

# “Awakening is itself the site of a trauma”

## *Rethinking Caruth on Freud*

There is a brute contingency to all origins as such.

—Harold Bloom, *Ruin the Sacred Truths*

### I

In discussing the impact of traumatic experience on the workings of memory, Bessel van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart challenge one of the central tenets of Freudian psychoanalysis—the concept of repression—at least as it relates to trauma. Like Freud, especially from the writing of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920) onward, van der Kolk and van der Hart are interested “in the role of overwhelming experiences on the development of psychopathology.”<sup>1</sup> But against Freud’s theory of repression as a response to trauma, they offer a new way of understanding what it means for the traumatized psyche not to be able to lay claim to a past experience in the form of a conscious relation to it.

Concerned both with how, in general terms, “memories are stored in the mind” and, more particularly, with the “disruptive impact of traumatic experiences” on the storage and retrieval of memories (158), van der Kolk and van der Hart argue that trauma’s disabling of the mind has less to do with repression as an active refusal of an experience—its forced relocation to a hidden region that escapes conscious attention—than with dissociation, a process whereby the mind, faced with an incomprehensible experience, fails to organize that experience within an unfolding temporal order, fails, that is, to assign it narrative coherence.<sup>2</sup> Where such coherence is lacking, they

argue, the mind cannot assimilate an experience into a broader life narrative. In this model, trauma renders experience inaccessible to conscious thought through the failed psychic integration of that experience: the experience cannot be assimilated into the broader cognitive patterns that are central to memory and, through memory, to the possibility of continuous or narrative selfhood. One might say that, for van der Kolk and van der Hart, trauma and narrative inaccessibility or incomprehensibility are one and the same.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, even as they disagree with Freud on the mental process that governs trauma, van der Kolk and van der Hart implicitly accept a key element of Freud's thought. If in the formation of trauma the role of conscious thought in engaging experience is somehow bypassed, the mind yet latches onto this experience at a different level. Thus, even as they reject Freud's use of the term repression in the context of trauma, van der Kolk and van der Hart still imagine some subconscious storehouse where the experience will be retained:

With regard to trauma, [Freud's] use of the term "repression" evokes the image of a subject actively pushing the unwanted traumatic memory away [later, they will write "pushed downward into the unconscious"]. . . . [But] contemporary research has shown that dissociation of a traumatic experience occurs as the trauma is occurring . . . There is little evidence for an active process of pushing away of the overwhelming experience; the uncoupling seems to have other mechanisms. Many trauma survivors report that they are automatically removed from the scene; they look at it from a distance or disappear altogether, *leaving other parts of the personality to suffer and store the overwhelming experience*. . . . [W]hen a subject does not remember a trauma, *its "memory" is contained in an alternate stream of consciousness*. (168; my emphases)

Although van der Kolk and van der Hart are no doubt right at the technical level to note that "traumatic memories cannot be both dissociated and repressed," they yet share with Freud the notion that trauma creates, indeed is essentially coincident with, an experience that goes underground and that subsequently disrupts consciousness "during traumatic reenactments" (168–69), that is, through repetition compulsion. The traumatic event may not be accessible to consciousness, but the mind retains a remnant, however distorted, of some part of an actual experience.<sup>4</sup>

Without trying to resolve the debate here (trauma as repression or trauma as dissociation), in the remainder of this chapter I would like to offer another possibility for understanding the formation and continuing impact of trauma (at least one type of it). And I would start with this simple observation: it is not self-evident that the psychical material marking a trauma must always be viewed as the remnant of an event that we actually experienced. As previously noted, van der Kolk and van der Hart appear to agree with Freud that, as an ongoing experience, trauma is the repeatedly expressed trace of such an event. But what if the experience of trauma registers an absence rather than a dislocated presence? What if the traumatic remnant is inaccessible precisely because it is not stored somewhere else in the mind? What if there is nothing to repress or what if there is nothing there to be transformed even into traumatic memory because there was no original experience to be remembered? Is it possible, then, to imagine that one could be traumatized precisely by what has *not* been experienced?

In the subsequent discussion I want to suggest that this possibility is hinted at (though only hinted at) in Cathy Caruth’s seminal study, *Unclaimed Experience*. But whereas Caruth builds on Freud’s related notions of fright, repetition compulsion, and deferred action (Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*) to explore trauma as an ethical crisis, I will attempt to show that at key points Caruth misstates Freud’s original argument and so imposes new, sometimes questionable meanings on certain Freudian concepts (most notably the death drive). More to the point, while in the final section I will briefly revisit the notion that trauma has an ethical aspect, I will argue that, whether or not Freud fully understood it this way, his original formulation represented trauma in its relation to the death drive less as an ethical situation than as an existential crisis.

