-da*” (“gone-back”) and suggests that an emotional trauma is repeated in the game. As the mother leaves the room, leaves her child to be alone, he must come to terms and learn to deal with her absence until she is back again. It is unclear to Freud whether the child is learning to deal with the absence such that the game displays an empowering gesture (“*Bemächtigungstrieb*”) or whether the game satisfies an impulse of revenge against the mother (Freud, 1920: 226; 1955: 16). Independently of which interpretation is taken, the *activity of repetition* is what makes Freud wonder why the child repeats an unpleasant experience.⁸ Often the game is played even without the “*da*,” and what Freud witnesses is thus the re-enactment of disappearance, leaving, and absence. Freud uses the repeated play of *fort-da*, as an example of the compulsion to repeat an emotional trauma.

According to Cathy Caruth, the compulsion to repeat bears witness to the experience of one’s own annihilation which consciousness cannot fathom except by repeating the (self-)destructive event: “The examples of repetition compulsion that Freud

⁷ “In welcher Beziehung zum Lustprinzip steht aber der Wiederholungszwang, die Kraftäußerung des Verdrängten? [...] Die neue und merkwürdige Tatsache aber, die wir jetzt zu beschreiben haben, ist, dass der Wiederholungszwang auch solche Erlebnisse der Vergangenheit wiederbringt, die keine Lustmöglichkeit enthalten, die auch damals nicht Befriedigungen, selbst nicht von seither verdrängten Triebregungen, gewesen sein können” (Freud, 1920: 230).

⁸ According to van der Kolk, Freud argues mainly for the first option: “Freud thought that the aim of repetition was to gain mastery, but clinical experience has shown that this rarely happens; instead, repetition causes further suffering for the victims or for people in their surroundings” (van der Kolk, 1989: 390, see also van der Kolk, 2014, 37ff). I believe that emphasizing the hesitation in Freud’s text shows how the focus is on the *activity* at stake in relation to the repetitive doings. A reading along these lines might enable us to look at weaker forms of agency in relation to traumatic repetition. That is, the compulsion to repeat might neither drive the traumatized person straight into further re-traumatization, nor is it strictly tied to a *Bemächtigungstrieb* that empowers the traumatized person. Rather, a weaker form of agency might be found in the activity itself. This is what I hope to show in the following.

offers—the patient repeating painful events in analysis, the woman condemned repeatedly to marry men who die, the soldier (...) wounding his beloved again and again all seem to point to the necessity by which consciousness, once faced with the possibility of its death, can do nothing but repeat the destructive event” (Caruth, 2016: 65). If repetition is consciousness’ way of responding to the possibility of its own death, how are we to understand this response? Whereas in grief, we most often come to a form of acceptance of the loss of the other (Freud, 1917), the traumatic repetition ties us to—in the words of Merleau-Ponty—an impossible future (see also Ingerslev, 2023).

Granted that we want to avoid what is unpleasant, why does the experienced pain return to haunt us? Freud asks the following question:

But how is the predicate of being ‘instinctual’ [Auf welche Art hängt aber das Triebhafte] related to the compulsion to repeat? [...] *It seems, then, that an instinct [ein Trieb] is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things* which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is it is a kind of organic elasticity, or, to put it in another way, the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life. (Freud, 1955: 36⁹)

According to Freud, the drives are of a *conservative* nature; they aim to preserve a former state (Freud, 1920: 246–248; 1955: 36–38). The claim of the conservative nature of drives leads Freud to postulate the existence of an underlying *death drive*, by which consciousness seeks to return to a state of inorganic non-existence. That is, for Freud, the answer seems to be that a death drive is active in the compulsion to repeat which brings the traumatized persons further into their trauma or holds them captive. At this point, I will call on Jonathan Lear’s criticism that this assumption seems unsound. As Lear sees it, it is not the content of what is being repeated, but rather the activity of the mind itself we should focus on:

