The Rhetoric of Trauma

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The temptations of therapy are many, perhaps particularly when it comes to the intersection of therapy and literature. According to Susan Sontag in *Against Interpretation* (1966), Aristotle postulates the implicitly therapeutic notion of catharsis in response to his deep misgivings about what literature might prove about the context from which it emerges or the content to which it responds. Yet Aristotle's early advocation of the cathartic properties of the aesthetic text, according to Sontag, yielded dangerous and largely irretrievable ground to all who would become, as the centuries passed, the interpreters of literature. For as soon as tragedy proves capable of catharsis, or any other literary text is able to help us cope with a reality greater than what can be experienced through the text, the idea of literature is made dependent on a work of interpretation that must necessarily defeat (or, if we soften Sontag's argument just a bit, at least diminish) the immediate sensory quality of the aesthetic experience itself. There is nothing surprising in this idea. As Stanley Cavell would say, it is perhaps a fundamental characteristic of the field of aesthetics that it "requires or tolerates" an act of criticism.[1] According to the strangely reciprocal yet often antagonistic relationship between the work of art and the act of criticism by which it is elaborated, the critic's independence from the immediate sensory experience imparted by the aesthetic text allows her to see the text more accurately for what it is and thereby to judge how well it fulfills the intentional parameters and implicit goals the artist set for herself in attempting to produce an authentic work of art.

The standard of success against which artwork is measured can be quite flexible, but it is always associated with the critic's capacity to discern an aspect of fraudulence in the original. In his essay "Music Discomposed" (1967), Cavell understands the modernist anxiety about fraudulence as a question not at all peculiar to our contemporary aesthetic moment but rather endemic to the idea of art itself. Cavell's concern has less to do with any individual artist's historical intention to deceive her audience than with the possibility that an audience or critic might be taken in by that which does not in the long run prove to be art. At one level, this notion is simply a reformulation of Plato's suspicion that poetry might prove so strong in its misrepresentation of reality as to seduce an audience to remain imaginatively imprisoned in its symptomology (perceiving only through its false or distorting lens), unable to return to common sense and the strict necessities of political reality. For it would seem that almost as soon as one declares that there is a field of experience that could possibly be called literature—or, more generally, aesthetics—there must occur the corollary suspicion that by virtue of its nonessential quality or nonreferential possibility literature begins to elude, even to deceive, understanding. According to Plato, it is poetry that is tempting—and directly in proportion to its success: the more artful it is, the more poetry has the capacity to deceive us permanently about our reality. To honor Cavell's modification of Plato, however, the critic must persist in an effort to distinguish the authentic work of art of her own moment from a mode of expression that declares its own prestige in order to disguise the extent to which it has nothing to say. At the same time, as Cavell clearly recognizes, there is a necessary dialectic between the critical elaboration of a theory of aesthetics and the sensory experience we have of a work of art (which, like religion, proves itself only by conviction); and insofar as this is true, an aesthetic text is always potentially (whether or not it causes us to

recall Plato's suspicion) that which has nothing to say.

What I want to explore in this essay is the extent to which an act of criticism might have something to say with regard to that about which there is (seemingly) nothing to say. Insofar as it is produced textually—that is, as the phenomenon of a text, embedded in our immediate sensory experience of the artwork—the trauma is the very figure of our experience of that about which there is nothing to say. Although trauma theory has lent an ear to what the trauma might say even in its seeming silence, we pursue the interpretive—dare we say, therapeutic—resolutions of traumatic silence at the risk always of overcoming the immediate sensory experience about which we are speaking.

For Dominick LaCapra, this situation is absolutely as it should be. The expressly rational task of the historian is to make sense of individual histories of suffering, which LaCapra perceives as tantamount to a therapeutic intervention in the trauma's nonmeaning: an act, as it were, of pulling a traumatized subject beyond a self-contained experience into what is merely the ordinary world of perception for the rest of us, a place that can again be called history. At the risk of seeming too schematic, I would like to suggest that contemporary trauma theory can be divided into two camps: on the one side, there are those who argue from and through the symptomology of the trauma or along the trajectory of its immediate sensory experience; and on the other side, there are those (LaCapra most insistent among them) who interpret the trauma from the perspective, or at least the prospective perspective, of a therapeutic resolution.

Once this distinction is made, however, it starts to come undone. For if one were to position Dori Laub, Shoshana Felman, and Cathy Caruth, for example, as sympathetic expositors of the symptomology of trauma, it is immediately apparent that for each of these critics the description of trauma depends at least as much as it does for LaCapra upon some therapeutic horizon. Indeed, the ingeniousness of Caruth's method in *Unclaimed Experience* (1996) is to construe the therapeutic horizon of the traumatized patient as though it were also trauma's imaginative work to perform an oblique act of history, registering that which cannot be said through displacement and thus saving it for a future moment in which it can occur as if for the first time. What Caruth perceives as an inscription of survival in the original traumatic moment gives the trauma the structure of an intention and derives a hypothesis of agency that will at some point be fulfilled (if only through the act of surviving the trauma and remembering a time when agency was impossible).[2]

In the original moment of trauma, however, there can be no perception of survival. Though Caruth would concede this point, she insists upon a doubled consciousness of trauma—the unconscious perpetuation of an unremembered event in the unconscious, along with the survivor's contemporary and forgetful consciousness. Trauma demands, if only by default, a subject who progresses beyond a point of view strictly limited to the trauma itself. Similarly, Dori Laub and N. C. Auerhahn argue that the "radical break between trauma and culture" marks a divide between the experiential dimension of unknowing in the trauma and the cultural forms of knowing in which the trauma would have to be articulated.[3] Since a trauma only can be named in retrospect, however, Caruth interprets the gap between the immediate sensory event and the time in which it can be recollected as though this were a relation of duality rather than opposition. (In other words, she gives to the trauma the same reciprocity Cavell discerns between the work of art and the act of criticism that names it as such.) According to this highly influential hermeneutics of trauma, it is almost as though the traumatic event itself could be read as a sign of hope.

What I wish to insist upon here is the necessity not of taking sides with the symptoms or with the cure, but rather of seeing that an act of interpretation is embedded in almost every description of the trauma, such that a critic who elaborates a philosophical theory to account for any given description already has begun to espouse a rhetoric of the trauma. In Caruth's case, it is almost as though the trauma itself were a phenomenon producing a set of rhetorical relations in the one who suffers the trauma as well as in the one who stands witness to the aftermath of the trauma, if not to the event itself. This construct yields a principle of progressive implication, as others come to be party to the symptoms of trauma and the occluded events to which

they testify. To make such a claim, Caruth must turn in large part against the ostensible framework for interpreting trauma outlined by Freud himself. By contrast, Dominick LaCapra may seem the more faithful inheritor of psychoanalysis, adhering to Freud's own strongly interventionist model of interpretation. For if it is true, as Sontag suggests, that Aristotle's designation of art's therapeutic potential has predicted the horizon of interpretation as an act performed against or from outside the text, in Freud this relation is reversed. Interpretation is put in service of (and made to seem only as significant as) its therapeutic function. In order to describe the trauma, Freud stands necessarily beyond its reach, sympathetic to the symptoms only insofar as they cannot finally be transferred onto him. I focus here on the interpretive stance he adopts vis-à-vis the trauma in *Moses and Monotheism* not only because this text reveals the peculiarly figurative qualities of the trauma in Freud's canon but also because Caruth performs one of her stronger misprisions of Freud by way of this text. Through this strangely doubled reading (reading Freud interpreting trauma by way of Caruth's interpreting Freud's inability to interpret his own trauma), I wish to delineate the rhetorical properties that belong to the trauma as described, respectively, by Freud and Caruth.

Whether the ineluctable rhetorical problems I perceive in Freud's and Caruth's respective descriptions of trauma need pertain to current medical praxis or to the wider field of psychoanalytic therapy is a concern beyond the parameters of this essay. For as soon as trauma becomes part of a language of hermeneutics and a lens through which to view individual experience as embedded in cultural phenomena and historical context, it necessarily becomes rhetorical and, in fact, is often given (in literary works at least) the concentrated status of a figure. As a more or less involuntary trope of literary texts, as that which can never quite escape its own rhetoricity, the trauma seems oddly to repeat the problematic of all aesthetic texts, which must contend with a structure of intentionality and a system of interpretive practices brought to bear upon them as though they consisted of meanings that must eventually yield to critical practice. Interpretation is hardly the same thing as rhetoric, but where the one meets the other—as a critic approaches a so-called traumatic text seemingly from within its symptoms or with therapeutic aim on them—is in the extraordinary exertion placed upon the capacity of the trauma, or upon the literary text for which it now stands, not to remain only what it is. Such a dynamic is compounded when trauma is made to seem the condition or origin of an aesthetic text, when the trauma achieves a status whereby it would seem the motivating force of the text in which it is situated.

