Understanding the Body’s Critique: Repeating to Repair

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ABSTRACT

In the following paper I look at the body as a site where individual and communal normative structures come into view. Drawing from the work of Sigmund Freud and Paul Ricoeur, and through an analysis of the compulsion to repeat, I offer an understanding of psychoanalysis as a practice whereby we decipher the body’s call to configure our individual lives more humanly. This involves the interruption of the compulsion to repeat and the transition from an instinctual and organic development, towards an ‘Erotic life.’ I also broaden the scope of the analysis and investigate the kinds of communal structures or bonds that the psychoanalytic concept of an ‘Erotic drive’ calls for. To this end, I introduce Walter Benjamin’s studies on the relation between different temporal and political structures.

Keywords: embodiment, transference, compulsion to repeat, erotic drive, messianic temporality.

Introduction

Central to Freudian psychoanalysis is a conception of the body as a site where individual and communal normative structures come into view. The patient’s symptoms are the signs of a way of life that is going astray, and the analyst attempts to interpret or decipher the meaning encoded in the patient’s body. Although the work of Charles Sanders Peirce will not be central to my analysis, his understanding of the role played by the three basic semiotic elements—the object, sign, and interpretant—in the production of meaning, can help us clarify how we may conceive of the body as a sign. The patient’s symptoms become signs for an object, the normative structure, and psychoanalysis becomes an interpretant; it clarifies the meaning of the symptom insofar as it signifies a specific normative structure.¹

In the following essay I will contend that the psychoanalytic cure consists in the acquisition of the practical ability to intervene in the structuring of our lives. More specifically, drawing on the work of Paul Ricoeur and Walter Benjamin, and through an analysis of compulsive behavior, I will argue that psychoanalysis can be understood as a practice whereby we decipher the body’s call to configure our individual and communal lives more humanly.
I. Transference as the Repetition of a Normative Framework

At first blush, this may seem an unconventional understanding of psychoanalysis. Anna O, the first patient of psychoanalysis famously called it the ‘talking cure.’ In its initial stages, the therapeutic technique consisted in the ‘cathartic method,’ whereby patients attempted to talk their symptoms out. Symptoms were conceived of as disguising and repressing painful memories, and the aim of analysis was to bring these memories to consciousness through hypnosis, recollection, or free-association. Allegedly, this process would purge the symptoms. The understanding of psychoanalysis as a practice whereby we decipher the body’s call to configure our individual lives more humanly and our communal lives more justly depends, preliminarily, on grasping the implications of one of the most significant revisions of psychoanalytic technique: Freud’s abandonment of the ‘cathartic method’ and his progressive conception of the aim of psychoanalysis in terms of resolving the transference. In the first part of this essay, drawing from Jonathan Lear’s comprehensive philosophical introduction to Freud, I will attempt to arrive at an understanding of transference as a normative framework coming into view, or as “a repetition of an entire orientation to the world” (Lear 2005: 136).

The concept of transference attains its central status in the postscript to the 1905 case study of Dora, where Freud describes transferences as “a special class of mental structures,” or as “new editions or facsimiles of the tendencies and fantasies which are aroused and made conscious during the process of the analysis” (Freud 1997: 106–08). They are peculiar in that they “replace some earlier person by the person of the physician” (ibid.). To get a better grasp of what these statements mean, it is necessary to review the minutiae of the case.

Dora, an intelligent eighteen-year old in a Viennese bourgeois family, was brought to Freud by her father after disclosing suicidal tendencies and allegedly inventing an attempted seduction by a family friend, Herr K. Through the analysis, Freud gets Dora’s version of the story: her father was having an affair with Frau K, and Dora was indirectly encouraged to receive the amorous attentions of Frau K’s husband, Herr K. One day, while on a walk after a trip to a lake in the Alps, Herr K. propositioned her. Dora responded with a slap, later complaining to her mother and breaking her parents’ social world apart. Three months into the treatment, the slap was repeated. This time it was directed at Freud, bringing his cure to a hasty end.