If one does not emphasize the repetition, there is no basis for conceptualizing the drive as aimed at the restoration of an earlier state of things. And if there is no basis for seeing the drives as inherently tending toward “the same thing again,” then there is no basis for conceiving the drives as essentially conservative. If, by contrast one sees the mind as inherently self-disruptive, there is no need to see those disruptions as moving in any direction at all” (Lear, 2000: 81)

Freud misunderstands the nature of the drive not only because he is searching for hidden purpose, but because he misunderstands what is being repeated. The “repetition” is not of content, but of activity—the activity of self-disruption. Such disruptiveness in no way ‘tends’ toward restoration—it ‘tends’ just

⁹ "Auf welche Art hängt aber das Triebhafte mit dem Zwang zur Wiederholung zusammen? (...) *Ein Trieb wäre also ein dem belebten Organischen innewohnenden Drang zur Wiederherstellung eines früheren Zustandes*, welchen dies Belebte unter dem Einflusse äußerer Störungskräfte aufgeben musste, eine Art von organischer Elastizität, oder wenn man will, die Äußerung der Trägheit im organischen Leben" (Freud, 1920: 246).

as much toward new mental creations. In fact, it tends in no direction at all". (Lear, 2000: 81; my italics)

The problem Lear addresses is found within Freud's argument that inherent to the compulsion to repeat is the death drive. "Freud moves from the idea that the compulsion to repeat is fundamental and not in the service of the pleasure principle to the idea that the fundamental nature of the drives is to restore an earlier state of things—and from there he moves on to the so-called death drive" (Lear, 2000: 81). But according to Lear, there is no 'tending towards' to be found in the repeated activity, nor does the content of what is being repeated display or tend toward any sameness. Lear's point is that "Freud should have used his insight not to offer a reverse and hidden teleology but, in this instance, to abandon the appeal to a teleological principle. The point of the mind's self-disruptions is, well (...) nothing at all" (2000: 83). With no inherent teleology, we have a tendency towards nothing in particular. If we accept this idea of a non-teleological tendency, we can focus on the activity of self-disruption without making any metaphysical claims about the mind or the unconscious. Self-disruptive activity is one that disrupts teleology and thus somehow goes against Freud's conservative reading of the drives. This idea enables an openness within the compulsion to repeat which I will explore in the following and it makes it possible to ask which kind of agency might be possible in the light of traumatic repetition.

As further emphasized by Dorothee Legrand, Merleau-Ponty's interpretation of the Freudian unconscious does "not have the structure of intentionality, with its subject at a distance from its object; it involves a pre-objective and pre-subjective latency which can manifest itself neither as a pre-reflexive subject nor as an intentional object" (Legrand, 2017: 105). To emphasize, what is repeated is *not the event*, as we will discuss in the next session with Lacan, *not a reproduction of the event* (Legrand, 2019: 219ff.) and *not the content of the event either*, as Lear argues. Rather, it is the activity of what Lear calls self-disruption. Self-disruptive activity is when the mind is involved in non-teleological activity that the agent herself might not understand—yet.

If we accept Lear's criticism that there is no fundamental force of repetition, only a repetitive activity of self-disruption, might we understand the traumatic experiences differently? A more productive question seems to be one that Cathy Caruth asks, namely whether a trauma "is (...) the encounter with death *or the ongoing experience of having survived it?*" (2016: 7). "At the core of these stories [of traumas], I would suggest, is thus a kind of double telling, the oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*" (Caruth, 2016: 7). Caruth's question would enable us to see in traumatic repetition the struggle for survival:

For consciousness then, the act of survival, as the experience of trauma, is the repeated confrontation with the necessity and impossibility of grasping the threat to one's life. It is because the mind cannot confront the possibility of its death directly that survival becomes for the human being, paradoxically, an endless testimony to the impossibility of living (2016: 64).

Thus, post-traumatic repetition participates in an ongoing destruction as it blocks the future for the traumatized person, but it might also entail a way of living with one's trauma that enables one to survive. Just as strongly as traumatic repetition imposes on us the impossible future, just as deep is the force of the implied necessity of survival. In Caruth's words, what Freud investigates as the compulsion to repeat is in fact the "urgent and unsettling question, *What does it mean to survive?*" (2016: 62).