Admittedly, I take a bit of a shortcut in demonstrating this dynamic when I turn to Claude Lanzmann's artful documentary film *Shoah* (1985) as a means of elaborating the intersection between the interpretive endeavor and the rhetorical properties of trauma. However, since I turn to at least one persuasive psychoanalytic reading of the film (offered by Dori Laub and Daniel Podell) that works precisely along these lines, I hardly am presuming an unwarranted precedent. Though there is little that is accidental in *Shoah* in the way we might suppose a text truly dictated by trauma might be, I chose Lanzmann's film because it shows just how unlikely it is that a text as pure symptom could ever exist. For all of Lanzmann's strident advocation of an aesthetic that would make neither use nor final sense of the Holocaust, he places himself throughout the film in the strong rhetorical position of an interpreter, one who investigates the symptoms of history and will not let manifest meanings alone. Eventually Lanzmann uses his own interpretive stance as one outside the event to confront the hypothesis of agency that coexists with each moment of trauma. The disturbing idea that recurs in key moments of *Shoah*, quite as though it were at the center of what we call trauma (it is also an idea evident in Freud's description of trauma), is that the traumatic event strangely configures the position of the victim and perpetrator in such a way that the hypothesis of agency, as an emblem of recovery, must always tend toward the perpetration of violence as a conceit for genuine agency. It is not my intention to declare this rhetorical tendency a final or necessary attribute of trauma. To my mind, however, the persistence of this figurative phenomenon by which boundaries between perpetrators and victims get blurred in order to preserve a hypothesis of agency within the description of trauma is reason enough for a closer inspection of the rhetorical properties of trauma. As a sympathetic yet critical reader

of contemporary traumatic discourses and as someone who does not obviously adhere to the working premises of trauma theory per se, I have set out here to offer a description of the trauma's own peculiar rhetoric when considered as a psychoanalytically inflected phenomenology; and at the same time, I have sought to account for the contemporary discourse of trauma according to the external, broader cultural framework it serves. Obviously, trauma has become a locus of memory, if only figuratively or rhetorically, for that which might otherwise remain silent in historical memory. For the sake of clarity in this essay, I adopt the convention of using the unqualified term *trauma* when I refer to a phenomenon, event, or theoretical premise elaborated according to the clinical principles of trauma theory. Conversely, I speak of *the trauma* when I wish to draw attention to the figurative or rhetorical status of such a phenomenon, event, or premise. Insofar as I assume that, even in the clinical scenario, there must be a rhetoric inscribed upon or issuing forth from every trauma, I have attempted to show how the theoretical discourse of trauma must be complicit with a wider set of cultural discursive practices and prevailing assumptions. Hence, not only must we be prepared to speak of a cultural rhetoric of the trauma but we must also attend to those moments in which trauma fails to speak on behalf of the very victims for whose sake the theoretical discourse of trauma has been espoused.

Who Speaks for Trauma?

There persists in our every attempt to tell history a tacit premise that the explanations reside with those who have acted, even if terribly. To exercise our rational faculty leads, almost naturally it seems, to psychological rationalizations of past actions and the causes that have (or should have) precipitated them. As the one who enacts history, the perpetrator would provide the hermeneutical key to the event itself. According to this logical equation between history and the intentional acts that constitute history, moral action seems tied to a predominant ideology declaring that the victim must exist, by definition, on the ideological "other side." If history is constituted and written by the agents of any given event, how are we to avoid the conclusion that the victim is not only an aberration of historical-minded rationality but also someone who can be thought of in rational terms only to the extent that she participates in the precipitation of her own suffering?

With regard to the victims of the Holocaust, such a line of reasoning would seem shocking if it were not so persistent. Even when it is properly qualified, the rational search for the victim's participation in his own fate is undoubtedly the source of stereotypes about Jewish passivity—such as the myth that Jews went like sheep to the slaughter or long-standing debates about the questionable behaviors of victims (e.g., the debate that sprang from the work of Raul Hilberg and Hannah Arendt about the complicity of Jewish leadership in the ghettoes). The attempt to identify a dispositional passivity in the murdered Jews has its source in the more basic scandal of the victim who, having once fallen out of causation, seems unable to find her way back into the cultural narrative that declares each subject morally worthwhile in proportion to her agency. As a consequence of the victim's scandalous loss of agency, it seems almost a cultural reflex to insist upon reintegrating the victim into our predominant social narratives by recognizing the steps victims take toward their own victimization. A closer inspection of the historical development of victimology as a subfield of criminology would reveal how pervasive this mindset is, even within social narratives aimed at shedding new light into the dark and private recesses of the victim's suffering. Even a minimal restoration of the victim's agency is reassuring; it tells us that there is a structure of rational causation, perceivable by victim and perpetrator alike, that precedes the moment of horror, the moment when the perpetrator inflicts his harm upon the victim.

As such, the search for agency leads necessarily to a distortion of the victim's perspective. The distortion takes form as a configuration of the victim and perpetrator, either by the act of assembling two entities into a unitary hypothesis so that they bear a figurative relation to one another or by the act of representing one subject (here, the victim) through the precedent or terms of another, seemingly prior, hypothesized subject (here, the perpetrator). In focusing attention especially on the

figurative distortions of the victim that occur when our rationality tries to understand her in a more than accidental relation to the perpetrator, I wish to keep in mind the traumatic subject's own basic discomfiture with her victim status. From a strictly therapeutic standpoint (in which one treats only the individual who must find a way out of her imprisonment in the past), it is reasonable and even compassionate to support the victim who does not wish to see herself or himself as only or permanently in that position of disadvantage. Yet in our haste to encourage this progress beyond victimization, in our insistence that the victim remains beyond our reach until she or he makes such progress, we treat the moment of victimization as if it were a seductive lie, a place too much like poetry insofar as it fails to tell us in a systemic and rationally explicable manner how things really are. Thus, interpretation tries to make more of the accident than is there, discerning the accidental qualities of a particular violent experience as if they were subject to the rules of an intentional logic, as if they fell into a social narrative of linear causation.

According to the premise that inspires trauma theory's hermeneutic, trauma is recurrent evidence of a failed mastery of the event. Therefore, any attempt to employ the trauma as a figure for history must at some level interpret trauma rationally—that is, through an act of retrospective demystification. If interpretation can bring the victim along with it (the ideal of therapy being that the victim elicit the interpretation), then it seems only appropriate that the perspective from within the event of violence should be lost over time. Yet insofar as this interpretive possibility also becomes an implicit cultural norm, it becomes mandatory to proceed beyond the victim's perspective, perhaps with the conviction that victims also will see their way clear of what has ailed them. Since the place of the victim cannot be occupied for long, the culture of therapy (which is both the context for and that which is elaborated from the singular case of therapy) contributes to a distortion in the representation of the victim. It is partly for this reason, I think, that everyone who theorizes on the subject of trauma operates with something of a bad conscience. For much as Nietzsche had said that to write about something it must already be dead to the author, the one who talks rationally about trauma must have come out, or always have been, on the other side of it.

To speak of distortion in this way is to reverse the very charge that Freud, as a model interpreter, makes against trauma. According to Freud, it is trauma—as a violence done to subjective consciousness—that distorts a person's perception of reality, causing the past to be lived as indistinguishable from the present. In the paradigmatic stories of trauma—Tancred's again wounding Clorinda even after she has become a tree, or the infamous femme fatale of biblical lore who continues to marry husbands who die, even until the seventh one—there is the suspicion that the repeated moment is somehow willful. If the poor woman really were trying to avoid dying husbands, she should have stopped finding them at least by the third or fourth try. There is more here than bad luck. This is misfortune pursued. Insofar as trauma repeats the event it cannot bring to recollection, there is indeed a sense in which it pursues the event into the future, displacing it forward so as to create a preparedness for loss or hurt that was absent the first time around.

Nowhere is the habit of compensatory mastery more evident than in the peculiar reading of Jewish history that Freud comes up with in *Moses and Monotheism*, a text for which Cathy Caruth provides such a strongly (mis)interpretive reading. By focusing on Freud's autobiographical interventions in his text and the story they tell of Freud's departure from Vienna on the eve of the Nazi annexation of Austria in 1938, Caruth reads this embeddedness in catastrophic history as traumatically determinative of Freud's speculations about the figure of Moses and what he means to the historical persecutions of the Jewish people.[4] This boldly interpretive move is one of the crucial moments in *Unclaimed Experience*. For if in Freud's account the Jews fail to admit an ancillary debt to another culture's monotheism (that is, to an Egyptian Moses and Egyptian god) and so repress knowledge of the murder of their foreign liberator, what Caruth perceives in this peculiar account of Jewish history are two key dimensions of trauma.

First, since the unremembered moment is an event with implications reaching far into the future, Caruth reads trauma itself as an "act of departure" or an "unconsciousness of leaving that bears the

impact of history" (22). In her view, since trauma always refers forward, it develops a hermeneutics of history as that which is still to be read, as that which is unfulfilled, as that to which we remain in relation even when—or especially because—we cannot see it clearly. By giving emphasis to the preface in which Freud confesses the difficult conditions that have presided over the text's composition and recalls how the Nazi invasion forced him to leave Vienna and postpone his work, Caruth interprets this interrupted textual history as a figure for Freud's highly speculative theory about the Jewish people. They, in their relation to Egyptian monotheism, are—much like Freud himself—subject to a psychically latent violence determining their eventual departure from the scene of real violence.

