Interest in the relationship between psychoanalysis and art – and other disciplines – is growing. In his new book *Reflections on the Aesthetic: Psychoanalysis and the uncanny*, Gregorio Kohon examines and reflects upon psychoanalytic understandings of estrangement, the Freudian notions of the uncanny and *Nachträglichkeit*, exploring how these are evoked in works of literature and art, and are present in our response to such works. Kohon provides close readings of and insights into the works of Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Louise Bourgeois, Juan Muñoz, Anish Kapoor, Richard Serra, Edvard Munch, Kurt Schwitters, amongst others; the book also includes a chapter on the Warsaw Ghetto Monument and the counter-monument aesthetic movement in post-war Germany. Kohon shows how some works of art and literature represent something that otherwise eludes representation, and how psychoanalysis and the aesthetic share the task of making a representation of the unrepresentable.

*Reflections on the Aesthetic* is not an exercise in “applied” psychoanalysis; psychoanalysis and art are considered by the author in their own terms, allowing a new understanding of the aesthetic to emerge. Kohon’s book makes compelling reading for psychoanalysts, psychotherapists, art therapists, literary and art critics, academics, students and all those interested in the matter of the aesthetic.

**Gregorio Kohon** is a Training Analyst of the British Psychoanalytic Society. Besides his numerous psychoanalytic writings, Kohon has published four books of poetry in Spanish, and his novel *Red Parrot, Wooden Leg* was finalist for the Fernando Lara Prize, Planeta, Barcelona. His next book, *Truco Gallo*, is a collection of short stories (also in Spanish, co-authored with Mario Flecha and Viqui Rosenberg).
The New Library of Psychoanalysis was launched in 1987 in association with the Institute of Psychoanalysis, London. It took over from the International Psychoanalytical Library which published many of the early translations of the works of Freud and the writings of most of the leading British and Continental psychoanalysts.

The purpose of the New Library of Psychoanalysis is to facilitate a greater and more widespread appreciation of psychoanalysis and to provide a forum for increasing mutual understanding between psychoanalysts and those working in other disciplines such as the social sciences, medicine, philosophy, history, linguistics, literature and the arts. It aims to represent different trends both in British psychoanalysis and in psychoanalysis generally. The New Library of Psychoanalysis is well placed to make available to the English-speaking world psychoanalytic writings from other European countries and to increase the interchange of ideas between British and American psychoanalysts. Through the Teaching Series, the New Library of Psychoanalysis now also publishes books that provide comprehensive, yet accessible, overviews of selected subject areas aimed at those studying psychoanalysis and related fields such as the social sciences, philosophy, literature and the arts.

The Institute, together with the British Psychoanalytical Society, runs a low-fee psychoanalytic clinic, organizes lectures and scientific events concerned with psychoanalysis and publishes the International Journal of Psychoanalysis. It runs the a training course in psychoanalysis which leads to membership of the International Psychoanalytical Association – the body which preserves internationally agreed standards of training, of professional entry, and of professional ethics and practice for psychoanalysis as initiated and developed by Sigmund Freud. Distinguished members of the Institute have included Michael Balint, Wilfred Bion, Ronald Fairbairn, Anna Freud, Ernest Jones, Melanie Klein, John Rickman and Donald Winnicott.

Previous general editors have included David Tuckett, who played a very active role in the establishment of the New Library. He was followed as general editor by Elizabeth Bott Spillius, who was in turn followed by Susan Budd and then by Dana Birksted-Breen.
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Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience

Psychoanalysis and the uncanny

Gregorio Kohon
To Teddy Moisés, Anna Sofia, Cecilia Rose and Matteo Edoardo

Hoping that one day you will be curious enough to find your names on these pages.

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This foreword arises from a conversation over several years with Gregorio Kohon about literature and psychoanalysis. The extended conversation explored a mutual interest in the way in which the concerns of psychoanalysis both inform and form part of aesthetic experience. In this new book, which significantly extends the scope of the Birkbeck Lectures which he gave as Visiting Professorial Fellow in 2010–11, Kohon reflects on the place of the unconscious in the art form.