The crisis of life and the crisis of death equally compel the mind to repeat the activity of *an impossible survival* and *rehearse a certain death*. The present reading of the compulsion to repeat highlights the following two aspects of traumatic repetition. First, rather than a death drive being at stake in traumatic repetition, I argue that we should follow Lear and accept that what is beyond the principle of pleasure in traumatic repetition is to be understood as non-teleological disruptive activity that does not tend toward restoration any more than it tends towards new mental creativity. What is repeated is not the event itself, but the disruptive activity itself. This reading allows me to focus on the activity at stake in the compulsion to repeat, and it further allows me to raise the question of how we might conceive of agency in relation to traumatic repetition. This question will be my focus in the next section. Secondly, although the disruptive activity resets a traumatic time, that is the time of an inescapable present and thus of an impossible future, the compulsion to repeat is not a mere capture of consciousness in this rupture, in these terrors, and in possible self-destruction. In the non-teleological disruptive activity, there is also an opening for consciousness to respond to the possibility of its own death. In this way, we might say that the struggle to survive is itself beyond the principle of pleasure. I will elaborate on this idea in the next section. To rehearse a certain death and face an impossible future at the same time seems to be a disruptive activity that enables, but does not have as its telos, a form of survival. There is no tendency as such towards survival, but within the ongoing disruptive activity of struggling, survival can be composed—as I will argue in the next section.

To Compose Survival

If the compulsion to repeat is not of content but of activity, how active or passive are we in relation to the activity of self-disruption? How is traumatic repetition tied to the possibility of surviving with one's trauma? What does it mean to live with and inhabit disintegrated silent regions and what does it mean to be *active* with respect to them? Which kind of agency is possible in the light of traumatic repetition? These questions are part of Caruth's question *what does survival mean?*

In what follows, I will project these questions onto a literary example in order to reflect on the active elements involved in surviving with trauma. The idea is to isolate, as literature can, aspects of a mode of existence in order to let these questions resonate. The reading will allow me to focus on an element of what I will refer to as *composition*, a term coined by Legrand (2019, 2020), in trauma. As we shall see, the literary example allows us to reflect on the invitational structure of repressed memory and the possibility for agency in emotional trauma. However, there are many limits to making use of such an example. By taking up a literary example rather than

a concrete example of non-fictive suffering, I do not intend to say that all elements of traumatic responses can be found in this example, nor do I mean to reduce or equivocally non-fictional traumas to the one I am about to describe. Whereas it might be objected that the following example in no thinkable way compares to the traumas of sexual abuse, physical and psychical violence, or other terrors, my aim by taking it up is to shed light on the elements of repetitive activity at stake in dealing with trauma, independently of the cause and life-long damaging inflictions on what is left of the traumatized person. The careful assumption that guides the following reading is therefore that we might focus on the element of *composition* as part of what it means to survive. Rather than seeing in the compulsion to repeat a death drive guided by a hidden teleology or an empowering gesture to come to terms with one's trauma, I will attempt with this reading to show that a weaker form of agency describes better the struggle to compose survival.

Marguerite Duras' novel "The Ravishing of Lol Stein" (*Le ravissement de Lol V. Stein*) tells of a woman, Lola Valérie Stein, called Lol, who ten years after an emotionally traumatic experience returns to her birth town (Duras, 1966). As a young woman, Lol V. Stein attends a ball with her friend Tatiana. As the ball ends, Lol's fiancé leaves, having danced all night with an older woman, Anne-Marie Stretter. Lol has been witnessing their dance and screams as her mother enters the ballroom in the early morning to get her home. After the event, Lol is traumatised and speaks little. After some time, she marries another man and leaves the city. Ten years after the fatal ball, Lol moves back into the family house with her husband and their children. Lol finds out that her friend, Tatiana, with whom she went to the ball ten years ago, still lives nearby. Tatiana and everyone else assume that Lol is still traumatized by the past event. After having found out that Lol is back, Tatiana invites Lol over for a dinner party where Lol meets a man, Jacques Hold, who turns out to be Tatiana's lover. Lol is drawn to this man, as is he to her. With this encounter, Lol's memory re-awakens.