On the strength of such a departure from and toward historical reference, Caruth emphasizes a second dimension of trauma, what might be called the trauma's horizon. As the Jews awaken to Mosaic monotheism, they enact their survival of the past and reencounter their chosenness "as the incomprehensible fact of being chosen for a future that remains in its promise, yet to be understood" (71). In Caruth's terms, chosenness becomes not a fact of the past but "the experience of being shot into a future that is not entirely one's own." In the traumatic departure from reference, which is conjoined with survival of a violent past, the chosenness of the Jewish people ultimately signifies an implication in history as the arrival of the future—even more particularly, a future that entangles us in others' narratives. The trauma is the means of (and even a trope for) an engagement with history by those who have suffered its direst effects and seem least able to address the history as their own event; at the same time, it facilitates an engagement with this history in those who stand outside the trauma—those who perhaps are prepared to interpret it, only to find themselves interpreted by it. As Caruth thus gives expression to the universalistic potential of traumatic reference, she seeks to overcome trauma's quality as a singular grievance resistant to larger cultural and social meanings, the very same pathological connotation of stubborn woundedness and limited particularism that many of trauma theory's strongest critics have attributed to it.

Here, however, Freud proves more stubborn than Caruth would like him to be, mostly because he can never quite see survival as a necessary principle of the violent history in which the one who suffers a trauma is immersed. As Freud ends his essay confident that he has shed light on the historical reasons for why the Jews have "shouldered a tragic guilt," he seems much less confident that this history of a collective trauma readily yields to the possibility of survival Caruth would like to emphasize: "The problem how they [the Jews] could survive until today as an entity has not proved so easy to solve [*Weniger Aufklärung fand das Problem, wieso sie sich bis auf den heutigen Tag als Individualität erhalten konnten*]."[5] Freud implies that the Jews have been scandalous to the rest of the world precisely because of their suffering and dependence (a supposition that is quite separate from anti-Semitic charges about the Jews as a parasitic people and the basic Christian logic of scapegoating a ritually and culturally expendable people). What Katherine Jones here translates as "how they could survive" is more properly understood as "how they could so exceptionally endure." In other words, Freud speaks of the mysterious capacity of the Jews "to have preserved themselves as an entity" despite their nonparticipation in the Christian cultural narrative. For when Christianity confesses the totemic murder of God as the ultimate father and brings to light one of the constitutive repressions of primitive society, this admission marks a progress resisted by the Jews, whose nonassimilation simply bewilders Freud. In light of what was to come in the years after 1938 and the lack of protection that highly assimilated Jews, such as Freud, found through their German or European identifications (assimilated Jews were, especially in the early implementation of the Nuremberg laws, more targeted than unassimilated Jews for persecution by the Nazis), it is hard not to hear an ominous tone in the essay's final paragraph. Indeed, it is quite as though Freud were inquiring whether this history of Jewish endurance, as a collective act of self-preservation, still would be possible. Freud seems to be asking his readers, Will the Jews endure as an entity beyond their contemporary persecutions? And can they do so by their own power? Though it might be overstating the case to say that Freud implicitly places the precarious survival of the Jews in Christian hands, at the very least this ending qualifies Caruth's suggestion that trauma

denotes history as a survival of violence even as it also questions the agency that would inhere in any survival figured as an enduring act of self-preservation.[6]

Apart from identifying the manifest strangeness of Freud's reading of Jewish persecution, my point is that the rhetorical dimension of Freud's theoretical elaboration of trauma simply cannot be overlooked.[7] As Freud writes this history of the Jews, he understands himself to be addressing an audience of Christian sensibility and he has, at least in part, theorized the traumatic history of the Jews through the historical lens of Christian tolerance or intolerance for its parent religion. All of the above becomes more overt, if at the same time more bewildering, when Freud attempts a demythologization of Jewish history that caters to dangerous Christian prejudices. In a letter to Arnold Zweig (which also launches Caruth's discussion of the text), Freud had written: "Faced with new persecutions, one asks oneself again how the Jews have come to be what they are and why they have attracted this undying hatred. I soon discovered the formula: Moses created the Jews."[8] Although Freud's reading against the grain of covenant represents a modern hermeneutical suspicion about sacred narrative that might just as easily offend many dogmatic Christians, his premise that Moses "created" the Jews involves a significant disfranchisement of Jewish identity since, read skeptically, even Jewish sacred narrative will reveal that the Jews are originally an idea of others, just as they were according to the cultural logic of Freud's day a prejudicial invention of others. More surprising still (not only as a piece of spurious history but as a rhetorical act of cultural identification) is Freud's claim that the unacknowledged violence performed by the Jews against the normative others who would define and do violence to them is the crucial moment in which they became a people characteristically alienated in history. The violence Freud discovers at the center of Jewish history is the very same violence the Jews have enacted upon Moses and the original monotheistic ethos—in other words, a violence they have done to themselves.[9] To the degree that the Jews possess the capacity for self-definition, their constitutive act is itself an impossible intention—that is, both a taboo act and the inability to admit the act to consciousness. It is by way of this unadmitted intention that we come to understand why Jews "have *attracted* this undying hatred," for the connotation of *attract* here gravitates toward intention: the Jews attract persecution according to their own veiled or traumatically latent intention.

Freud's troublesome point becomes only too clear when he attempts to explain two of the activating myths of early-twentieth-century anti-Semitism as though, despite their irrationality, these myths yet preserved vestigial truths. The first example is perhaps the more bizarre. According to Freud, when the Jews fail to admit their Egyptian inheritance and the fact that monotheism was brought to them by Moses in rebellion against the Pharaoh's suppression of Ikhnaton's version of monotheism, the result is that the imperialist connotations of monotheism survive in the Jewish concept of election. In other words, Jews have a wish for "world sovereignty" tied up with the idea of being specially chosen—an idea, Freud says, that "still survives among that people's enemies in a belief in a conspiracy by the "Elders of Zion" [*lebt noch heute bei den Feindend des Volkes im Glauben an die Verschwörung der 'Weisen von Zion' fort*]" (Strachey 85).[10] Perceiving the endurance of Jewish identity to be dependent upon the sources of external permission the Jews require to live in an unfriendly world, Freud finds a partial cause for the historical lapsing of permission (as anti-Semitic persecutions reached a new zenith in 1938) in the latency of Jewish identity (*Individualität*). Besieged by the unrealized memory of their own murder of Moses and their secreted past, as well as by the suspicions and persecutions of their enemies, the Jews nevertheless must interpret their collective trauma through the eyes of those who are outside of its experiential center, even (if it is required) by seeing themselves as they are seen by the agents of the terrible violences being perpetrated against them in the present moment. By such an interpretive logic, the Jews must be in part what they are perceived to be by an outside world, so that there is a residual truth in their enemies' mythical perception of them. Though Freud dismisses the overtly propagandistic and anti-Semitic claim of *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, he believes with the emergent anthropology of his time that myths trace—even as they veil—real history, and so he allows for the possibility that an outrageously propagandistic myth may yet arrive at a historically and traumatically distorted intention.

Only slightly less bizarre, and perhaps more dangerous because he gives it greater credibility, is Freud's adoption of the central activating myth of Christian anti-Semitism—the myth that the Jews killed Christ. To get to the core of truth behind this myth, Freud says that we have to recognize that part of the reason monotheism made "such a deep impression on just the Jewish people" is that through the murder of Moses, the "great deed and misdeed of primeval times, the murder of the father, was brought home to the Jews" (113). Moreover, in their religious observance they were enacting a repetition (much as a neurotic would), rather than remembering that deed so crucial to their collective consciousness. If Moses acts as a stimulus to the Jewish wish-fantasy for a messiah and Jesus functions as the Christians' substitute extension of this wish, the crucial difference is that Christian mythology admits the murder of its messianic, deified father figure:

> The poor Jewish people, who with its usual stiff-necked obduracy continued to deny the murder of their "father," has dearly expiated this in the course of the centuries. Over and over again they heard the reproach: "You killed our God." And this reproach is true, *if rightly interpreted*. It says, in reference to the history of religion: "You won't admit that you murdered God (the archetype of God, the primeval father, and his reincarnations). Something should be added—namely: "It is true, we did the same thing, but we admitted it, and since then we have been purified." Not all accusations with which anti-Semitism pursues the descendants of the Jewish people are based on such good foundations. (Jones, 114–15, emphasis added)

Even if one were to accept much of Freud's demystification of the Moses story, what Freud entirely ignores here is the bad faith of the Christian charge against the Jews, since the myth that the Jews killed Christ is activated precisely to suppress the admission Freud would grant to the Christians. Against the Freudian reading, the logic of the Christian myth, more "rightly interpreted," should be as follows: *we (the Christians) did not do the same thing; rather, you (the Jews) did the same thing all over again*. Even stranger, however, than Freud's failure to recognize the exonerating trajectory of the Christian anti-Semitic myth is his insistence here again that the past is being revisited upon "the poor Jewish people" in some proportion to their own doings.