What Dora’s slap, one of her symptoms, seems to reveal is that in her “idiosyncratic” world there are a limited set of structures or positions “in terms of which she experiences people and events. She quells her own anxiety, calms herself, by experiencing the world in a familiar pattern” (Lear 2005: 122, 124). For example, in her orientation to the world there tends to be a Herr K position: “there [tends] to be an older male figure who is at once charming, seductive, attentive, manipulative and self-centered—in relationship to whom she organizes her own complicated emotional responses” (ibid.). In “The Dynamics of the Transference,” Freud aptly likens this form of patterning the world to a cliché:
Every human being has acquired, by the combined operations of inherent disposition and of external influences in childhood, a special individuality in the exercise of his capacity to love – that is, in the conditions which he sets up for loving, in the impulses he gratifies by it, and in the aims he sets out to achieve in it. This forms a cliché or stereotype in him, so to speak, which perpetually repeats and reproduces itself as life goes on. (Freud 1959: 312)

This is the sense in which transferences are a special class of mental structures. In the analysis, the patient repeats all of his or her normative structures and tendencies, transferring them to the physician and to the analytic situation. In “Remembering, Repeating and Working Through,” Freud brings the repetitive aspect of transference into focus: “the patient remembers nothing of what is forgotten and repressed, but acts it out. He reproduces it not as a memory but as an action; he repeats it” (Freud 1958: 150). In Dora’s case, for example, she “[comes] to experience Freud in Herr K-like ways, and that is why she wants to give him a slap” (Lear 2005: 123). The slap signifies and makes visible a central part of Dora’s normative framework.

What is particular to analysis is that these structures or frameworks are subject to question. The patient’s idiosynratic world “[comes] into view as such” (Lear 2005: 122). In other words, the ultimate aim of analysis is to “devise a form of interaction in which people can come to recognize their own activity in creating structures that they have hitherto experienced as an independently existing world” (ibid.). This is precisely what Freud means when he states, in the postscript to the Dora case, that through analysis the transference is constantly being destroyed or resolved. Here, to remember no longer means to bring a painful, repressed memory to consciousness, thereby purging it. It means to repeat our normative framework and to have another highlight our active involvement in its formation, thereby endowing us with the practical ability to intervene and, perhaps, to re-configure our overall forms of evaluation. To remember, here, means to engage in a conversation that has the potential to “change the structure of a human soul” (Lear 2005: 220).

II. Compulsive Repetition, the Conservative Nature of the Instincts, and the Embodiment of Erotic Life

In the previous section I offered an understanding of transference as the structure of a human soul coming into view; the body signifies a particular normative structure. In this section, drawing on Ricoeur’s discussion of Eros and Thanatos (love and death) in his seminal study Freud and Philosophy, I will propose an interpretation of the normative structure that comes into view in compulsive behavior.

Ricoeur’s discussion of Eros and Thanatos is part of a broader attempt to clarify Freud’s 1920 essay Beyond the Pleasure Principle. In this essay, Freud first introduces the concept of the death instinct, specifically to explain compulsive behavior. As Ricoeur states, “it should be noted that the death instinct was not introduced to
account for the factor of destructiveness...but to account for a set of facts which center around the compulsion to repeat” (1970: 281). Yet, the relation between the death instinct and compulsive behavior becomes evident only after a meditation on the limits of the explanatory force of the concept of the pleasure principle.

To refresh our memory, for the first half of his career, Freud conceived of the mind or psychical apparatus as a system set in motion by a production of tension; because tension is experienced as unpleasurable, the mind works to reduce it. The ‘pleasure principle’ and the ‘reality principle’ are the two principles of mental functioning through which the mind works to reduce tension. Following a normal course of development and “under the influence of the ego’s instincts for self-preservation” (ibid., 283), the ‘pleasure principle’ is replaced by the ‘reality principle.’ The mind’s concern is ultimately not only to reduce tension, but to attain satisfaction by solving the problems initially producing tension.

Yet this understanding of the two principles of mental functioning was problematized by Freud’s encounter with instances of compulsive repetition. Specifically, it was problematized by his observation of war neuroses. The symptoms of soldiers coming back from the front after World War I seemed to be qualitatively different from those Freud had observed, for example, in cases of hysteria. Particularly, it seemed impossible to conceptualize their dreams as disguised gratifications of a wish, as the mind functioning under the ‘pleasure principle.’ Rather, the dreams of soldiers had the particular characteristic of repeatedly bringing them back to traumatic situations, flooding their minds night after night with images of “the same atrocity” (Lear 2005: 154). The difference was great enough that it motivated Freud to make a significant revision in psychoanalytic theory. It led him to think of the compulsion to repeat as an instantiation of something, “more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle” (Ricoeur 1970: 287). It led him to hypothesize an instinct beyond the pleasure principle: the death instinct, Thanatos.