Early in the book, Tatiana passes Lol's house while walking with her lover and Lol hears Tatiana wonder "Dead maybe" (Duras, 1966: 28). As if awakened by the scene of the lovers and Tatiana's sentence, Lol starts to go for daily walks. During these walks, she secretly watches couples meet up. As the story unfolds, we find Lol walking, following, and thus witnessing Tatiana and her lover as they go to a motel. Lol lays down in a field of rye in front of the motel and watches the silhouettes of the couple in the motel window. "For Lol, it is unthinkable that she not be present at the place where this gesture occurred. This gesture would not have occurred without her: she is with it flesh to flesh, form to form, her eyes riveted on its corps. She was born to witness it" (Duras, 1966: 39).

We are told that Lol's repeated walks make her recognise less and less, and how Lol with no explicit memory seems to move in a palace of oblivion (Duras, 1966: 33): She keeps forgetting this well-known place, as her own presence prevents her from recalling it. With her presence, Lol cancels out the flowing of time; any new entrance into what was once familiar to her is blocked. Lol re-enacts the traces of her repressed memories as she wanders the streets blindly as the third witnessing part of couples in love, born to witness this gesture that will not occur without her, as we read. With her whole being, Lol responds to a phantom surrounding for her

to re-enact her own ghostly presence. The walks keep erasing her memory as she nourishes the one present in which she lives and moves: the ball night. Most importantly, so we learn, what matters the most to Lol is the end of the ball. With her daily walks, she reconstructs the moment of ‘incredibly cruelty’ where she is separated from the couple at the ball night, she arrests this very moment, stretches out its seconds and movements, and as she does so, she reconstructs “the end of the world” (Duras, 1966: 37).

What Lol is doing is not done for any particular reason that is known to her. Sleeping in the rye in front of the motel where Tatiana and her lover meet is not as such done intentionally. Lol’s repetitions follow no teleological principle. Rather, her activity seems incomprehensible. Lying in the rye in front of the motel, however, she is not afraid; she is no longer escaping her trauma but surrendering to it. “They took me with them, I was suddenly without them,” she explains (Duras, 1966: 127). By inserting herself again and again in a trio of lovers, Lol is responding to the invitational gesture of her emotional trauma. This kind of repetition enables Lol to insert herself in the very traumatic event, uncannily insisting on it not coming to an end, which, however, in this case, opens a space of mourning, we might say. Lol is not forced to repeat these events; she is not moved by sheer compulsion. Rather, an element of *wanting to repeat* is present in her readiness to perceive her surroundings in the light of her trauma. As if streets, lovers, and fields of rye would call for Lol and she would want to respond. I will elaborate on how to understand the element of weak agency in this kind of haunted wanting below. We might say with Lear, that what is repeated is not the *content*, what is repeated is the *activity of self-disruption*, which at the same time keeps Lol alive by way of her surviving with the trauma. As van der Kolk reports, it can be part of living with trauma to feel “fully alive only when [...] revisiting their past” (van der Kolk, 2014: 21). The Trauma nourishes the sense of aliveness in a present that can itself not be fully lived. Life is continuously organized around the trauma, “as if the trauma were still going on—unchanged and immutable—as every new encounter or event is contaminated by the past” (van der Kolk, 2014: 62).

A crucial event in the novel occurs when Lol goes back to the beach where the ball took place together with Tatiana’s lover. Here we witness yet another re-enacted version of a traumatic triangle. It seems that in the midst of the repeated traumatic experience, *a possibility of creation* arises.