Much of Freud's reading should not surprise us, since it merely extends the psychoanalytic search for a cause in the one who suffers psychological affliction into the realm of cultural criticism. Psychoanalysis handles the scandal of the victim poorly. It does so not, as some have argued, because it privileges the irrationality of the psyche to the point where anyone can claim to be a victim, but because its therapeutic premise of intervention in the phenomenology of suffering gives rises to a hermeneutic that would solve suffering at its source—in the aberrant condition of the sufferer's consciousness.

Two principles of rational inquiry emerge from this bias. The first principle is a quasiutilitarian psychology that reads social norms as the standard for health and demands the assimilation of anyone who falls outside of that norm, a reintegration that must come ultimately at the behest of the person suffering estrangement. This therapeutic insistence on working through the patient's suffering leads to a second practical hypothesis, which often has been converted into a principle of rational inquiry. This second principle, starkly stated, is that the perpetrator of suffering is at some level an intention of the victim and an extension of the victim's consciousness.[12] Although much of this hermeneutical impulse has been corrected (especially by feminist critics) due to its potential for trivializing sexual violence and reading a victim's testimony as a fantasy intention involving the perpetrator, the construct of the perpetrator as an emanation of the victim's consciousness persists culturally in the basic premise that a victim bears a more-than-accidental relation to the one who perpetrates violence against her. So, for example, the emergent field of victimology, a subfield of criminology, has tried to study the characteristics of victims to determine the "victimogenic role" in crime—that is, the degree to which victims precipitate the crimes against them.[13] Although there are many modifications of this premise in the field at large, victimology encourages a rational inquiry into the victim's proneness toward victimization as a function of factors such as vulnerability, structural conditions (such as age or gender), powerlessness, and deviant

behaviors. Without meaning necessarily to attach blame to the victim (although early studies in the field did tend to impute such judgments), victimologists pursue the study of violent crime by investigating the victim as a partial agent in the act of violence, as one who is conditionally and characteristically responsible for what happens to her, as someone who exists in a necessary proportion to the violence perpetrated against her.

The Multiple Meanings of Distortion

Trauma theory has at least this much in common with the contemporary criminological discourse of victimology: in each case, the attempt to interpret the experience of someone who has suffered violence brings us back to the spectral premise that the victim bears more than an accidental relation to the fate that befalls her, even perhaps to the perpetrator of her suffering. To emphasize the victim's survival as though it were a necessary consequence of her trauma is to overcome accident and to read the experience of victimization toward purposiveness. However generous one's intent to give the traumatized subject back to herself, the fact that the imaginative figure of the perpetrator recurs in such moments, much like the specter of agency a victim would seek to recover, may suggest a fundamental flaw in the endeavor as undertaken. In its attempt to offer an explanation of the past that would exorcise the obsessive hold of trauma at the immediate sensory level of experience, trauma theory fails to admit the trauma itself as a rhetorical event and the full force of its own rhetorical, often admirable exertions on behalf of traumatized victims. For instance, finding trauma to be the interpretive key to what might otherwise seem a deeply troubling ideological text can be an exercise in rhetoric such that the trauma functions as a figure for a liberatory praxis of reading. Cathy Caruth does this very thing for Freud. When she reads Freud's text as indicative of his own trauma, which is inscribed in his elaboration of the Jewish people's collective trauma, she benevolently elides the nonreferential center of traumatic experience with a historical horizon (a coming out on the other side) that seems strongly opposed to trauma's stubborn claim to be absolutely innocent of intention or agency. What she has to overlook—or at the very least, to reconfigure dramatically—are those peculiar rhetorical urgencies in Freud's text that make it difficult to separate a particularly problematic application of interpretive will from the larger therapeutic project of interpretation.

The possibility exists, then, that an aggressively interpretive hypothesis (much like the demystifying, reductive aim Sontag accuses so many interpreters of taking on aesthetic texts) will have supplanted an audience's more permissive relation to the text or a therapist's receptive stance toward the patient. The particular form of interpretive suspicion— for which Freud since has been held accountable by those who side both with and against psychoanalysis—is that the state of being a victim becomes perhaps fundamentally a lie told against a patient's personal history: it is to enact a falsely made claim of innocence. The suspicion runs from Freud into much of the vocabulary of victimology and is now widely disseminated in popular culture. Proposing an intimacy between interpretation and the perception of agency as a violent will manifested in a text, Freud speculates in *Moses and Monotheism* about how the biblical text came to be falsified according to secret tendencies, even as it still bore traces of its own unsuccessful repressions: "Thus almost everywhere there can be found striking omissions, disturbing repetitions, palpable contradictions, signs of things the communication of which was never intended. The distortion of a text is not unlike a murder. The difficulty lies not in the execution of the deed but in doing away with the traces" (52).[14] By implicitly comparing his own interpretive work to the role of the criminal investigator, Freud pursues the murderous past to its core moment, having been put off the trail only slightly by the canonical accretions that try to cover up a highly unpious act. His basic hermeneutical premise is that texts are written by murderers, by those on the side of winning ideology (as all who perpetuate the norms of an enduring society must be), who since have sought to erase some of the more unpleasant signs of their usurpation of power.[15] Anyone indebted to what we now call the hermeneutics of suspicion will appreciate the skeptical rigor that informs Freud's interpretive praxis. Like Nietzsche before him, Freud obdurately refuses to believe that morality or culture ever can tell the truth about itself. Moreover, any contemporary methodology that works against the grain of predominant ideology—say, by uncovering

the Western imperialist ideology of the Enlightenment era or by giving the lie to Nazi Aryanism's cruder appropriations of certain strains of evolutionary theory—necessarily employs such demystifying tactics. Simply put, such a critical methodology attempts to trace a historical cover-up.

Nevertheless, it cannot be lost on us—no matter how sympathetically Caruth works to include Freud in the story of his people's sufferings—that Freud is interpreting the history of the Jews as the story of a repressed memory pertaining to their own constitutive act of murderous violence even as (in the historical moment of 1938) they approach the nadir of collective victimization and the single-largest concentrated moment of historical animosity ever directed against a particular group. To find the key to such a history in an oppressed culture's own liberatory text seems surprising but perhaps not too much so if one proceeds from the premise that the trauma precipitates an act of psychological distortion, propelling a set of wishful or convenient lies in all who suffer its effects. If this be true, not only must our rationality intervene wherever it can, interfering with the trauma's abiding meaning, but it must seek a cause for trauma that, by definition, is inconsistent with its phenomenality. Thus we arrive at the larger interpretive temptation to read the phenomenality of trauma, which might still most properly delineate a victim's perspective, as if the sufferer of trauma has played a part in the perpetration of her own wounds.

Yet we also can approach this question of the trauma's configuration of victim and perpetrator from the other side, worrying that the trauma permits the perpetrator to except himself from the moral consequences following upon his actions and to include himself, either imaginatively or delusively, in the victim's perspective on history. There is little doubt that in strictly psychoanalytic terms the perpetrator could be traumatized by what he does. Freud's account of the Jewish people's murder of Moses even suggests that this is a likely consequence to both the collective memory and individual psyches of those who do violence to others. As Freud construes the manifestations of trauma through real or imaginative perpetrations, sometimes tracing a collective "historical" root for trauma (as in *Moses and Monotheism*) and at other times emphasizing the traumatized person's unconscious repetition of the act as an attempt to perpetrate an event before which she originally had been passive, his suspicion seems to be that trauma speaks a language not of exoneration from consequences but of implication in events carried forth into history. In this respect, the rhetoric of the trauma—by which we might mean a language commensurate with any of the cultural discourses privileging a therapeutic response to suffering over the facticity of the event itself—may permit perpetrators to mystify their own actions by claiming that they were never present to themselves as agents during the event of violence.

In other words, if one admits the possibility that an act of violence might be carried forth unconsciously in the perpetrator's memory as well as in the mind of one who suffers it (and perhaps also in the psyche of the nonparticipating witness), then in ethical terms the trauma's rhetorical claim on its audience might seem a highly ambiguous one. It is with this concern in mind that I now turn to Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*, for in his film Lanzmann opposes his own interloping function as interpretive filmmaker and investigative historian to the memory of victims, bystanders, and perpetrators alike. As the film explores the historical symptomology of traumatic events for individuals interviewed and quite possibly for the collective psyche of entire groups, Lanzmann keeps digging beneath the surface of memory to find what is not being said. This persistent and indeed insistent rhetorical quality of Lanzmann's film is not always emphasized in critical discussions of it. For instance, by invoking *Shoah* as an example of "the art of trauma," Dori Laub and Daniel Podell read it as indicative of the productive means of artistic representation, which typically proceeds by indirection to trace the "inner experiences of trauma" (994). On the one hand, Laub and Podell perceive a crucial difference between art and experience, whereby the work of art is most valuable because it urges the mind beyond experience and thus constructs a supplementary field of experience in which trauma is reconfigured as though it were in the company of a "witnessing presence." Yet because they assume that this "indirect pointing to past meanings" is characteristic of the "art of trauma" insofar as it aims to produce a "protected space wherein the remembrance of the traumatic experi-

ence can begin," they interpret most of Lanzmann's "forceful presence" in the film as though it facilitated—rather than provoked or even perhaps staged—its moments of remembrance.