## II

Before we consider how Caruth’s study might help us to rethink trauma, it is instructive to observe how, like van der Kolk and van der Hart, she yet retains a critical aspect of Freud’s theory even as she reworks other parts of it. Focused explicitly on how trauma persists—and how especially it is re-experienced in the form of repetition compulsion—Caruth never addresses the precise mechanism through which an original traumatic event becomes embedded in the psyche. But her descriptions of such an original event suggest that she would incline more to van der Kolk and van der Hart’s view than to Freud’s:

[T]he wound of the mind—the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world—is not, like the wound of the body, a simple and healable event, but rather an event that . . . is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor. . . . [T]rauma is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual’s past, but rather in the way that its very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely *not known* in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on. . . . [Trauma] is always the story of a wound that . . . addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available. This truth, in its delayed appearance and its belated address, cannot be linked only to what is known, but also to what remains unknown in our very actions and our language.<sup>5</sup>

Caruth is more concerned here with the circumstances under which trauma is formed than with the specific process by which an initial event becomes disruptive psychic residue. But even as she goes on to write that “traumatic experience, as Freud indicates suggestively, is an experience that is not fully assimilated as it occurs” (5), to say that such an experience “is not fully assimilated *as it occurs*” leans toward van der Kolk and van der Hart’s position. For example, as previously noted, they observe how “contemporary research has shown that dissociation of a traumatic experience occurs *as the trauma is occurring* . . . There is little evidence for an active process of pushing away of the overwhelming experience [Freud’s repression]; the uncoupling seems to have other mechanisms” (my emphases). More generally, Caruth’s claim that trauma is a “breach in the mind’s experience *of time*” accords with van der Kolk and van der Hart’s sense that the traumatic remnant is inaccessible to conscious thought because unassimilated into the mind’s normal temporal ordering of experience.<sup>6</sup>

That said, though hardly explicit about it, Caruth appears to share with van der Kolk and van der Hart the Freudian notion that the traumatic remnant is something retained in the psyche as a record or trace of an actual occurrence. She notes, for example, that the experience of trauma “stubbornly persists in bearing witness to some forgotten wound” (5). That the wound is *forgotten* suggests that it has been lost to or in the mind only after it has first been retained: if now forgotten it must previously have been remembered (even if in unassimilated form), and this memory points to

something that really happened in the past. While that original experience may not be “*fully* assimilated as it occurs,” something *is* assimilated at that initial occurrence; if there is a “*delayed* appearance,” that appearance yet points to the original event or at least to our response to the original event.

Still, as we have noted, Caruth insists that the relation between the trauma and the original event is governed by incomprehensibility. Because the original event “is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly,” it is “precisely *not known* in the first instance” and so “not available to consciousness.” And when it is available at all, it is only in the form of “belated address” or through “belated impact.” Indeed, for Caruth, “the story of trauma” is “the narrative of belated experience” (4, 7). Such a narrative is precisely that experience of bearing witness subsequently to what, we might say, is always already forgotten. Belatedness is thus, for Caruth, coincidental with repetition compulsion: trauma’s “belated address” or “belated impact” or “delayed appearance” resides in the temporal afterwards from which the mind looks back, repetitively, longingly, futilely, on an event it experienced but never truly knew.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps it is just a quibble to note the paradox of Caruth’s wording: how can something be belated or delayed if it is experienced “too soon?” No doubt, Caruth uses the phrase “too soon” to figure the perspective of the mind relative to an event rather than to situate a subject’s actual temporal relation to that event. In other words, the original event is experienced *before* the mind is ready to encounter and assimilate it. The subsequent “afterwards”—the time of the belated impact—would thus refer to when the mind *is* ready even as the delay would mark the breach in time that dislocates the original experience. Caruth sees the full force of trauma as operating belatedly in the sense that the subject experiences a delayed onset of symptoms: this notion of belatedness is best understood as equivalent to Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit* or “deferred action,” what “returns to haunt the survivor *later on*” (4). But, as we have noted, Caruth is just as interested in the *initial condition* of incomprehensibility (the “unassimilated nature” of an experience, “the way it was precisely not known in the first instance”). And when she writes that, in traumatic experience, “the most direct seeing of a violent event may occur as an absolute inability to know it; that *immediacy, paradoxically, may take the form of belatedness*” (91; my emphasis), she hints that belatedness is not just a statement of the temporal positioning of the response (its delayed appearance) but is also, and perhaps more crucially, descriptive of some quality in the original experience itself.