I refuse to admit the end which is probably going to come and separate us, how easy it will be, how distressingly simple, for the moment I refuse to accept it, to accept this end, I accept the other, the end which has still to be invented, the end I do not yet know, that no one has invented: the endless end, the endless beginning of Lol Stein. (Duras, 1966: 174f.)

Although these words are spoken by the narrator, Jacques Hold, Tatiana’s lover, they seem to be a projection of Lol’s emotional trauma. Or we are allowed to touch the otherwise ghostly presence of Lol as we assume the gaze of Jacques Hold (see also Lacan, 1987). If the night doesn’t end, there will be an endless beginning. Here, the activity of self-disruption reflected intersubjectively in Lol’s relation to Jacques Hold is at the same time a creation of a new pulsation of

time that allows for a new endless ending such that the question of what survival means might be answered. If we see with Lol and her lover, how the night cannot come to an end since then it can allow for no beginning, *we might understand the repetitive behavior of Lol as revealing a form of agency. She wants to begin endlessly in order to survive.* Lol is *composing* a perspective on her trauma, which is a way of coming to remember what has happened (Legrand, 2019, 2020). In this way, Lol's traumatic memory *does* seem to allow for a kind of activity and her agency is not reducible to that of sole compulsion. Might we say, by inventing a scene, by imagining, by taking the train back to where it hurts, Lol is creating a space where she can mourn and therefore love again? Lol is creating a perspective. Lol is inventing. Lol is imagining her memory. We might say she experiences the ball night for the first time, and she thereby survives *with* her trauma. She is reclaiming her experience as Caruth would say which means that she is acknowledging the traumatic experience for what it is, for being part of who she is becoming. Just as described by van der Kolk (2014: 10ff.), not wanting to let go of the traumatic nightmares is a way to compose a future for what has been lost. It is a way to come to learn to mourn the loss of oneself and one's traumatic past. When I, with Lol in mind, interpret *part* of the compulsion to repeat to consist in a wanting to repeat, I do not understand this kind of wanting to imply a self-destructive need for repetition that holds the traumatized person captive of the past. Moreover, I mean to point to the traumatized person's *struggle to survive*. What Legrand, as I understand her, terms *composition* might help us understand in what sense Lol's struggle is a form of activity that is not merely a compulsion. Legrand defines composition as follows:

La composition est donc non seulement une construction, mais une construction organisée, fonctionnelle, voire harmonieuse. Et pourtant, cette construction n'est jamais un *tout* uniforme: les parties qui *composent* ne fusionnent pas les unes dans les autres mais sont et restent *différent*. La composition et composite: irremédiable marquée par l'hétérogénéité de ses composant, c'est un 'truc'. (Legrand, 2019: 21)

Legrand evokes this definition of composition in order to show how two opposite concepts share an intricate dynamic; rather than simply mutually excluding each other, the two opposites compose together a space between them where both elements create a field of lived tension. In our case, a crisis of death and a crisis of life do not simply exclude one another but belong to the ongoing struggle to answer the question of what it means to survive. The composition of two mutually excluding terms should not be confused:

It is crucial not to confuse life and death and it is crucial not to confuse what is not lived through but *could* be lived through with what is unlivable. We must not downplay the fact that death will always remain unlivable, be it in infancy or in adulthood, be it when it is endured with parents who are not good enough or who are too good to be true, or with a good enough clinician. (Legrand, 2020: 109)

Traumatized memory is not simply transformed into normal memory once a narrative is ‘composed’ (as Brison (2002) importantly argues). Rather, the composition remains a struggle, a holding together, *an elaboration of one’s life*, that is, through something that haunts us: “La composition est une ‘hantise’, une ‘rupture’, une ‘scansion’, c’est une ‘blessure’, c’est une ‘inquiétude’, une ‘obsession’, une ‘disparité’” (Legrand, 2019: 23f.). The therapeutic relevance of the notion of composition therefore consists in understanding Lol’s attempt to compose her memory as a way in which she continues to construct her survival. I believe that composition understood in this way is to be characterized as involving a weaker form of agency (Ingerslev, 2020).