There is certainly something uncanny about the scene outside the church in which Polish peasants recall their former bystanding by enacting it as as a form of complicitous, even aggressive and deeply anti-Semitic witness to the Nazi camps. It is disturbing to observe the peasants fall with relatively little prompting into a liturgically inspired rationalization of the death of the Jews, with one Pole even putting into the mouth of a rabbi going to his death in the 1940s a version of those infamous words of supposedly Jewish self-accusation from Matthew's gospel, "Let his blood fall on our heads and on our sons' heads." Yet however accidental much of this appears to be—especially in the sense that Lanzmann cannot, as the church organist Mr. Kantorowski has done to the rabbi, put words into the mouth of the Poles—the scene is surely not as "unplanned and unscripted" as Laub and Podell suggest. A closer examination of Lanzmann's selections and careful juxtapositions from his vast archive of documentary footage and of his provocative line of questioning would impress upon us the deeply rhetorical nature of such a scene. Laub and Podell are able to read it as somehow representative of an art of trauma that speaks powerfully to and about trauma only by underestimating its rhetorical procedures. To recognize this fact is not to cast doubt on the artfulness of Lanzmann's film or even on its ethical purposiveness (in fact, the result may be quite opposite in each case), but it is to concede a greater divide between the art of trauma, which is preeminently rhetorical, and the traumatic experience to which it would testify.

One of the more significant differences, it seems to me, between Lanzmann and Freud is that as an interpreter of hypothetically traumatic events, Lanzmann denotes his own necessarily rhetorical stance vis-à-vis trauma—that is, an unambiguous partiality for the victims of atrocity.[16] This premise emerges in the film as a choice made in advance, as an ethical distinction between the central victims of a violent event and those who are its ostensible perpetrators or even those who remain more ambiguously at the periphery of the event as bystanders. In the service of this distinction, Lanzmann addresses with great suspicion the notion that the rhetoric of the trauma could ever be, in the mouth of a perpetrator, other than a self-legitimating lie. Much has been made of Lanzmann's thematic use of translation in *Shoah* to suggest the terrific gaps between the victims' perspectives of the events and the perspective of those who witnessed them from outside the experience of suffering, whether as bystanders or perpetrators.[17] Throughout *Shoah* communication is laced with an ironic doubleness reflective of the separation between the victims and the perpetrators, and it is on these grounds that Lanzmann decides not to keep his promise to SS Unterscharführer Franz Suchomel but rather to record his (Lanzmann's) lie as a transaction that is ethically honorable:

> "But don't use my name."
> "No, I promised."[18]

Lanzmann's own historical resentments, in the sense Jean Améry has given to that word as an articulation of the moral righteousness of the victim, reflect truths that can only be ironically unearthed: so as Suchomel tries to make Lanzmann see how the perpetrators also wept at their task, recalling that when the mass graves had to be cleaned out (because the "ground undulated like waves because of the gas"), the Germans had also to participate in the task, Lanzmann becomes severe. He tries to force Suchomel to revisit imaginatively the scene of unearthing and locate himself more truthfully—that is, apart from the false identification he has forged with the victims.[19] When Lanzmann asks who pulled the bodies from the graves, Suchomel says both SS men and Jews did the work, as if their joint participation in such a task would make the events equally traumatic to each. Again Lanzmann pursues, first getting Suchomel to admit what seems obvious to us, though in the rationalizing mindset of the perpetrator it has not been fully admitted as fact: that since the Jews were forced to do the work, it was the Germans who were forcing them. Drawing our attention to the direct involvement of the Germans and refusing to let Suchomel hide behind vague regret (as he laments that he and the other Germans had to witness all of this), Lanzmann insists on the

seemingly minor and historically literal point that it was the Jews who cleaned out the mass graves:

> *"The Germans themselves?"*
> "They had to."
> *"They were in command!"*
> "They were in command, but they were also commanded."
> *"I think the Jews did it."*
> "In that case, the Germans had to lend a hand." (57)

Since Suchomel's memory depends upon eroding the lines of suffering between victim and perpetrator, Lanzmann intervenes as a speculative witness, one who was not there and yet is better able to speak for the victims. "I think the Jews did it," he says, and when Suchomel says "[i]n that case," he yields ground to a historical truth provoked by Lanzmann's testimonial willfulness, though only so much. For Suchomel continues to insist that the Germans "had to lend a hand," an idiom that evades the full responsibility of the perpetrator's intention and maintains the Germans in traumatic intimacy with the Jews.

The effect of the aggressive irony Lanzmann directs at Suchomel is to allow the filmmaker's manifest interpretive opposition to what he is being told stand for the concealed meanings beneath the rhetorical surface of the speaker's words. The rhetorical posture of the interpreter confronts the rhetoric of the trauma. Any conflation of perpetrator and victim that might occur in traumatic memory is made to seem merely rhetorical. Whether or not Suchomel really had been traumatized by what he participated in (how would it change things if we learned, for example, that he had truly undergone years of therapy in response to these events?), his desire to be understood as traumatized functions here as an evasion of responsibility. Lanzmann's ironic narrative stance speaks throughout the film from the suppressed perspective of the victim, and that voice so often has to be left in doubt, or left as a doubt posed to the perpetrators and bystanders, because it cannot be absolutely imagined or recovered.

A similar play of irony governs the film's earlier scenes in which Polish bystanders tell stories of their heroic efforts to give water to Jews who were packed into the transport trains, scenes that give way to the more perverse recollections of Poles whose intervention took the form of making a throat-cutting gesture to the Jews as they passed. Describing the throat-cutting sequence from *Shoah* as a travesty of meaningful communication, Daniel R. Schwarz suggests that the gesture fails to participate in language because the victim is already entirely beyond communication, so that any idea or information imparted fails to allow for genuine reception, for a space of deliberation in which an accounting of self could be realized in action.[20] From Schwarz's brief account of the scene, one might think that Jews were for the most part able to read the throat-cutting gesture, even though they were unable subsequently to act on the idea for which it was a sign. Yet Lanzmann introduces the sign as set apart from meaning, as altogether distinguished from the function of communicative signs between two parties who are capable of reciprocal understanding. In other words, it is from the perspective of the victim located outside the freedom of reciprocity that such a sign becomes impossible to read, as the survivor Richard Glazar recalls the difficulty the Jews had making sense of the gesture: "We'd been able to open a window—the old man in our compartment saw a boy . . . cows were grazing . . . and he asked the boy in signs, 'Where are we?' And the kid made a funny gesture. This: [draws finger across his throat]." (34) Glazar's testimony embeds the throat-cutting gesture in a situation with communicative urgency, for as the boy responds to the solicitations of the Jews to know where they are, his meaning will not come clear to them. Lanzmann asks Glazar whether the Jews on the train were able to question the boy, and he continues, "Not in words, but in signs, we asked: 'What's going on here?' And he made that gesture. Like this. We didn't really pay much attention to him. We couldn't figure out what he meant" (34). In short, the boy's meaning depends upon his ability to imagine the Jews' deaths and their inability to do so.[21]

It is for this reason that Glazar's testimony on behalf of the bewildered Jews fades into a contemporary scene of remembrance among some Polish

villagers, who as they recall the significance of the sign of throat cutting are filled with a confidence gleaned through historical memory about the transparency of the sign. One of the villagers recalls the deluded perspective of the wealthy Jews and views them ironically through the malice of the perpetrators: "They [the Nazis] said they were going to a factory. On arrival they saw what kind of a factory it was." As he says this, he smiles—nervously, we wonder, or with menacing delight? —and Lanzmann's film deliberately preserves the ambiguity between embarrassed memory and historical participation:

> "We'd gesture that they'd be killed."
> *"Those people made that sign?"*
> "He says the Jews didn't believe it."
> *"But what does that gesture mean?"*
> "That death awaited them." (35)

From the point of view of the victim, the sign is an allegory drawn from the future, its meaning requiring a rift within perspective for the one who is contemporaneous with his own suffering, as though such a rift stood for the impossibly present perspective of the victim. At the same time, it functions ironically to develop the aggressive perspective of the bystanders, thus figuring their own complicity in history. To drive home this point, Lanzmann ends the segment on the throat-cutting gesture with the menacing and more fully historical account of Czeslaw Borowi, who, more willfully than the other villagers, enjoys what amounts to a dramatic irony—that the Jews are denied knowledge of what the Nazis had authored. Since Borowi seems so obviously sympathetic with the Nazis' position of superior knowledge, Lanzmann demands that he repeat the gesture he made:

> *"So he went past these 'Pullmans,' as he calls them, containing those Jews who were calm, unsuspecting, and he made that gesture to them."*
> "To all the Jews, in principle."
> *"He just went along the platforms! Ask him!"*
> "Yes. The road was as it is now. When the guard wasn't looking, he made that gesture." (36–37)

Lanzmann's questioning here seems pointed toward history and the audience of his film. There appears to be little hope of making Borowi see that his gesture in its present context has become a metonymy for the murder of the Jews or that he seems to have been only too willing to see them murdered. The underlying assumption is that those who participated in such violence, even as bystanders whose only capacity to imagine intervention was to run along train platforms slashing their throats at deported Jews, have become commensurate with the privileged knowledge, a species of Nazi knowledge, that they tried to impart to the Jews. It is impossible to imagine the throat-cutting gesture as a truly communicative sign, not just because the Jews could do nothing with the information but because as it imitates the perspective of oppressive power, it participates in the violence it would signify.