Indeed, if for Caruth trauma is “an event that . . . *is experienced too soon,*” in her subsequent discussion that “too soon” will become precisely

its opposite. Borrowing from Freud's key distinctions between fear, fright, and anxiety as laid out in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth notes that the "breach in the mind" characteristic of trauma is caused by "the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly" (here it is the stimulus that comes "too soon"). And "the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock . . . is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known" (62).<sup>8</sup> This notion of traumatic belatedness as the subject's coming *too late* rather than too soon helps us conceptualize the possibility of an experience of an initial seeing that fails to see, a presence that is also an absence, the inexplicable missing of what could not possibly have been missed. That is, what Caruth calls the "central enigma" of Freud's contextualizing of trauma in terms of the unexpected or accidental ("for instance, a train collision," as Freud puts it) might point to a different way of understanding belatedness. It "is not so much the period of forgetting that occurs after the accident, but rather that the victim . . . was never fully conscious during the accident itself." The deferral, or what Freud in *Moses and Monotheism* will call "latency," within the experience of trauma "would thus seem to consist," Caruth concludes, "not in the forgetting of a reality that can hence never be fully known, but in *an inherent latency within the experience itself*" (17; my emphasis).<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, this notion of belatedness is still figurative rather than literal: the subject was "there" but, inexplicably, missed the experience. But what if the initial encounter is not a presence dislocated in the mind but precisely a true originary absence, an experience in relation to which the traumatized subject was never and could never have been "there"? Caruth observes that much within trauma "defies . . . our witness" and "defies . . . our understanding" (5). But perhaps in some cases trauma defies understanding because the event that prompted it was never witnessed at all. Could "precisely not known in the first instance" mean, in some circumstances at least, that there was no such original event or, even if there were, that this event was not actually experienced, never actually remembered (even in dissociated form), and so never actually forgotten?

In short, what if we were to take the notion of "coming too late" literally rather than as a figurative description for that initial experience of incomprehensibility? Caruth is undoubtedly correct to suggest of trauma's relation to repetition compulsion that what is experienced in "traumatic neurosis . . . [is] the unwitting reenactment of an event that one cannot simply leave behind" (2). In some instances, however, it may be that the reenactment or obsessive return occurs precisely because, at the time of the

original event, the subsequently traumatized subject was already left behind in the sense of not having been present. For the remainder of this chapter, I want to pursue this interpretive trajectory. On the one hand, I will follow Caruth in arguing that the ghostly reality of the real event, a reality the traumatized subject inexplicably missed, fixes belatedness not just as a temporal lag in the registering of an event (the “delayed appearance” of trauma) but also, and more crucially, as a formative condition of trauma. On the other hand, I want to revise Caruth by arguing that, for a particular kind of trauma (one first theorized by Freud and subsequently appropriated by Caruth), the subject does not just “miss” the event but is in fact absent from it. Indeed, the event as constituted requires the subject’s absence. It is to an exploration of this possibility that we now turn.

### III

This section, which has much to do with the concept of origins, has its own origin in Freud’s justly famous account of the dream of the burning child (*Interpretation of Dreams*, chapter 7), a dream that Freud felt compelled to interpret twice. Here is Freud’s account of the setting of the dream and of the dream itself:

A father had been watching beside his child’s sick-bed for days and nights on end. After the child had died, he went into the next room to lie down, but left the door open so that he could see from his bedroom into the room in which his child’s body was laid out, with tall candles standing round it. An old man had been engaged to keep watch over it, and sat beside the body murmuring prayers. After a few hours’ sleep, the father had a dream that *his child was standing beside his bed, caught him by the arm and whispered to him reproachfully: “Father, don’t you see I’m burning?”* He woke up, noticed a bright glare of light from the next room, hurried into it and found that the old watchman had dropped off to sleep and that the wrappings and one of the arms of his beloved child’s dead body had been burned by a lighted candle that had fallen on them.

Freud begins his interpretation by noting how the dream can be read in terms of the fundamental processes of dream-work he has previously described. Although there seems to have been an external reality to which

the dream makes direct reference, the main terms of the dream—the child's words to the father—show evidence of the two primary dream-processes, condensation and displacement:

[T]he words spoken by the child must have been made up of words which he had actually spoken in his lifetime and which were connected with important events in the father's mind. For instance, "*I am burning*" may have been spoken during the fever of the child's last illness, and "*Father, don't you see?*" may have been derived from some other highly emotional situation of which we are in ignorance. (V, 509–10)

Freud recognizes that the very explicit connection between the dream and an external reality is atypical of dreams, and he "wonder[s]" at first "why it was that a dream occurred at all in such circumstances, when the most rapid possible awakening was called for." It is, therefore, the delay in the father's response—that is, the force of dreaming that postpones an awakening urgently demanded—that arouses Freud's interpretive interest.