His book illuminates the ground shared by art and psychoanalysis. In doing so, it eschews mechanical “interpretation”, rejects “application” and provides instead an authentic language for reflection upon the nature of aesthetic experience. It is a rarity in interdisciplinary engagement in that both psychoanalysis and art are considered in their own terms, allowing a new understanding of the aesthetic to emerge. Psychoanalysis is not here “applied” to art as a metatheory; the reality of the consulting room is never far away and the reality of the artwork is always experienced. This makes for a painful and very personal engagement. Kohon conveys closely what he has come up against in the artworks that he discusses – paintings, narratives, sculptures. At the same time, his approach bears the knowledge of the huge emotional vicissitudes of the consulting room, of psychoanalysis itself. His book is therefore authentic and disturbing in a way that much of the “psychoanalysis and . . .” literature is not.

His detailed engagement allows us to think about the nature of aesthetic experience in a new way. He argues that the uncanny, as described by Freud, is a fundamental component of that experience. It includes the bleakness of borderline experience, uncertainty, anxiety, aloneness, silence. These are states of mind that the reception of an artwork may evoke or touch or awaken in ways that may be difficult to understand or even bear. Kohon explores how the artwork invites the recipient to take the emotional risk of engagement in a process which is also the reality of psychoanalytic experience. More than this, and importantly, he faces the fact that the most difficult questions in psychoanalysis are present in the work of art. The act of creation includes the despair of those moments when symbolisation and representation are not possible, and this is described movingly as part of the reality of psychoanalysis and the reality of artistic creation. Kohon acknowledges and explores the dream that cannot be dreamt and shows, for example, how the
stories of “The Hunter Gracchus” (Kafka) and “Funes the Memorious” (Borges) or the works of Muñoz uncannily represent something that eludes representation.

Thus, Kohon’s argument, which unfolds carefully in the process of his personal engagement with the art objects, is that the work of art both embodies and calls to this knowledge: that, at a fundamental level, it too is concerned with the bleakness of the unrepresentable, with making silence heard, darkness visible. He reminds us in a passage on the Warsaw Ghetto Monument that there is a real sense in which Auschwitz cannot be symbolised. He also considers how the meaning of those passages in psychoanalysis that cannot be reproduced as they were outside the clinical session is that for which the artwork also struggles. Kohon describes carefully how this produces a paradox in the reception of the artwork, an “uncanny” quality, involving an encounter with the negative, which underlies the experience of the aesthetic.

Kohon’s life and work as a psychoanalyst bring to his explorations a clarity that this interdisciplinary field needs. As a clinician, he knows how the unconscious qua unconscious cannot be known – except, that is, through its transformations. Interpretation of those transformations is the creative act in psychoanalysis which offers the possibility of engaging with what is not known. This is what the creative act in art is also wrestling with: can the transformation be expressed? Can it be symbolised?

From this, Kohon convincingly develops an aesthetics of estrangement and, in relation to Kafka’s short story, “The Burrow”, outlines a paradigm of estrangement encountered in the creative work of both psychoanalysis and artistic endeavour. “Psychoanalysis and the aesthetic share the task of making a representation of the unrepresentable, but they are separated by their own individual and contrasting ways of making the attempt. Art and literature have the capacity to create something unfamiliar within the familiar reality; psychoanalysis reveals and identifies the unfamiliar already present in that apparent reality”. Thus, in Kohon’s reading, psychoanalysis and art do not simply relate each to the other: they are rooted in the same ground and share a characteristic tendency to break through the conceptual signposts of their local habitations. His approach brings insight which feels real: Kohon addresses his subject as a psychoanalyst, not as someone who uses psychoanalysis.

This makes a significant difference, not least in the pervading sense that aspects of psychic experience have meaning within the psychoanalytic encounter and must become something else if transferred mechanically in a process of “interpretation” or “application”. This concern leads to a meditation on the nature of “interpretation”. In discussing Richard Serra’s work, Kohon writes, “If we are going not so much ‘to understand’ the artistic object or the literary text as to allow ourselves, instead, to become involved with it, there will be a demand for uncertainty to be tolerated: uncertainty, opaqueness, doubt. The relationship with the artistic object cannot be resolved: it is steeped in the ambiguity of something familiar and unfamiliar, uncanny”. Thus interpretation in this context should be “a way of thickening the plot”, “a moment of dynamic creation”, not the revelation of hidden meaning through the application of a theory.
This is the quality of dialogue most sought and most elusive in interdisciplinary work. The book takes literally the words of the Spanish poet, Antonio Machado, quoted by Kohon in his chapter “Of lairs and burrows”:

Walker, there is no road,
the road is made by walking.