The example of Lol V. Stein shows that we might find in traumatic experiences *an openness to the process of mourning*. Maybe Lol is finding a way to bid her past adieu by experiencing for the first time the psychic pain she was exposed to in her early youth. The process of creating a perspective is a way of remembering what happened. *Lol’s wanting to repeat* gives her the possibility of facing the future in a new way such that it is no longer impossible. In this way, we might see in Lol’s repetition not the repetition of the event of the painful ball night, *but a search for a future for what has been lost*. The search does not involve a teleology or an explicit intention; rather, it consists in a pulsation of what we might call the self-disruptive activity that we might think of as the workings of the unconscious. Lol’s ghostly recreations of trios of lovers happen despite herself and what is repeated is not the content of the event but, despite the destructive appearance of what Lol is doing, she is seeking, despite herself, to tie and untie *a knot* that will allow her to survive. As Lacan writes:

And to get at what Lol is seeking from this moment on [of the ball night;LRI], must we not have her say ‘*Je me deux,*’ to conjugate, with Apollinaire, ‘*douloir?*’ But, precisely, she cannot say that she suffers. Thinking along the lines of some cliché, we might say that she is repeating the event. But we should look more closely than this. This is roughly what we discern in this scene, to which Lol will return many times, where she watches a pair of lovers in whom she has found, as if by chance, a friend who was close to her before the drama, and who helped her even as it unfolded: Tatiana. This is not the event, but a knot retying itself there. And it is what this knot ties up that actually ravishes—but then again, whom? (Lacan, 1987: 223)

There are two important steps here. First, Lacan conjugates the verb *douloir*, meaning to suffer or to be in sorrow, into “I two myself”. As the translator Peter Connor notices, this sentence is quite untranslatable.¹⁰ Further, what Lol “is seeking” from the moment of the ball night is the painful splitting of herself. She seeks to be part of a trio such that she shall not disappear or be destroyed. What is to be noted here is that Lacan finds Lol not to be repeating the event itself, this would be

¹⁰ “*Je me deux* is the first person reflexive form of the now archaic French infinitive, meaning to feel sorrow. It means, therefore, “I feel sorrow,” but also read in another way, “I two myself”. No English verb captures the ambiguity of the French[.]” As the translator, Peter Connor writes (Lacan, 1987: 228).

a cliché, rather, what is retying itself is a knot of her ravishment where she is seen as part of a trio. And in saying that she is seeking or wanting to be part of the tying of this knot that has become her psychic grief, we find her wanting as well to repeat, despite herself, not the event but the tying of a knot *in order to survive*. By saying that her search for survival differs from mere compulsion, we grant her a space to mourn and to find, maybe, a voice to articulate her suffering. To repeat despite oneself (as when Lol follows couples of lovers like a ghost of her own oblivion) thus seems to also and at the same time to involve a wanting to repeat (as when Lol lies in the rye wanting to be the object of Jacques Hold's gaze (see Lacan, 1987: 225).

According to Julia Kristeva, however, the story of Lol attests to the hopelessness involved in psychic grief. The speech of the characters in the novel bears witness to a breakdown of meaning that cannot heal (Kristeva, 1989: 226). The bare and disrupted speech is one of despair, destruction, and suffering. Kristeva's urgent suggestion is for any reader to refrain from translating or transforming the pain depicted by Duras into something comprehensible, hopeful, or liveable (1989: 227f.). Lacan as well insists on the incomprehensibility of Lol's ravishment: "one suspects from [the last sentence of the novel, which brings Lol back to the rye field] a caution against the pathos of understanding. Lol is not to be understood, she is not to be saved from ravishment" (Lacan, 1987: 226).