Despite the dream's direct reference to an external reality, because the details of the dream yet "can be inserted into the chain of the dreamer's psychological experiences," Freud initially interprets the dream as an instance of his theory of wish-fulfillment:

[H]ere we shall observe that this dream, too, contained the fulfillment of a wish. The dead child behaved in the dream like a living one: he himself warned his father, came to his bed, and caught him by the arm, just as he had probably done on the occasion from the memory of which the first part of the child's words in the dream were derived. For the sake of the fulfillment of this wish, the father prolonged his sleep by one moment. The dream was preferred to a waking reflection because it was able to show the child as once more alive. (V, 510)

Freud does not say this in so many words, but the fact that the dream takes place in the context of an actual external reality to which it appears to refer directly (though it is not, of course, a simple reflection of that reality) provides even more evidence for the complex rhetoric of the dream-work. For the external reality of the light is reconfigured in the dream as an indirect representation, both metaphorical and metonymical, of the child's death ("don't you see I'm burning?"). And the very ambiguity of that representa-



tion (why is the child burning? where is he burning? where is the father?) serves the ends of wish-fulfillment: a burning child who can yet speak is precisely not a dead child. Freud adds that “if the father had woken up first and then made the inference that led him to go into the next room, he would, as it were, have shortened his child’s life by that moment of time.” Following a logic more in line with Freud’s own observations concerning the solipsistic nature of dreams, we might turn this remark around to say that, had he woken up immediately, he would have shortened his own *fatherly* life by that moment of time. That is, dreaming that his child yet lives (even if suffering), the father extends the time in which he has not yet failed in his chief paternal duty, to protect his own child from harm.

Freud’s first answer then to the problem of the delay in waking up is completely in line with his theory of dreams. But Freud seems unsatisfied with this interpretation, and, later in the chapter, without rejecting that initial interpretation, he adds a secondary motive:

[W]e may assume that a further motive force in the production of the dream was the father’s need to sleep; his sleep, like the child’s life, was prolonged by one moment by the dream. “Let the dream go on”—such was his motive—“or I shall have to wake up.” In every other dream, just as in this one, the wish to sleep lends its support to the unconscious wish. (V, 570–71)

The phrase “wish to sleep” might suggest that the presence of a second wish just goes to prove that the relation of dreaming to wish-fulfillment is overdetermined: because dreams are efficient, more than one wish can be accommodated in a single dream. But it is curious that Freud distinguishes the wish to sleep from “the *unconscious* wish” to prolong, even for just a moment, the life of the child. In other words, it is not clear if the wish to sleep is a “wish” in the way the theory of dreams understands wish-fulfillment as the release through the censoring mechanisms of the psyche of desires created under the pleasure principle. Is there simply a bodily *need* for sleep that is facilitated by the drive of the Unconscious to engage in wish-fulfillment or is there an *unconscious* wish for sleep, that is, a desire for sleep that can be understood in terms of the urgings of the Unconscious? And, if the latter, why would the wish for sleep need to be unconscious in the first place?

We might even ask if any part of the psyche is aware of a need or desire to sleep. Earlier in the *Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud appears to answer in the affirmative but not without some ambiguity: “All dreams . . . serve

the purpose of prolonging sleep instead of waking up. Dreams are the GUARDIANS of sleep and not its disturbers. . . . Thus *the wish to sleep (which the conscious ego is concentrated upon . . .)* must in every case be reckoned as one of the motives for the formation of dreams, and *every successful dream is a fulfillment of that wish*" (IV, 233–34; my emphases; original emphases deleted). On the one hand, Freud says explicitly that the wish to sleep is related to "the conscious ego"; on the other hand, the fact that the prolonging of sleep marks the fulfillment of a wish (an instance of the generalized process that governs all dreams) suggests that, like other wishes, it derives from the Unconscious. But it isn't clear how the conscious ego "concentrates upon" the wish to sleep. Does this wish emanate from consciousness or does it come from someplace else and only thereafter come to the attention of consciousness?