Perhaps most important from my perspective, what this segment on the throat-cutting gesture exposes, however dishonestly, is a rejection of the victim's state of unknowing. As Borowi insists, for example, that "in the small cities in the area, it was talked about" and thereafter concludes that the Polish Jews had to know, even if the foreign Jews did not, he implies that in knowing what would happen to them the Jews have permitted it to happen. Is this also the reason Borowi is now willing to run up and down the platform making the gesture? By such a logic, a victim who knows her fate is less a victim, since her knowledge of what will happen to her makes her adequate to her fate and responsible for it. It may well be that conditions prevent the victim's taking real action on her own behalf, since oppression so often denies a subject any practical responsibility for her own intentions or actions. Yet even so—the cultural logic runs—knowledge creates the imaginative condition for agency and requires that a victim exempt herself from victimization by any means possible. What Lanzmann has brought brilliantly to the surface, like an unearthed sword

exposed to new light, is the extent to which an imaginative act of taking sides with or against the victims of violence inheres in even the minor details of historical remembrance.

Is There Still a Victim in This Text?

It might be asked whether the trajectory I have been tracing for trauma is a necessary consequence of the discourse. I do not want to claim that it is. What I want to insist upon is that the rhetoric of trauma (insofar as we understand it as a rhetoric proceeding from and through the trauma as a mode of apprehension) already contains an ambiguity of perception according to which perpetrators and victims might seem interchangeable, as though they were relative and related subject-positions to be taken up in the imaginative space of the psyche and not necessarily roles historically inscribed by the event to which the trauma refers. Among those who are most suspicious of trauma theory as a hybrid of psychoanalysis and deconstruction, the value of trauma as a mode of cultural discourse might be ignored by refusing its necessary condition, which is simply the premise that there is some part of the human mind resembling what Freud calls the unconscious. This species of historicist skepticism might be developed as a consequence of empiricist historiography, pragmatic psychology, or deliberative moral philosophy, but the trauma is threatening to all of these rational discourses precisely because it traces a lapse (or lacuna) in their basic modes and premises. The trauma seems the epitome of irrationality, a phenomenon disabling rationality and perhaps best prevented by not admitting its legitimacy.

If one insists that trauma should become transparent to public modes of rationality, the only course that can be charted for trauma as a discourse legitimating its own troubled notion of history is perhaps a therapeutic model along the lines LaCapra has advocated so persistently. Yet the tenor of cultural distrust that precedes LaCapra's solution is also worth taking account of, if only because it returns us to a basic ethical problem: any outright dismissal or surpassing of traumatic phenomenality must necessarily coincide with a view of rationality as set apart from those voices suppressed by the hegemonic cultural structures through which rational agents have been legitimated or enabled in history. The exceptionality of those experiences that fall outside of rationality's ready measure also must be denied, steeped in suffering as those experiences are on the one side and in the perception of beauty or something akin to sublimity on the other. In ethical terms, what this means is that the recovery of trauma's lost perspective is roughly tantamount to the experiential voice of the victims of history. To deny trauma a phenomenological validity that might influence the terms of our rationality is to suppress the psychic symptomology of the victim as though it were irrelevant to the historical accounts we offer of rationality's limits and successes.

A fairer and at the same time more rationally rigorous suspicion of trauma might insist, then, that the problem is not that trauma does not exist (nor that there is no such thing as a psychic realm akin to the unconscious, which exercises influence on our rational motives through the emanations of obliquely remembered memories). It need only point out that if we yield to the phenomena of trauma an authority beyond rationality, we have no way of measuring its genuine ethical validity and answering it. One might resolve the methodological difference between Caruth and LaCapra by suggesting that whereas LaCapra perceives trauma much in the same way Sontag supposes criticism elucidates and also reduces art—by bringing it into the light of rationality through the work of interpretation—Caruth doubts the critic's capacity to remain differentiated from the claims of trauma. In short, Caruth does not wish to underestimate the extent to which trauma inscribes its claims upon us, much as art does, in ways we are not fully cognizant of. By supposing that trauma elaborates a rhetoric (say, of liberation, of survival, of implication) quite apart from what we who speak from beyond its reach might pronounce, Caruth largely conflates the rhetoric of the trauma (as a cultural and interpretive discourse) and the rhetoric of trauma (as phenomenology, as symptomology). The collapsing of these boundaries might be perceived as either ingenious or dishonest (depending upon one's sympathies), or perhaps as a willed, interpretive naïveté much like the stance Sontag encourages aesthetic critics to adopt in relation to the immediate sensory experience of artworks.

An awareness of the cultural or aesthetic rhetoric of the trauma, then, does not diminish the rhetorical exigency that pertains to victims of trauma. The historical parameters of the violence that occasions trauma and the experiential urgency of traumatic events in history must be accounted for if we are to make sense of the trauma's many figurative urgencies in the work of art. By focusing in this essay on a particular figurative strand within the artistic representation of the trauma—namely, the habit of treating the perpetrator as the initial, initiating figure for agency within the experience of violence—I have tried to trace the aesthetic dimension of the trauma within the work of art to a cultural language that establishes both parameters and cues for interpreting victims of violence. I thereby have attempted to make us better aware of the trauma's cultural complicity with an interpretive horizon that largely contradicts the sense of trauma as a language sympathetically and therapeutically elicited from the perspective of the victim.

In closing this essay I turn to a literary text that might not initially seem an illustrative example of trauma, if only for the notable reason that this imaginative text fails to arrive at Caruth's first principle of trauma, that it should inscribe a survival. Yet this poem's primary rhetorical gesture (and it is a poem that reduces almost entirely to its rhetorical gesture) points to a mock survival that has everything to do with the hermeneutic Caruth would construe from trauma as a discourse ethically implicating its secondary witnesses in a history they have not experienced directly. The poem proffers a deliberatively crude gesture of implication, even as it also becomes complicitous with cultural cues demanding from the victim of violence an explanation of her experience to be inserted into the terms of our cultural understanding. I refer to Dan Pagis's duly famous Holocaust poem "Written in Pencil in the Sealed Railway Car."

> here in this carload
> i am eve
> with able my son
> if you see my other son
> cain son of man
> tell him that i[22]

I can never read this poem without recalling a pedagogical device employed by Sidra Ezrahi in a seminar at Yad Vashem during the summer of 1996. Placing Pagis's poem alongside a poem that was indeed (although Ezrahi had not yet revealed this fact) recovered from the body of a poet murdered by the Nazis, Ezrahi asked the seminar participants which of the two poems seemed more likely to have been written by a victim of the Holocaust. Several participants took the bait and voted for Pagis's poem. Few of them had the advantage of being professional interpreters of literature, which may account for their willingness to speak innocently. Such literary innocence seems to recall Plato's worst fears—that literature might make us unable to recognize what is real. Those among us who are not analysts of literary texts follow a custom or cultural convention of reading literature as though it were the transparent measure of authentic experience—according to which, for example, a fiction such as Jerzy Kosinski's *The Painted Bird* could be promoted (by the author himself) and received as though it were a novelistic account of the author's own experiences and according to which a fiction such as Benjamin Wilkomirski's *Fragments: Memories of a Wartime Childhood* could be marketed fraudulently as a memoir. One way of understanding the gullibility of audiences in such cases might be to account for the cultural status of the Holocaust as an event placing extraordinary demands on cultural representation. What is perhaps more interesting ideologically is that by mistaking fiction for truth, audiences abide by long-standing critical suspicions about the validity of fictional treatments of the Holocaust, but only by enacting a compensatory preference for fact over fiction, for real life over mediated reflections on experience, when in actuality it is the rhetorical effect of fictionality that they have preferred. When Art Spiegelman fought so hard to have *Maus* listed as nonfiction on the *New York Times* bestseller lists, he heeded the same cultural imperative, enabling his readers to enjoy a highly inventive and formally experimental rendering of personal history with the good conscience that most of the dialogue could be traced

back to the authentic experiences of a second-generation survivor. Often traumatic discourse perpetuates a similar conflation of the experiential realm of the author and the immediate sensory experience of an aesthetic text, such that a fiction's distortions might be read as though they were consequent upon and tantamount to traumatic symptomologies.[23]