Toni Griffiths
London, February 2014

Note

1 Dr Toni Griffiths has written on the subjects of ‘literature and psychoanalysis’ and has focused particularly on the work of George Eliot. She taught on the MA Comparative Literature course at UCL and for several years headed a department at UCL concerned with the field of higher education and professional development. She was a dean at the Institute of Education and senior research fellow at the University of Warwick.
I was privileged to have been invited to be the Visiting Professorial Fellow in the Department of Psychosocial Studies (School of Social Sciences, History and Philosophy), at Birkbeck, University of London, in 2010–11, by Dr Lisa Baraitser, Professor Stephen Frosh and Professor Daniel Pick. I would like to express my appreciation to them as well as my gratitude to the students attending my workshops and lectures: they motivated me to continue working on my ideas.

This book is based on some of the lectures I gave during that period. In time, the present text developed a life of its own.

Every attempt has been made to contact copyright holders; my apologies to any whom I have inadvertently missed. Any omission in the present edition will be corrected in future ones. I would like to thank the following for their kind permission to reproduce the artwork contained in this volume:

Louise Bourgeois Studio for Bourgeois’s artworks; the Juan Muñoz Estate for Muñoz’s artworks; the Anish Kapoor Studio for Kapoor’s artworks; the Richard Serra Studio and Gagosian Gallery for Serra’s artwork; Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz for Mahnmal gegen faschismus; Ernst Schwitters and Sprengel Museum Hannover for Schwitters’s Hannover Merzbau; Attilio Maranzano for his photography of Muñoz’s Double Bind; Walrus for his photography of Muñoz’s Listening Figure; Luis Asin for his photography of Muñoz’s Conversation Piece; María José Orihuela for her photography of Muñoz’s Many Times; Teresa Nunes for her photography of Muñoz’s Many Times; Christine G. H. Franck for her photography of San Carlino Alle Quatro Fontane; W. C. Chow for his photography of Zen gardens; Michael Reeve for his photography of Serra’s Clara-Clara; the Art Institute Library of the Jagiellonian for Kunzek’s Wampir’s photography; wmpearl for The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising’s photography; Adrian Grycuk for Rapoport’s The Warsaw Ghetto Monument’s photography; Infinite Ache for the “Field of Steleae”: Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe’s photography; F. J. B. Gonzáles for La Paralaje (drawing graphic illustration); Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa and the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum for Serra’s artworks and pictures; and Prinzhorn Collection for permission to reproduce Mehr’s artwork.

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I am particularly indebted to James E. Young (1989, 1993) for his work on the Warsaw Ghetto Monument. I could not have written my chapter on it without his research on the subject. Danuta Golec, in Warsaw, elucidated for me a number of past and present historical circumstances.

The conversations I had with Toni Griffiths about psychoanalysis and related subjects, whether while crossing the sea on the ferry from Tenby to Caldey Island in Wales, or walking around \textit{El Palacio del Rey Sancho} in Valldemossa, Mallorca, were always challenging and inspiring. I am also especially grateful for her editorial comments and suggestions.
I would like to extend my thanks to Viqui Rosenberg and Carlos Sapochnik. One way or another, it has been over fifty-five years of friendship: no está mal, che. Similarly, my gratitude to Rosine Perelberg and Donald Campbell, for our dialogues, for their friendship, comradeship and support. My warm thanks also to mi gran amigo Horacio Elena for the generous gift of his painting, Autorretrato, and for his permission to reproduce it for the cover of the book.

Valli, my wife, well, that’s another story: gracias, por todo, y por más.

London/Palma de Mallorca
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No symphony was ever written by a committee.

Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, *Zakhor: Jewish History and Jewish Memory*

Psychoanalysis is not what you think it is.