In her analysis of Freud's dual interpretation of the dream of the burning child, Caruth notes that the father's wish for sleep is "more profound and enigmatic" than his wish to sustain a fantasy that his child yet lived "because . . . it comes not only from the body but from consciousness itself, which desires somehow its own suspension." "[C]ommon to all sleepers," Caruth adds, this desire "represent[s] . . . the wish fulfillment of consciousness itself" (96). Caruth's phrasing in a certain way repeats the ambiguity of Freud's original account, and we must ask, again, what sort of wish emanates from consciousness. What makes this notion truly profound and enigmatic is that it offers the possibility that consciousness is not simply to be distinguished from the Unconscious but that consciousness itself has its own unstated or unknowable or even forbidden desires.

What we need to ask then is just what is this forbidden desire of the wish to sleep that consciousness can face only in the form of a dream. I quoted Caruth's observation that "consciousness itself . . . desires somehow its own suspension"; she goes on to note that the "wish of consciousness to sleep" is, in some form, "the desire of consciousness as such not to wake up." Attempting to gloss this notion, Caruth, who still sees the "desire of consciousness as such *not to wake up*" very much in the context of the father's emotional struggle over his child's death, comments that "it is not the father alone who dreams to avoid his child's death, but *consciousness itself* that, in sleep, is tied to a death from which it turns away" (97). The phrase "tied to a death from which it turns away" appears to mean the death of the child, the death the grieving father cannot yet accept. But to the extent that, in Caruth's curious formulation, the desire of consciousness to sleep is bound up with its turning away from the child's death, we might rightly ask if the idea of "the desire of consciousness not to wake

up” can be anything other than a metaphor for wish-fulfillment itself. That is, if sleeping as opposed to waking marks the father’s turning away from his child’s death, what sleep both enacts and represents is simple disavowal, the resistance to waking up to a reality the conscious mind does not want to admit. And when Caruth then concludes by noting that “Freud seems to suggest [that] something in reality itself . . . makes us sleep” (97), we might respond that this something is precisely reality itself, in other words, the reality principle in opposition to the pleasure principle. This tautology does not advance our understanding very far.

Perhaps we can redirect the inquiry by asking a different question. Let us return to Caruth’s statement that “it is not the father alone who dreams to avoid his child’s death, but *consciousness itself* that, in sleep, is tied to a death from which it turns away.” As I noted, the death from which consciousness turns away here appears to be the death of the child. The father’s consciousness of this death—or at least an awareness within consciousness that this death marks a reality to which it does not want to awaken—is thus a response to a very specific setting, the death of this particular child of this particular grieving father. What can it mean then to suggest, as Caruth does, that the experience of consciousness itself “desir[ing] somehow its own suspension . . . refers to a desire *common to all sleepers?*” Caruth appears to be imagining an experience different from a shared need (bodily or otherwise) to sleep. The experience is rather, as she suggests, a desire within consciousness not to wake up. But this desire cannot be as specific as a disavowal of a child’s death for the simple reason that this particular situation of grief is *not* common to all sleepers. We are thus left with another, as yet unexplained possibility. If “the desire of consciousness as such not to wake up . . . is tied to a death from which it turns away,” is there another death from which this father and all sleepers turn away? In other words, perhaps the death we are considering is not the death of this particular child but precisely the death that is *common to all*: our own death.

To explore this possibility in more detail, I want to pick up on a line of inquiry that Caruth hints at only to set aside in favor of an ethical reading of the dream. Discussing Lacan’s account of the dream in his Seminar XI as yet another revision of Freud’s original dream-interpretation, Caruth observes how the complex dream-work of the dream of the burning child suggests that “awakening . . . is itself the site of a trauma” (100; original emphasis deleted). And the trauma that Caruth imagines as arising from the father’s experience is “the necessity and impossibility of responding to another’s death.” It is this failure of response to another, and in particular

to another's death, that Caruth sees as definitive of trauma and might even, she ventures, "represent the very nature of consciousness itself" (96).