In the present reading, however, I might have done exactly that: trying to save Lol from ravishment and madness. I have seen in Lol's behavior not only compulsion and destructive pain, but in Lol's *wanting-to-repeat*, I suggested that we see a practice of creation and thus of mourning. I suggested this as a response to the question of how we might conceive of agency in traumatic repetition. Kristeva's reading of Duras underlines two crucial clinical aspects of reflecting on agency in trauma. First of all, can we make any attempt at understanding the practical incomprehensibility of traumatic repetitive behavior and suffering, can we translate the tormented speech of trauma? Secondly, do we harm the irreducibility of the suffering of the traumatised person when we attempt to understand this pain?

Whereas the story of Lol depicts an incomprehensibility of a ghostly, unreal, disrupted speech, it does *not* break completely with the communicative order or with the intersubjective bond of listening. We do as readers listen to Lol, we do believe her that if the night ends, she will be destroyed. This underlying commitment to listening and believing, I would argue, is larger and more powerful than the practical incomprehensibility of her actions and doings. Listening to someone with an outlook similar to Lol's already entails the attempt to move with the trauma in a magnetic field, we might say. As argued with Merleau-Ponty, we shall never get rid of the silent regions of the magnetic fields, the spheres of tendencies themselves, that is, the affective pull of our past traumatic experiences, but while committing intersubjectively with a dreamlike engagement to creating a new perspective (Lear, 2006, 2017), we might survive the most destructive aspects of our suffering. Therefore, the present attempt is neither to reduce the suffering by translating it into propositional language nor to replace the trauma with a wish-like narrative of naïve hope. Listening to what is yet unheard of and to what even violates our understanding, in Mariá del Rosario Acosta López (2021) sense, is to insist on a "grammar of listening" that does not rush to turn the traumatic experience into something comprehensible but

commits us to the communicative therapeutic situation being stronger than propositional content. What is yet unheard of also implies a temporality that allows the disrupted speech to articulate sense *yet to come*. Such is the articulation of a therapeutic hope; sense is yet to come and it is intersubjectively practiced by listening.

One of the great difficulties in listening to trauma survivors is that in most occasions what we listen to is not strictly speaking a ‘memory’ but rather the mark left behind by its ‘unforgettable’ absence. This is because the original event that has triggered the traumatic reaction is trapped in a very specific form of deferral: the event has not yet been processed by the psyche as past, that is, as something that has happened. (Lopez, 2021: 146)

The traumatized voice that claims our understanding, at the same time defies it (2021: 146), Lopéz argues. Therefore, by contrast to Kristeva, I do believe that we can listen to Lol as someone who is living with an emotional trauma without rushing to transform or translate her pain, as we attempt to listen to her disrupted speech. Whereas Kristeva is right in insisting on the melancholic psychic pain of Duras’ characters, I believe that Lol’s final gesture of lying down *again* in the rye does involve an active stance in relation to her trauma that exactly shows how her freedom is confined: Lol is *not mastering* her trauma; she is seeking a way to survive with it.

Concluding Remarks

If we accept the relevance of something like a sphere of tendencies that manifests itself in certain situations and in our relation to other people, we might agree that the unconscious understood as a magnetic field of silent regions calls for phenomenological and psychoanalytical studies of the inherent latency characteristic of certain weaker forms of agency like the one of traumatic repetition. This is what I have been arguing for in this paper. In order to answer the question of what kind of agency is at stake in repetitive behavior resulting from trauma, I proposed the following answer: Weak agency is the kind of activity at stake where the agent is doing is in some way incomprehensible to herself but at the same time of vital importance for her as a way to acknowledge that she has survived a traumatic experience. In order to answer what survival even means, the agent composes a future for what has been lost. The collaboration between phenomenology and psychoanalysis made it possible to analyse temporally and interpersonally the forms of practical incomprehensibilities related to trauma that require elaboration, namely tendency, repetition, and the self-disruptive activity of the mind. One way to investigate the manifestations of the unconscious is to look at the structure of traumatic experiences and to ask whether the compulsion to repeat when understood as a disruptive activity entails a manner for the traumatized person to compose for him or herself a space to mourn what has been lost.

Funding Open access funding provided by Copenhagen University. The author acknowledges the support from the Fritz Thyssen Foundation.

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