Michel de M’Uzan, “The uncanny . . .”
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We ourselves speak a language that is foreign.  
Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”

... truth cannot be made up of pure facts.  
Alain Badiou, The Idea of Communism

Clifford Geertz argued that, if it is to be understood, any form of social activity has to be incorporated into the texture, quality and consistency of a particular mode of life, defined as a specific manner and style of perceiving and thinking. Thus, in order to understand anything that concerns human society, one has to take into consideration the particular intimacies and the specific elements of what Geertz called “local knowledge” (1983). Whether it is a matter of the moral imagination in a society, its cultural and structural system, the question of symbolic power, issues of law, the concept of common sense, works of art or the construction of the self and identity, everything of cultural significance is always a “local matter”, a “way of being-in-the-world”, which those things both promote and exemplify. In the specific case of works of art, they materialise a “way of experiencing, [bringing] a particular cast of mind out into the world of objects” (1983, p. 99).

I regard the realm of aesthetics as a distinctive order that allows us to identify objects that are concerned with art and literature, their specific modes of experience and forms of thought, their visibility and intelligibility (Rancière, 2000, pp. 12–13; 2003, pp. 75–76). This is a broad characterisation – one, among others, that offers enough conceptual ambiguity to be used constructively. But it is not a definition or an explanation of aesthetics. It does not require the detailed exposition of a specific psychoanalytic framework.

Throughout his life, Freud expressed his admiration for literature and the arts, but not without a certain ambivalence. On the one hand, he thought that the explanation of artistic genius was beyond the reach of psychoanalysis; on the other, he held that psychoanalysis extended its understanding to other endeavours, such as philosophy, religion, anthropology, linguistics, literature and art. Reading some of Freud’s writings on this subject, we could come to believe – mistakenly – that
truth in a work of art is only discernible through the application of psychoanalytic theories and interpretation (Kofman, 1970; Kohon, 1999a). This conception gave rise, during the early optimistic, pioneering years of the psychoanalytic movement, to a proliferation of papers and books on the interpretation of artists and their art, as if their creations were comparable to patients’ symptoms or dreams told to a psychoanalyst. Psychoanalytic reductionism prevailed.

The application of psychoanalytic theories to art has always presented serious methodological difficulties. In this book, I do not offer psychoanalytic theories as comprehensive explanations of art and literature nor a psychoanalytic reading of culture; I will not attempt to unravel the creative process, the privileged realm of the artist. I am not concerned with the question of aesthetic values nor am I interested in the unconscious meaning of a specific work of art. Instead, I would like to explore how, in the perception and appreciation of art and literature, the viewer or reader is confronted by an emotional disruption provoked by the object, threatening the natural distinctions by which we normally live. A crucial dimension of uncertainty appears to be demanded by the aesthetic object.

I suggest that the different and multiple meanings contained in and brought to mind by the artistic and the literary object, the mixture of past and present experiences of the subject evoked by the encounter with the object, the elements of irrationality which probe and challenge the rational efforts of our perceptions, all provoke in us a feeling of strangeness. The recognition of something familiar goes hand in hand with the perception of something unknown, new, something other.

In his article on the uncanny, Freud suggested this:

> It often happens that neurotic men declare that they feel there is something uncanny about the female genital organs. This _unheimlich_ place, however, is the entrance to the former _Heim_ [home] of all human beings, to the place where each one of us lived once upon a time and in the beginning . . . the _unheimlich_ is what was once _heimisch_, familiar . . .

(Freud, 1919, p. 245)

Freud’s interpretation may or may not be correct, but I would like to take the structure of his statement for the consideration of the dynamics of the familiar (_heimisch_)/unfamiliar (_unheimlich_). From this point of view, I would argue that, in the “way of experiencing” the aesthetic, the sense of the present, what makes us feel real and _there_, in the here and now, coexists with the reactivation of what George Eliot defined as our “powerful imagination”: “. . . far reaching memories and stored residues of passion, bringing into new light the less obvious relations of human existence” (Eliot, 1879, chap. 13, p. 197). Fantasies, needs and desires that belong to another scene, to another time in the past, defy the sense of comfortable familiarity that we assume in everyday life. This constitutes a condition of the aesthetic experience, where the self of the individual is not fully in charge.