Freud endows the compulsion to repeat with a central role in the psychical apparatus by drawing a parallel between the organism’s response to external stimuli and what happens in traumatic dreams. As Ricoeur clarifies, “the reception of external stimuli is conditioned by the erection of a protective shield: ‘protection against stimuli is an almost more important function for the living organism than reception of stimuli’” (1970: 287). In Freud’s account, traumatic dreams serve a similar function. What is accomplished by repeated exposure to real or imagined traumatic situations is a heightened sense of anxiety. And Freud depicts anxiety as “a particular state of expecting danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one” (ibid., 288). In other words, if a traumatic experience is traumatic to the extent that one is not prepared for it, the state of anxiety created by the dream serves as a protective shield against unknown dangers.

Freud now speculates that the pleasure principle only operates after the more instinctual task of creating a protective shield against external stimuli has been accomplished. The compulsion to repeat is thus prior to the pleasure principle. Yet it still intimates no relation to the death instinct. This relation becomes apparent after
marking the specifically “instinctual” nature of the compulsion to repeat, along with Freud’s description of the “universal attributes” of instincts (Ricoeur 1970: 289). As Freud suggests, “an instinct is an urge inherent in organic life to restore an earlier state of things which the living entity has been obliged to abandon under the pressure of external disturbing forces; that is, it is…the expression of the inertia inherent in organic life” (Freud 1958: 36).

Freud here stresses the essentially conservative nature of all instincts. Insofar as they are disposed to restore or preserve earlier conditions, the death and life instincts share a solipsistic, autarkic response to the external. The protective instinctual response prevents the organism from creatively incorporating novel conditions. Drawing out the implications of this insight places us in a better position to understand Freud’s controversial claim that all organisms die for internal reasons, and that the aim of all organic life is death. Ricoeur elaborates this insight as follows:

All of life’s organic developments are but detours toward death, and the so-called conservative instincts are but the organism’s attempts to defend its own fashion of dying, its particular path to death…Consider the migrations of certain fish and birds returning to the former localities of the species …does not all this attest to the conservative nature of life, to life’s inherent compulsion towards repetition? (Ricoeur 1970: 290)

From this it becomes clear that the compulsion to repeat relates to the death instinct in the form of embodiment. It is the sign or symptom of a body struggling against life, yet clearly against a different conception of life, one that does not develop organically but as an accomplishment. In contrast to Thanatos or the death instinct, we may call this conception of life ‘Erotic life.’

How is this form of life embodied? Which signs or symptoms manifest it? If the compulsion to repeat embodies a life lived and structured by the conservative death instinct, how is an ‘Erotic life’ embodied, and if an instinct does not activate it, what does? In Beyond the Pleasure Principle Freud introduces, in opposition to the death instinct, and as a more encompassing force than the sexual instincts, the concept of the Erotic drive.

It is important to note, first, the shift from the notion of instinct to that of drive. This shift immediately places the discussion of the death instinct, compulsive behavior, Eros, and its own form of embodiment, in the context of a renewed meditation on what sets the human apart from the animal. If the animal instinct for reproduction is “innate, naturally selected, issues in a characteristic activity, and aims at a certain outcome” (Lear 2005: 71), what Freud’s studies on fetishism and homosexuality bring to light is that human sexuality is “essentially imaginative” (ibid.,: 73). The significance of this claim is discerned if one thinks of sexuality more broadly as a teleological activity. In other words, when human beings ask themselves the question: ‘In view of what aim and through which activities should I structure my life?’ The responses that they formulate, while seeming to be natural, are in fact imaginative. If all the instincts, including the
death and life instincts, share the universal attribute of conservatism, Freud’s conceptual shift from the notion of instinct to that of drive sets apart the dimension of futurity for human life. If animal life is repetitive because self-contained, human life, Erotic life, is innovative because responsive. This is its form of embodiment.

It remains to explain what enables the replacement of both the life and death instincts by the Erotic drive. The following passage from Ricoeur’s study of Freud proves to be useful in this respect. It is worth citing at some length:

If the living substance goes to death by an inner movement, what fights against death is not something internal to life, but the conjunction of two mortal substances… the desire of the other is directly implied in the emergence of Eros; it is always with another that the living substance fights against death, against its own death, whereas when it acts separately it pursues death through the circuitous paths of adaptation to the natural and cultural environment. Freud does not look for the drive for life in some will to live inscribed in each living substance: in the living substance by itself he finds only death. (Ricoeur 1970: 291)

In other words, Erotic, human life becomes possible only by engaging with and being receptive to the external. Not by erecting a ‘protective shield,’ but by acknowledging another mortal substance, another human life structuring his or her activities in view of specific aims, and within a limited period of time.