Such a conflation becomes even more problematic when a text abides by other imperatives that contain the perspective of the victim of violence within cultural rubrics or interpretive protocols that an audience accepts, as it were, on the authority of the victim's voice. I am not suggesting that Pagis's poem intends a deception along the lines of Wilkomirski's ventriloquized memoir. Any initiated reader of literature, sensitive to the figurative and rhetorical devices by which imaginative effects are enacted, quickly will understand that the interruption at the end of Pagis's poem is precisely too convenient: it is as though the woman who writes this poem speaks up to the very moment when she arrives at the concentration camp and is unloaded from the railway car. Moreover, the poem's obvious formal relation to a genre such as epitaphic poetry increases the burden of the device, since the impossible perspective of the voice is enacted through the posthumous present tense of epitaphic convention. The writing on the wall of the railway car speaks to all who pass and stop to read these words. Already, however, as we draw out the historical conceit, there is a terrible deformation of the tradition of epitaph, since those who are most likely to read these words—if we remain naïvely faithful to the conceit (indulging the premise that the lines have been authored by a real Holocaust victim)—are the victims of the next transport. As lines written desperately by a victim to and for other victims (among whom might be, for example, the woman's other son), the poem seems to exemplify trauma, offering words that are the closest thing to silence we can imagine, words so obscure and useless that they seem barely to rise above the throat-cutting gesture of the complicitous bystanders in *Shoah*. Yet this interior, traumatic reading is precisely the perspective of a voice in history that never could have been recorded and so also the poem's most fraudulent hypothesis, creating the very effect of pathos that allows the naïve reader to accept the poem as directly testimonial.

It is only through the greater artifice of literature—according to which Pagis imaginatively enters the railway cars and concentration camps in order to conceive what transpired there and also to discover these all-but-anonymous lines—that this poem starts to achieve cultural significance. According to a supposition of timelessness, much as epitaph conceives itself by convention as a warning for all future generations, Pagis's poem is addressed to the surviving world and expresses itself through the allegorical idioms of broader culture. An involution of the aesthetic rhetoric of the trauma might seem the closest approximation we can have of that experience which is not our own, but immediately we are made to understand that the poem's address to Cain means also that its rhetoric has traveled beyond the perspective of its imagined victims, who are here both Abel and his mother. As the poem ventures toward this external world of reference, the inner reading of traumatic phenomenality I suggested in the above paragraph is not canceled. Rather, it is made possible for the first time, which is to say that it exists only by being contained as an irony within the practical parameters of the poem's allegorical reference. Notably, this address to the broader world is spoken as though to the archetypal murderer; and what seems most striking—and, by the terms of traumatic figuration I have been espousing in this essay, also most troubling—is that the victim speaks not to other victims but to a perpetrator who is also her son. One might try to assess this reference as an allegory for Jewish history, imagining the referents for Cain and Abel as different types of Jews, perpetrators (or collaborators) and victims, but such a hermeneutic starts to feel an awful lot like the interpretive protocols of *Moses and Monotheism*. Indeed, I would argue that Pagis's poem achieves its greatest ethical clarity by imagining Eve in the part of a Jewish mother cast as everywoman and Cain as the wayward son of culture, as the world beyond her control, perhaps even as one of the Nazis who victimizes her. By this reading, the poem identifies the ethical problem of trauma not in its being located outside history as irrationality but rather in its complicity of reference: even as it refers us to the suffering of the victim, any trauma as such demands to be

spoken in the language of rationality qua perpetration.

At the very least, then, Pagis's poem marks the gap between rhetorical protocols and traumatic experience as being so large that not only can the poem not recover the traumatic victim's genuine voice except through the conceit of a fantastic posthumous survival, but it must imagine a victim who speaks in the perpetrator's idioms, trying to find words within which to express her experience that murderers also will understand. We are almost thankful for the poem's fateful irony, though it is a cruel and grudging one, that the woman never has to speak these final words, which already would diminish and contain her experience as victim precisely because they are solicitous of—and seem to have been solicited by—a culture that conceives of agency through perpetration. Though Pagis's poem addresses trauma by way of its rootedness in the victim's perspective, it also fails to depict narratively a succeeding scene of survival, except possibly as a rhetorically suspended hypothesis. In this way, the poem gives evidence of a world in which rhetoric can never be finally repaired to trauma. There is trauma; here is rhetoric: everything we call meaning lies in between, by existing in rhetoric as in culture. Perhaps only artistic or literary rhetoric provides a stay against a construct of survival that is always more than a little bit forgetful of the victim precisely to the extent that it is also therapeutically or pragmatically effective. Such a stay occurs, ironically if at all, in large part because we believe there is a realm of aesthetic experience that almost parallels everyday experience—significant before, though just barely, it is interpreted.

Notes

[1]Stanley Cavell, "Music Discomposed," in *Must We Mean What We Say?: A Book of Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, [1969] 1976) 180–212.

[2]There is a structure of survival within the experience of trauma (which is perhaps only a poetic way of saying that the one who is traumatized is distinguished from other victims of violence by surviving the violence done to him). See Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). See Dominick LaCapra, *Representing the Holocaust: History, Theory, Trauma* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994) esp. 169–223.

[3]Dori Laub and N. C. Auerhahn, "Knowing and Not Knowing: Forms of Traumatic Memory" *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 94 (1993): 287–302.

[4]Caruth sees the writing of Freud's text as an act with historical connotations, as the "traumatic form of repression and repetitive reappearance . . . mark it [the text] as the very bearer of a historical truth that is itself involved in the political entanglement of Jews and their persecutors" (*Unclaimed Experience*, 20).

[5]See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, trans. Katherine Jones (New York: Random House, [1939] 1967) 176. I most often use Katherine Jones's translation, preferring it in certain important passages to Strachey's standard translation (*The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, ed. and trans. James Strachey

[London: Hogarth Press, 1953–1974]). Since Strachey is also consulted and sometimes cited, subsequent references are to Jones or the SE. In this particular passage, Strachey's translation loses some of the connotation of cultural identity that inheres in *Individualität:* "Less light has been thrown on the problem of how it is that they have been able to retain their individuality till the present day" (SE, 13:137).

[6]The Jews' endurance as a cultural entity depends upon a precarious relation to their Christian "host" cultures, much as the story of Freud's own text (told in his prefaces and in the "Summary and Recapitulation") depended upon the reception of his writing by an audience predominantly resistant, even perhaps hostile, to his argument. In his first prefatory note to *Moses and Monotheism*, Freud confesses his decision to withhold publication at a previous time because he feared losing the protection of the Catholic Church. Even in England, where he feels free and secure enough to publish his ideas without such self-censorship, he anticipates that this text will mean that among the "good people" who have written him letters worrying about his soul and eager to point him toward Christ, he will lose "something of the sympathy they now extend to me" (Jones, 70).

[7]Many of Freud's turns to audience seem merely a matter of rhetorical convention, strengthening a point by anticipating counter-points ("At this point I expect to hear the reproach," Freud says, "that I have built up my construction . . . with too great a certainty" [Jones, 35].) Yet in the two prefatory notes to *Moses and Monotheism,* one written in Vienna while still under the protection of the Catholic Church and the other from England where he had been received warmly, Freud considers his audience under the hypothesis of self-censorship. He describes his original decision to suppress the third part of the essay because it might offend the Catholic Church which, though it had been protecting him as he wrote the first "preface," has so far in history "been the implacable enemy of all freedom of thought."

[8]Freud to Arnold Zweig, 30 May 1934, in *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, ed. Ernst L. Freud (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970).

[9]A period of latency follows this trauma, during which the passionate, militaristic, and animist god Jahve competes with the vestiges of an abstracted, universalistic Mosaic god and the enlightened ethos he represents, until finally the Jewish tradition strikes a compromise by bringing the Mosaic ethos under the name of the later god and allowing the originally repressed leader and his ethos to survive, especially in the prophetic tradition with its reformative relation to cultic practice.

[10]Indeed, it is precisely because Freud cannot conceive of a relatively powerless people inventing a universalist and imperialist monotheism that he insists on the fact that the origins of the Jewish God must be borrowed. Monotheism, he says, survives as a wish-fantasy about world sovereignty that has been relatively diminished to a construct of election now nourishing a besieged identity. Although the original fantasy has been "relinquished long ago by the Jewish people" (*Moses and Monotheism*, 85), it continues to provide a rationale for their persecution. In the face of yet another escalation of persecution, his use of *fortleben* in the sentence here cited gives rise to what are most likely unintentional ironies, not only anticipating Caruth's reading of trauma itself as a survival but more concretely predicting the dilemma Freud poses to the reader as a responsibility by the end of the text: how have the Jews preserved themselves as an entity until this day and how are they to do so hereafter?