Art, history, literature and psychoanalysis have each a distinct, meaningful place in the wider repertoire of interrelated and mutually influential cultural creations.
They are all part of the same cultural world but they do not constitute a harmonious unity nor do they share a common structure. They embody different modes of experience: each of these modes demands from the subject what Edward Said, in a different context, described as “... a knowing and unafraid attitude toward exploring the world we live in” (1998, p. 109).3

This is clearly different from a “theory of beauty” that would account for the existence of art or a philosophical reference that would demarcate the limits of its presence in the world. I would suggest that there is no general concept of art, which “ceaselessly redefined itself” (Rancière, 2011, p. xi). The aesthetic experience can never be conceived as essential or universal; rather, it may best be understood through the recognition and acceptance of its very ambiguity. It resists not only definition but also exclusive interpretation; attempting to define what it is meant by the concept of aesthetic experience is not easy.4

The experience of contemporary art, as discussed in these pages, offers itself as the object of multiple interpretations. There is a constant dynamic shifting of meaning that varies and fluctuates within the individual, from one individual to another, from one culture to another.

Contemporary art, in particular, demands from the spectator an active participation. Freud’s reference to the philosophers’ definition of the aesthetic attitude as that in which “... we are not trying to get anything from things or do anything with them ... but ... we are content with contemplating them ...” (Freud, 1905, p. 94) does not help us here. We may not ask anything from it but the object demands something from us. Lucien Freud declared,

What do I ask from a painting? I ask it to astonish, disturb, seduce, convince. ... (quoted in L. Freud, 2012)

The spectator has to be willing to engage with this challenge, this invitation that comes from the work of art. It is not just a matter of passive contemplation; the aesthetic object does not allow us to be distant; it insists on the subject being involved and implicated.

In the short story “Like Life”, Lorrie Moore offers a description of how one of her characters, dashing around an art gallery, would stop for a long while in front of a work that she liked; she would feel that it was pulling her in, dancing with her for a while, and then letting her go (1990, p. 168). The spectator is, indeed, pulled in, drawn by the aesthetic object, brought in to be part of a dance, even if for a little while, and then set free. The encounter with the object may be a playful occasion – playful but nevertheless serious, where there are no guarantees. For each of us, the engagement entails a complex participation, full of potential ambiguity, irony, pain, memories, logical relations, emotions, revelations, anxieties and confusion.

Traditionally, many psychoanalytic authors have tended to link the aesthetic experience with the vicissitudes of the encounter with the primary object. Nevertheless,
it may be something more mysterious and complex than this. There is an excess in the experience itself that defies simple definitions. It is conceivable that the existential memory present in aesthetic jouissance takes place in the context of experiences other than that mythical primary encounter. Its significance may have started somewhere else, in a psychic place other than with the mother, and progressively moved back and forth along different paths. Possibly only later on in life would its meaning have emerged retrospectively.

While definitions are problematic, the aesthetic moment and its jouissance require interpretations. But such interpretations are not to do with the revelation of underlying meaning, a hidden truth, or through the employment of a preconceived, psychoanalytic or any other kind of theory. This is not a negative reference to psychoanalytic theory per se; in fact, I cannot think of any other theory that would better account for the complexity of the human mind. Nevertheless, in general terms, interpretations here should not be understood by reference to the intention or motivation of the one who produces the painting or the sculpture. In this book, interpretations are presented as a way of “thickening the plot”, of engaging more fully with the object of enquiry, of entering into a dialogue. They require “a moment of dynamic creation rather than passive discovery” (Egginton, 2007, p. 3). The approach should be dynamic but not intrusive – imaginative and yet never complete. Geertz claims that, in contrast to a paranoid’s delusion or a swindler’s story, interpretations cannot be fully coherent (1973, p. 18). In any case, as most psychoanalysts are aware, interpretations do not require or even represent a consensus. They make things more interesting; they complicate matters. At best, they resemble the translation from one language into another.

It is in and through the very process of the translation of a poem, for example, that we discover the original text. There is always something unprecedented and unexpected in a translation: something in the original text demands an interpretation that may recover for the reader the uniqueness of that text. But no single version establishes the “truth” of a poem; this would need to be re-discovered or perhaps even created. Furthermore, each new version may add original and creative insights. Contained in the dialogue between the translator and the translated (as, in the analytic dialogue, between the analyst and the patient), more than one way of carrying out the task will be discovered. As Umberto Eco has argued, the translator will have to be sufficiently ruthless: “... only by being literally unfaithful can a translator succeed in being truly faithful to the source text” (Eco, 2003, p. 5, italics in original; see also Rockhill, 2000).