III. Resolving the Transference: Interrupting the Compulsion to Repeat and the Transition that Dignifies a Human Life

Let me summarize the points made thus far. Freud ultimately came to understand the aim of psychoanalysis in terms of resolving the transference. As I maintained in the first section of this essay, to resolve the transference means to repeat one’s evaluative framework and through a particular kind of conversation, namely analysis, to gain the practical ability to intervene in the way that one structures one’s world and one’s place in it. In the second section I contended that what the compulsion to repeat embodies or signifies is a solipsistic life: one structured conservatively, defensively and inertly following its pre-given path. Through the concept of Erotic life, I also began to suggest that what could interrupt the compulsion to repeat would be a more human life; a life that is inventive and future-oriented because it is structured around the acknowledgment of others.

This reading of Freud places the great critic of religion in the vicinity of the two thinkers who fathered the “phenomenology of religion”: Emmanuel Lévinas and Jean-Luc Marion. For if the cure for the compulsion to repeat consists in a life beginning to be structured responsively, rather than by doggedly pursuing its pre-determined course, this places the terms of the discussion in line with the transition that, for Lévinas and Marion, dignifies a human life: the transition whereby one ceases to think of oneself as
an I and begins to think of oneself as interloqué. This transition is one whereby one ceases to think of oneself as in “autistic autarchy” (Marion 1998: 200), as depending for one’s sense and purpose on nothing other than oneself, and whereby one begins to think of oneself as an “auditor” (ibid., 204), as taking on a shape in response to familial, social and historical debts. In Marion’s words, a human I, is “an I that one does not designate but which says, hinenu, ‘Here I am’” (ibid., 72). It is in this sense that psychoanalysis can be understood as a practice whereby we decipher the body’s call to configure our individual lives more humanly.

IV. The Political Body and the Compulsion to Repeat: Walter Benjamin on Sovereign and Messianic Temporality

In the final section of this essay, drawing on Walter Benjamin’s studies of the ways that different temporal and political structures interrelate, I will broaden the scope of the analysis, focusing on the kind of communal structures or bonds that the concept of the Erotic drive calls for.

By stating that the compulsion to repeat is conservative, and that Erotic life is future-oriented, I draw attention to the different temporalities that these two forms of life embody. The conservative temporal structure of the death instinct, embodied in the compulsion to repeat, closely matches the conception of time and succession that, for Benjamin, is inherent to sovereign states and to capitalist modes of production and consumption. This is the time-form of the “continuum” (Benjamin 1999: 253) where “one Now-point follows another, uniformly, in linear succession” (Hamacher 2005: 49). It is the counterpart to the modern idea of progress, the automatic, “equally uniform, steady and inexorable striving towards a pre-given ideal of political life” (Hamacher 2005: 47). Benjamin calls this time-form “petrified unrest,” aptly capturing the sense that, while the modern understanding of progress entails movement, because it is tied to a set telos or end, it entails no real change.

The relation between this time-form and the overall structure of a sovereign state is not difficult to grasp, yet it is worth elucidating. Benjamin’s most significant discussion of this relation is his 1921 essay, the “Critique of Violence.” This essay is primarily a critique of the kind of violence, he calls it “mythic violence” (Benjamin 1978: 294), which serves either to further or to preserve the ends and means of a sovereign state and its institutions. Mythic violence is ‘law preserving’ when it is the handmaid of positive law, that is when it serves to preserve what are taken to be, within a given political body, legal means to attain specific ends. It is ‘law making’ when it is the handmaid of natural law, that is when it serves to preserve what are taken to be, within a given political body, legal means to attain specific ends. It is ‘law making’ when it is the handmaid of natural law, that is when it serves to attain ends that a political body considers being just. The relation between the time-form of progress and the structure of a sovereign state is perhaps most evident in the ‘law making’ function of violence, in the domain of natural law. For, as Benjamin states “[natural law] perceives in the use of violent means to just ends no greater problem than a man sees in his ‘right’ to move his body in the direction of a desired goal” (Benjamin 1978: 271). If inherent to the modern conception of progress is the idea that movement is steady, uniformly linear, and in view of pre-
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given aims, this movement is paralleled by the sovereign states’ warranted attempts to further its own just ends. Again, what Benjamin highlights in the concept of ‘mythic violence,’ in its relation to sovereign states and to the time-form of the continuum, is the degree of self-containment. The paradigmatic symbol for this containment is the border: “fortifications are, we might say, the very emblem of...what Benjamin called mythic violence” (Santner 2005: 108).