This nexus of trauma, death, and consciousness leads Caruth, briefly, to set aside her focus on what she calls "the story of an urgent responsibility" (102)—a responsibility both to bear witness to and to acknowledge the impossibility of ever bearing witness to the true otherness of someone else's death—to recall an earlier section of her study in which she considers Freud's analysis of trauma in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*. In chapters 4 and 5 of that path-breaking study, Caruth observes, Freud

moves from a speculation on consciousness that explains trauma as an interruption of consciousness by something . . . *that comes too soon to be expected*, to an explanation of the origins of life itself as an "awakening" from death that precisely establishes the foundation of the [death] drive and of consciousness alike. This peculiar movement therefore traces a significant itinerary in Freud's thought from trauma as an exception, an accident that takes consciousness by surprise and thus disrupts it, to trauma as the very origin of consciousness and all of life itself. (104)

As if concerned that this way of reading Freud will take her too far afield of her main concern, Caruth immediately drops this line of inquiry (one that, as we shall see in a moment, she has previously pursued). She goes on to argue instead that the "global theoretical itinerary" unveiled in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (the relation of trauma, death and the death drive, and the simultaneous origin of consciousness and life) is best understood by Lacan's *revision* of Freud's dream-interpretation, especially Lacan's "suggestion that the accidental in trauma is also a revelation of a basic, *ethical dilemma* at the heart of consciousness itself insofar as it is essentially *related to death, and particularly to the death of others*" (104; my emphases). What is amiss in Caruth's argument is that her understanding of Freud's own expansion of the scope of trauma (from "trauma as an exception, an accident" to "trauma as the very origin of consciousness and all of life itself") ends up defining the death drive as though it took its original orientation from the death of another. Caruth acknowledges later that this view of the death drive is at most only hinted at in Freud and that the true source of this idea is not Freud but Lacan.<sup>10</sup> In any event, we are reminded here of precisely what failed in her analysis of the father's wish-fulfillment: "the story of a sleeping consciousness figured by a father unable to face the accidental death of a child" (102) cannot "refer to a desire *common to all sleepers*" (that is,

to consciousness’s desiring “its own suspension”) because the accident of a child’s death is not common to all people. In other words, despite what Lacan or Caruth might think, the trauma that arises in response “to the death of others” is precisely what is the exception and therefore should not be substituted for Freud’s “global theoretical itinerary,” a theory of the origins of trauma as something common to all.<sup>11</sup>

In short, in considering Caruth’s earlier discussion of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, we recognize that, “insofar as” what is common to all people “is essentially related to death,” the death in question has little to do with the death of another. Perhaps even more important, as Caruth herself appears to recognize initially, this shared experience is “related to death” only to the extent death is itself related to something else entirely. To understand what this might mean, let us return to Caruth’s attempt to reconstruct one of Freud’s fundamental claims in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*:

In this work, Freud . . . moves from a speculation on consciousness that explains trauma as an interruption of consciousness . . . to an explanation of the origins of life as an “awakening” from death that precisely establishes the foundation of the [death] drive and of consciousness alike. This peculiar movement . . . traces a significant itinerary in Freud’s thought from trauma as an exception, an accident that takes consciousness by surprise and thus disrupts it, to trauma as the very origin of consciousness and all life itself.

As I have noted, Caruth is here referring to a section from *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* she had previously addressed. Freud’s key statement reads as follows: “The attributes of life were at some time awoken in animate matter by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception. . . . The tension which then arose in what had hitherto been an inanimate substance endeavored to cancel itself out. In this way the first drive came into being: the drive to return to the inanimate state.”<sup>12</sup> In line with her core argument, Caruth substitutes “awoken” for the *Standard Edition*’s “evoked”—hers is a much better rendering of *erweckt*—and in that context she goes on to suggest that Freud himself locates the “beginning of the [death] drive” not in any encounter with death “but rather [in] the traumatic ‘awakening’ to life.” But when she immediately adds that “life itself, says Freud, is an *awakening out of a ‘death’* for which there was no preparation” (65; my emphasis), her argument begins to go awry. In the first place, at this point in her discussion she does nothing to establish that trauma has its

origin in the death of another. Second, and more important, even if Freud is here imagining the “awakening to life” as a traumatic experience that is shared by all, he does not in fact say that this is the equivalent of an awakening “out of a death.”<sup>13</sup> What he says rather is that life is awoken (*erweckt*) from an “inanimate state,” a state that is linked to what we call death only in the sense that the death drive marks an urge to “return” to that state.<sup>14</sup>

Caruth’s misrepresentation is significant because it forms the basis of her unsubstantiated extension of Freud’s theory: “the origin of the [death] drive is thus precisely the experience of *having passed beyond death without knowing it*” (65; my emphasis). While this assertion anticipates and lays the groundwork for her subsequent reading of the dream of the burning child, the “experience of having passed beyond death without knowing it” is precisely *not* Freud’s way of articulating the origin of the death drive. Indeed, as we have just noted, although Freud views the death drive as an instinctual response to the trauma of awakening (to life and to consciousness), that awakening is “out of a death” only to the extent that death might be taken as a metaphor for an inanimate state (Freud himself does not call that state “death”). Thus, Caruth’s “having passed beyond death without knowing it” can really only mean coming into being or experiencing the origin of life and consciousness—or, perhaps more accurately, moving from an inanimate to an animate state—without understanding how or why. And this is precisely how Freud himself puts it: “The attributes of life were at some time evoked [awoken] in animate matter *by the action of a force of whose nature we can form no conception*” (XVIII, 38; my emphasis).