Comparable to the analytic situation of transference or the daily occurrence of dreams, the experience of the aesthetic (whether for the writer/artist or the reader/spectator) will always be autobiographical – and it will always be suffused with saudade.5

The aesthetic experience can never be considered finished nor complete; there will always be the possibility of future development and change. In every new experience of an aesthetic object, there will be further opportunities for new narratives. A painting might not be seen in the same way each time it is viewed.
The same short story offers different meanings, new descriptions of its characters, additional accounts of the plot. The conscious and unconscious memory of previous aesthetic experiences increases the possibility of new perceptual responses. When I refer to “the memory of previous aesthetic experiences”, I do not mean a nostalgic longing, originating in maternal primitive experiences. The responses might make their presence known via unexpected emotional eruptions, which may include disturbing and poignant sentiments. It might be a reaction not easily discernible by the subject: it may be experienced and yet not consciously noticed; even if noticed, it might not be susceptible to being thought about. It might denote something unknown but this does not necessarily make it new.

For this to occur, the subject has to be ready and willing to undergo some form of depersonalisation, to experience some sense of unreality; the subject must risk, however briefly, losing the boundaries that keep the self safe and sound. This may involve anxiety, the fear of which may inhibit the capacity for aesthetic experience; trepidation and apprehension may do away with joy. The subject might suffer a genuine estrangement from the self, which, as Freud specifies in “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), is elicited by the reappearance of something familiar that has been repressed.

I refer to Freud’s work concerning estrangement and the uncanny in the next section of this chapter. At this point, however, I make a temporal leap and jump forward to 1933.

**Estrangement**

Victor Tausk’s paper, “On the Origin of the ‘Influencing Machine’ in Schizophrenia”, described his observations of a paranoid delusion that occurs in a “certain type of schizophrenic patient” (Tausk, 1933, p. 519). Such a delusion often involved being influenced from afar by a “diabolical machine”, typically believed to be operated by a group of people – most frequently the patient’s doctors – who were regarded as the persecutors. The machines were experienced as instruments of torture and mind-control; they consisted of boxes, cranks, levers, wheels, buttons, etc.; they could implant and remove ideas and feelings and inflict horrendous pain from a distance. At times, they made the patient see pictures. The machines used waves, rays or mysterious forces that physics could not explain; they created sensations that could not be described by the patients because they were strange to them, alien to any other experience. Many of Tausk’s descriptions, common then in classical psychiatry, are still referred to in the contemporary psychiatric clinic.

A clinical description of an influencing machine was recorded by John Haslam as early as 1810. In his *Illustrations of Madness* (1810), Haslam described the first fully documented case of what later would have been described as paranoid schizophrenia. The patient was a literate man, a Welsh architect named James Tilly Matthews, who was able to produce sketches of an air loom (Figure 1.1), which he imagined striking him with “spermatic animal-seminal” magnetic rays.
Considering “The ‘Uncanny’”

The air loom was supposed to be operated by a gang of four men and three women, villains skilled in “chemistry” who lived at the London Wall in Moorfields, not far from the Bethlem Hospital where Matthews was a patient. Matthews claimed that the rays affected his body so as to produce a variety of symptoms, a litany of horrible tortures. The torments included “lobster-cracking”, during which the circulation of the blood was prevented by a magnetic field, “stomach-skinning” and “apoplexy-working with the nutmeg grater”, which involved the introduction of fluids into the skull. “Bill the King” was the man in charge, pictured in command of the instrument and its levers, tubes and piano-forte keys. The rest of the gang, supposedly all French agents, seemed to be having sexual intercourse on the floor next to the machine.