The relation between the conservative temporal structure of the compulsion to repeat and the conception of time and succession inherent to capitalist modes of production and consumption is perhaps more opaque. For, the rate and scale of change introduced by technological progress in the nineteenth century seems anything but conservative. In Marx’s celebrated words:

Constant revolutionizing of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into thin air. (Marx 1985, 224)

Yet, the unrest that is characteristic of modern times masks the fact that, at least initially, what fueled it was the modern faith in progress in history and through human intervention. In view of this, “sovereign temporalization mutates into the temporalization proper to the rhythms of commodity production and consumption” (Santner 2005: 76). Even the constant innovation that fashion demands does not prove to be truly forward-looking, for in Benjamin’s view, innovation is only genuine when it is necessary, that is, when it is responding to a missed opportunity from the past.

This brings us to the conception of time that, for Benjamin, could interrupt the compulsion to repeat, and to the political structures or kinds of communal bonds that would result from it. What characterizes this time-form is a complex relation between past, present and future. This relation is aptly captured by the terms “messianic time” (Benjamin 1999: 255), ‘historical time,’ or ‘calendar time.’ This time-form is messianic because the forward-movement from the present to the future is called for by a desire to redeem the past: either to cash in the possibilities (for universal human flourishing, for peace, for example) missed in the past, by fulfilling them in the future, or to make amends for an oppressed past. It is in this sense that we can understand Benjamin’s claim that “the past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption” (Benjamin 1999: 245). This time-form is historical, not because it follows the modern conception of history as a continuum and as progressive, but rather because it is characterized by historical awareness. Finally, a calendar, rather than a clock, serves as a better tool to measure it, because while following repeating structures, calendars are unique in that they are punctured by days of remembrance and include empty spaces where we can inscribe new commemorative dates.
V. Conclusion

Benjamin never explicitly delineated the political structures or kinds of communal bonds that would correspond to this ‘messianic’ temporality. His enterprise was critical: it was to diagnose in positivism and in the philosophy of progress, common traits of vulgar Marxism, conservative historicism and social-democratic evolutionism,\(^{13}\) a dangerous tendency to turn idealism into ideology. In the first three sections of this paper I offered an understanding of psychoanalysis as a practice whereby we decipher the body’s call to configure our individual lives more humanly. In view of the points made in these three sections, Benjamin’s “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” completed in the spring of 1940, not long after the short-lived Nazi-Soviet Pact was signed and not long after Hitler’s invasion of Poland, can be understood as an attempt to decipher the call of a political body to interrupt its compulsion to repeat; not to inertly follow its own death instinct, but by structuring its communal life with the desire for universal redemption, to substitute it by the Erotic drive. This reading of Benjamin places him in Freud’s vicinity, sharing with him the notion that a body, individual or communal, can fail to attain its humanity by following its tendency to repeat itself.

References


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Notes

1 See Charles Sanders Peirce, The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings, Vol. 2. Edited by The Peirce Edition Project. (Bloomington, IN, 1998), p. 492: “A Sign is a Cognizable that, on the one hand, is so determined (i.e. specialized, bestimm) by something other than itself, called its Object […], while, on the other hand, it so determines some actual or potential Mind, the determination whereof I term the Interpretant created by the Sign, that the Interpreting Mind is therein determined mediately by the Object.”


5 An elucidating correspondence can be found between this conception of ‘bound energy’ and Kant’s account of transcendental synthesis.

6 Ricoeur provides a helpful analysis of how Freud distinguishes anxiety from fright and fear. See Freud and Philosophy, p. 288.

7 Cited in: Ricoeur, Freud and Philosophy p.289.

8 For the clearest elaboration of this term, see Dominique Janicaud, Phenomenology and the Theological Turn, trans. Bernard G. Prusak. (New York, 2000).

9 An illuminating comparison can be made between Lévinas and Marion’s account of this transition, and Jürgen Habermas’ account of the transition from a selective cognitive and instrumental rationality to a more comprehensive communicative rationality. Habermas frames his account of this transition through a critical analysis of the Modern concept of self-preservation. See Jürgen Habermas The Theory of Communicative Action, trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Boston, 1984), p. 390-391.

10 It is interesting to note that Benjamin had originally planned a thesis on the concept of history in Kant. See Werner Hamacher, “Now: Walter Benjamin on Historical Time,” in Walter Benjamin and History. Edited by Andrew Benjamin. (London and New York, 2005), p.49.


12 See Santner, On Creaturely Life p.67: “The repetition of juridical precedent is, in other words, in a quite literal sense the compulsion to repeat. It is precisely this dimension of repetition compulsion that defines, for Benjamin, the sphere of ‘mythic violence.’”