Within his speculative history of organic life, Freud does see the movement from an inanimate to an animate state as occurring without the organism fully knowing that it is undergoing this transition. Any knowledge of the origin would therefore be after the fact, partial and retrospective at best. In short, this “discovery” of existence (to borrow from the Emersonian phrasing I have discussed in the study’s introduction) is belated (“too late to be helped,” as Emerson puts it). Freud’s main contention, in fact, is that, from this impossible perspective in which we come to consciousness too late to have been truly present, we simply cannot understand the force that can act on us in this way. What force exists that can awaken us from our inanimate state and drive us into our new animate one? What is this force that comes *before* and so locates us forever after in the afterwardsness?

While waking up (being “awoken”/*erweckt*) is a reasonably expressive metaphor for the experience of this origin—the coming into the consciousness of one’s being—the notion of being “evoked,” while a poor translation of the German, more fully captures Freud’s sense that we are passive

recipients of an action performed by something outside and temporally prior to ourselves.<sup>15</sup> Thus, as Freud has previously noted, “it follows that the phenomena of organic development must be attributed to *external* disturbing and diverting influences” (XVIII, 38; my emphasis). And to the extent that, for Freud, this “process [is] similar in type to that which later caused the development of consciousness in a particular stream of living matter” (XVIII, 38), we might now revise Caruth’s statement yet again: “having passed beyond death without knowing it” more reasonably means, for a higher-level organism, coming into the consciousness of being while yet being faced with the mystery of its own origin, that force external to itself about “whose nature we can form no conception.”

Caruth is thus correct in observing that, for Freud, any particular traumatic experience both marks an “enigmatic testimony . . . to what . . . resists simple comprehension” (6) and replicates, even as it derives from, an “awakening to life,” “the very origin of consciousness . . . itself.” But because Caruth misrepresents this traumatic awakening by locating it in an experience of death, she goes astray in viewing the central enigma of trauma as the *survival* of consciousness rather than as the *origin* of consciousness. For example, despite the fact that she understands what we might call the Freudian Ur-trauma as related to the *origins* of life and consciousness, Caruth invariably uses a language that equates this moment with *continuation* rather than with *beginning*:

What Freud encounters in the traumatic neurosis is not the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, *the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival*. If the dreams and flashbacks of the traumatized thus engage Freud’s interest, it is because *they bear witness to a survival that exceeds the very claims and consciousness of the one who endures it*. At the heart of Freud’s thinking in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* . . . is the urgent and unsettling question: What does it mean *to survive?* . . . *The problem of survival, in trauma, thus emerges specifically as the question: What does it mean for consciousness to survive?* (60–61; my emphases; original italics deleted)

Caruth here cites *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* precisely to establish how any particular trauma is akin to, even a repetition of, an original “*waking into consciousness*” (64). But her notion that “the dreams and flashbacks of the traumatized” (precisely those instances of repetition compulsion that are the symptoms of trauma) “bear witness to a *survival* that exceeds the very

claims and consciousness of the one who endures it” doesn’t make much sense in the context of an organism that has just awoken. What can survival even mean at such a moment?<sup>16</sup> Even more to the point, to the extent that trauma necessarily marks what “exceeds the claims and consciousness of the one who endures it,” what this experience “bears witness to” at the moment of first awakening can be nothing other than what consciousness cannot claim for itself: the knowledge of how and why it came into being in the first place. What consciousness is thus forced to endure is the burden of its own incomprehensibility, its sense of having been evoked elsewhere. What Caruth fails to grasp, in short, is that the origin of trauma is precisely the trauma of origins.

#### IV

As we noted in the study’s introduction, in the Emersonian Fall of Man belatedness (what is “too late to be helped”) marks an absence, the very space in which we can come into existence without knowing that we do. Read in relation to Freud’s notion of trauma, the “origins of life and consciousness” come too late to be helped precisely because, from the start, we were helpless before it; or, rather, we were helpless because the event necessarily came before us. Latency inheres in the trauma of origins because, as the primal scene reminds us, we were, in some paradoxical way, absent from the scene of our own creation, a scene marked, as Justin Martyr anciently observed in a passage I used as an epigraph to part I, precisely by the impossibility of choice, a perspective oddly echoed in Freud’s “Theme of the Three Caskets.” At the origin, we did not and could not choose for ourselves because we were chosen instead and chosen, so Freud notes in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, by “a force of whose Nature we could form no conception.” In short, what is absent at the scene of creation—the latency inherent in this event—is precisely our choosing because the moment of choosing necessarily preceded us.