[11]The liberal, non-Jewish version of such a contention would be Sartre's claim in *Reflexions sur la Question Juive* (*Anti-Semite and Jew*, trans. George J. Becker [New York: Shocken Books (1946) 1948]) that the external prejudice of anti-Semitism determines the insularity of Jewish identity.

[12]The tendency to convert the idea of one who inflicts harm into a fantasy of the ego's own masochistic woundedness is most pronounced in an essay such as "A Child Is Being Beaten," where Freud's inter-

pretation of the beating fantasy conflates the positions of the sadistic and masochistic impulses (masochism is always the guilty redirection of sadistic urges) and so, by logical extension, determines the real status of the victim through the projected ideas about the one who inflicts harm. Although Freud makes the disclaimer that in the fantasies of neurotics, the content of violence develops in an inverse relation to any etiology in real violence (the neurotics who witness such beatings in their dreams are not themselves products of especially violent upbringings, nor inclined to experience real violence as pleasurable), this impulse of the neurotic marks a characteristic dimension of the human psyche for Freud. The neurotic negotiates an aggressive impulse toward the seemingly anonymous child it imagines being beaten by a similarly anonymous figure (Freud fills in this phase of the fantasy by completing the dream's ellipses: *the child whom I hate is being beaten by my father*) and also veils its own masochistic fantasy of guilt and love in the spectacle of detached violence (the dream disguises the child's punishment fantasy at the hands of the father).

[13]As the field of victimology emerged as a special division of criminology and legal studies largely after World War II, one of its foundational precepts became the construct of "victim precipitation"—those actions a victim may take to put himself or herself at risk of a crime or those actions that may provoke a crime. This idea emerges in Hans von Hentig's argument in his seminal study in victimology, *The Criminal and His Victim* (1948), namely that despite the law's efforts to maintain distinction between victims and perpetrators, there is a sense in which "the victim shapes and moulds the criminal." As von Hentig says, the law observes the one who acts and the one who is acted upon in order to maintain the distinction between perpetrators and victims, but "[i]n sociological and psychological quality the situation may be completely different. It may happen that the two distinct categories merge. There are cases in which they are reversed and in the long chain of causative forces the victim assumes the role of a determinant" (*The Criminal and His Victim* [New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948] 384). Though it has been at times contested, this premise has had a long and full life in the field. It is not always, however, stated as provocatively as in an essay by Grayson and Stein arguing that a "nonverbal dialogue seems to exist between criminal and victim through which the victim communicates his or her vulnerability to the criminal in much the same way that releasor mechanisms operate in the animal world." See B. Grayson and M.I. Stein, "Attracting Assault: Victims' Nonverbal Clues," *Journal of Communication* 31:1 (1981):68-75 and Ezzat A. Fattah, *Understanding Criminal Victimization: An Introduction to Theoretical Victimology* (Scarborough, Ontario: Prentice-Hall, 1991). It is worth noting a familial resemblance between this legal mode of thinking and a strain of Holocaust studies that has focused either on the pathology of the victim (for instance, some of Bruno Bettelheim's essays) or on the victims' complicity in their fate (a position most famously attributed to Hannah Arendt in her extension of Raul Hilberg's account of the *Judenrat*).

[14]Freud is indebted to the biblical tradition's pious tendency to preserve all details, even discordant ones, so that the text is simultaneously the symptom of murder and its suppression, a parallel made obvious in Freud's terms for the composition of his text, when he explains that the structural repetitiveness of the book and the tendency of the second and third parts of his book to recapitulate what has come before results from the interrupted history of its compositions, so that the reader perceives in this clumsiness the "traces of how the book came to be written" (*Moses and Monotheism*, 132).

[15]Freud here anticipates René Girard, who characterizes the function of any mythological text as a repetition and diffusion of the original violence to which it bears witness. See René Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, trans. Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1972] 1977).

[16]Dori Laub and Daniel Podell also commit themselves to a process of what we might call ethical selectiveness, choosing to focus only on the traumatic phenomenology as it pertains to obvious victims, such as Simon Srebnik, who are presented in *Shoah*. See Dori Laub and Daniel Podell, "Art and Trauma," *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 76

(1995): 991–1005.

[17]See especially Shoshana Felman, "The Return of the Voice: Claude Lanzmann's *Shoah*" in Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 204–83.

[18]All citations of the film *Shoah* refer to the complete printed text of the film. See Claude Lanzmann, *Shoah: An Oral History of the Holocaust* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985) 54.

[19]See Jean Améry, "Resentments," *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor of Auschwitz and Its Realities*, trans. Sidney Rosenfeld and Stella P. Rosenfeld (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1980) 62–81.

[20]Schwarz, adopting the hypothetical perspective of the victims, wonders what sense or use they might have made of these signs:

> Other Poles claim with great pride to have signaled the Jews arriving in transports to Treblinka station that they were going to die by moving their hands across their throats. But is not Lanzmann implying that this is a pathetic intervention on the part of the Poles?
>
> For, we ask, what could the victims do with these admonitions? Richard Glazer speaks of seeing a boy make the warning gesture, and we may also think of Spielberg's appropriation of the gesture in *Schindler's List*. Yet, ironically, when Gawkowski, the man driving the train, wipes the sweat from his neck, he repeatedly moves his hand across his throat in a gesture that suggests throat cutting. What this shows is not only the ambiguity of a gesture now claimed to have been an act of heroism, but possibly how the latent iteration of repressed trauma—what Freud calls the repetition compulsion—inadvertently surfaces in Gawkowski's psyche. For the contemporary viewers, that inadvertent gesture could be our response to the desserts of those who participated or stood by while annihilation took place" *(Imagining the Holocaust* [New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999] 32).

The gesture fails to amount to the significance of heroic memory precisely because it is a sign severed from any meaningful wish for communication or action. If it is intervention, it is a "pathetic" intervention on the part of the bystanders, the complement to the inefficacious signs to be found in the victims themselves who can do nothing "with these admonitions." The accidental pathos evoked by the gesture arises in inverse proportion to the possibility that the Jews might do something with the information. Notice too that Schwarz's reading remains invested in Caruth's interpretive trope by which trauma is said to pass its signification onto the figure of the perpetrator/bystander (here, the unconscious throat-cutting gesture of Gawkowski repeated years later).

[21]With the synecdochal voice of the deported Jews mystified by the throat-cutting sign, the scene next cuts to the Polish villagers. We get no explanation of what kind of signs the Jews might have used to convey the abstract and difficult question, "What's going on here?"; all we do know is that their attempts at communication were met with this sign of throat-cutting, ominously predicting the silence of the victim. The impasse of communication in the narrative segment about the throat-cutting gesture relates to the broader phenomenon of the disbelief of the victim. Over and over again in Holocaust testimony, we hear the disbelief of the victim, sometimes against rational evidence, in the face of such overwhelming atrocity. A survivor in Lanzmann's film, Abraham Bomba, tells of arriving at Treblinka and asking what had happened to those who had gone before them, only to learn they have all been gassed: "How could they kill, how could they gas so many people at once? But they had a way to do it" (47). His disbelief, as it is countered by the cold facts of the Nazi genocide, recalls the menacing voice of one of the Polish villagers declaring "they saw what kind of factory it was" (35), since knowledge conquers moral disbelief. Perhaps the most famous example of the many testimonies detailing the phenomenon of Jewish disbelief when confronted with news of the Nazis' evil comes from the opening of Elie Wiesel's *Night*. In that text Moshe the Beadle, having survived a mass execution by one of the *Einsatzgruppen*

killing units, returns to Sighet, Transylvania, to warn the Jewish community: "I wanted to come back to Sighet to tell you the story of my death. So that you could prepare yourselves while there was still time. To live? ... I don't attach any importance to my life any more. I'm alone. No, I wanted to come back, and to warn you. And see how it is, no one will listen to me..." (*Night/ Dawn/ Day*, trans. (of *Night*) Stella Rodway [Northvale, New Jersey: Jason Aronson, 1985] 17). Moshe is an ironic prophet, bearing news of such fantastic import it cannot possibly be understood by human beings who expect even the most minimal standard of decency to inhere in the actions of their oppressors.

[22]See Dan Pagis, *Points of Departure*, trans. Stephen Mitchell (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1981).

[23]Cf. Amy Hungerford's reading of the problematic continuity between trauma and experience promoted by Wilkomirski's false memoir. Although Hungerford is also interested in the fault line that runs between experience and literature, she especially emphasizes the tendency of trauma theory to overextend the parameters of experience and reach into literature, suggesting the way in which memory for that which was not experienced directly can be assumed as though it were one's own experience. Whereas Hungerford emphasizes the trespasses of imagination upon a ground not its own and thus seems to call for a literature that would delineate these boundaries more carefully, by contrast I have tried to listen to the interpretive cues determining the aesthetic text's place in culture in such a way that the rhetoric of the trauma as cultural figure can be distinguished from the possibility of a rhetoric that would inhere in the trauma itself. See Amy Hungerford, *The Holocaust of Texts: Genocide, Literature, and Personification* (Chicago: Univeristy of Chicago Press, 2003) 97–121.