Even as an existential crisis, traumatic belatedness yet resides in an ethical situation because, as Jean Laplanche writes, it “is inconceivable without a model of translation: that is, it presupposes that something is proffered by the other, and this is then afterwards retranslated and reinterpreted.” He adds that this “something that comes before” is precisely “the [other’s] implantation of [an] enigmatic message.”<sup>17</sup> Laplanche is thinking here of an exchange that takes place during an actual if unintelligible and so unasimilated encounter (a child breastfeeding, for example).<sup>18</sup> But even as it



presupposes an originary event (precisely *the* originary event), the trauma of origins is founded on an exchange that exists only at the later discovery, a discovery that points to the irresolvable mystery of the other’s place in my own identity.

Although for reasons we have seen Caruth’s explanation of this mystery is quite different, her phrasing is instructive: “The peculiar temporality of trauma” includes “the sense that *the past it foists upon one is not one’s own*,” a “perspective,” she adds, that may “be understood in terms of a temporality of the other” (143n10; my emphasis).<sup>19</sup> In his *On the Psychotheology of Everyday Life*, Eric Santner similarly considers the ethical implications of Freud’s thought in the context of otherness. Writing that Freud permits us to “rethink what it means to be genuinely open to another human being . . . and to share and take responsibility for one’s implication in the dilemmas of difference,” Santner argues that, in its “psychoanalytic conception,” an ethics of “communality is granted on the basis of that fact that every familiar is ultimately strange and that, indeed, I am even in a crucial sense a stranger to myself.” While Santner reads this “internal alienness” optimistically, I would counter that the experience of self-estrangement might take different forms. At a minimum, to the extent that being a stranger to myself means that my origin lies elsewhere, the experience of internal alienness—its recognition—must be understood as profoundly traumatic.<sup>20</sup> This is so because, in the Emersonian context at least, if such self-estrangement includes the discovery of existence then it is an experience that necessarily comes after the fact. And absence—especially the absence of my own ethical act, my choosing—thereby becomes constitutive of my identity because that identity exists in relation to what must come before, the enigma of the other’s choice of me. To know the impossibility of having been there will ever after be what cannot be helped: to discover existence precisely as the burden of always coming too late.

That said, to the extent that Santner views the “ethical consideration of . . . ‘everyday’ life” as “pertaining to my answerability to my neighbor-with-an-unconscious”—the other “is a stranger . . . not only to me but also to him- or herself”—the trauma of origins as existential crisis need not be the end of the story. For, tracing out Santner’s logic, we might envision an ethics arising precisely from our recognition that the Other (first and foremost our parents) is also the subject of a trauma because it did not choose its origins: our parents had parents and so they too, as Justin Martyr anciently reflected, “were born without . . . knowledge or choice.”<sup>21</sup> As Santner provocatively, and hopefully, suggests, “against [the] background” of how the self shares its estrangement with the Other, “the very opposition

between ‘neighbor’ and ‘stranger’ begins to lose its force.”<sup>22</sup> What Caruth calls “the temporality of the other” would thus also include the Other in its infinite regress, and the trauma of belatedness could come to function ethically to the extent we might recognize that all of us are wounded from the beginning.

As we shall see in chapter 2, however, this sense of connection to the ethical connection—an obligation to or the recognition of the very otherness of the Other—is yet crossed by the possibility of violence, or what Sartre calls “the refusal of being born.” To the extent an ethical connection might also entail a conferral of responsibility to the other, such an ethics also marks an imposition, even a sense of indebtedness (what a child might owe to its parents). And that experience of owing the other might be as anxiety-riddled as it is morally enabling. While fuller discussions of that situation will come in chapters 3 and 5 (especially in relation to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Milton’s *Paradise Lost*) I will conclude part I with some reflections on how Freud, in response to his disciple Otto Rank’s understanding of the trauma of the origin (the birth trauma), engages this issue even as he effectively explains it away by reasserting the Oedipal economy (in particular castration anxiety) as the source of hostility that problematizes the child’s relation to the parents, which for Freud invariably means the son’s vexed relationship toward his father.