Tausk noted that influencing machines were described by their troubled inventors as complex structures. Sometimes these devices were experienced by the patients as their doppelgänger, unconscious projections of the patients’ fragmented bodily experience. Although patients would typically invoke all the powers known to technology to explain their obscure workings, the machines always resisted a coherent account of their function: “All the discoveries of mankind”,

Figure 1.1 John Haslam, The Air Loom (1810). Illustrations of Madness, exhibiting a singular case of insanity, in the person of John Tilly Matthews, with a description of the tortures experienced by bomb-bursting, lobster-cracking and lengthening, etc. (1810). London. © The British Library Board, 1191.i.7.
Tausk wrote, “are regarded as inadequate to explain the marvellous powers of this machine” (Figure 1.2).¹⁰

There is something extraordinary and unexpected about the detailed and rich depiction of this specific paranoid delusion. Frequently, the reader’s associations are to the literary and artistic realm of science fiction. My own associations on reading the paper for the first time included the original cinematographic version of *Frankenstein* (directed by James Whale in 1931) – that wonderfully inaccurate and distorted version of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). In a memorable scene in the film, the monster (played by Boris Karloff) lies inert while being raised to the skies by Frankenstein (played by Colin Clive). The supposedly brilliant, yet mad, scientist stands hunched over the machine he has invented, twisting dials and moving levers, excitedly contemplating how the platform with the monster’s body is exposed to

*Figure 1.2* Jakob Mehr, *Influencing Machine* (1810). © Prinzhorn Collection.
Considering “The ‘Uncanny’”

the opening in the roof, lightning from the storm in the sky above bringing the dead to life. The image of this modern Prometheus stealing fire from the heavens inverts the schizophrenic patient’s phantasy of an influencing machine stealing life from him.

It is interesting to note that at the beginning of his paper, Tausk explains almost apologetically that his clinical and theoretical considerations are based on a single clinical example. Furthermore, in this particular case, “... the structure of the machine differs materially ... from all other varieties of apparatus of this sort” (1933, p. 519). This is a “very rare variant” of an influencing machine, and Tausk cannot but feel that objections will be made to his conclusions: after all, how could anyone draw generalisations from the study of a single, uncharacteristic case? Psychoanalysis is supposed to be a science, and sciences involve generalisations arising from a considerable number of cases. However, Tausk argues, psychoanalysis is not psychiatry. In psychoanalysis, things work differently. In principle, it is possible (“permissible” is the word used by Tausk) to derive general conclusions from “exceptional types”. He says,

The conformity of typical cases have the ultimate effect of an impenetrable barrier, while a deviation from type, on the other hand, may be a window in the wall through which a clear view is to be obtained.

(Tausk, 1933, p. 520)

Tausk made a crucial and significant discovery from the material of one case only. What Tausk described as “conformity” may nowadays be understood as “evidence”.

Among the many symptoms described by Matthews, the Welsh architect, was a sense of depersonalisation and isolation of affect. This was similar to what Tausk included in his clinical descriptions as the patients’ feelings of “inner estrangement”. According to Tausk, patients feel “strange to themselves, no longer understand themselves: limbs, face, facial expression, thoughts and feelings have become estranged” (p. 523). In passing, he uses the expression, “self-estrangement”, the internal perception of changes taking place in the psyche and/or the body of the individual. This is something that may occur at puberty but does not necessarily become pathological.

Tausk was one of the first psychoanalytic authors to use the term “estrangement” in this specific sense. In German, the word is Entfremdung, which may be translated as estrangement, alienation or disaffection. We find in Strachey’s version of Freud the words estranged and estrangement. He used these English words to convey the process of separating and creating distance, of becoming alienated from an object: usually a friend, a lover, the family and/or the world. This is also the sense in which the word was translated into English by other authors in early psychoanalytic writings. Otherwise, in other contexts, the word used in translation was “derealisation”, which is closer to the German sense of “unreality”.

The concept of estrangement was to be used frequently and significantly by psychoanalytic authors across the generations. They included, among others,
Melanie Klein (1927), Otto Fenichel (1933), Erich Fromm (1942), Karen Horney (1950) and R. D. Laing (1960). For the present purposes, I concentrate briefly on a description by another author, Paul Federn.

For Federn, estrangement frequently took the form of an attack, the perception of which varied in intensity and extent for the same individual at different times. Mostly, it occurred after a precipitating event or in some special circumstances:

The symptom of estrangement, since it was first discovered, has always been referred to as a feeling, never a knowledge or a consciousness of estrangement. (Federn, 1932, p. 62)

Federn noted that there is always a split between a detached, observing self and a participating self: the observing self, although familiar to the individual, does not prevent the loss of the capacity to perceive an object with one’s full ego; the participating self experiences these strange feelings and consequently suffers from a “feeling of unreality” (Federn, 1932, p. 71; see also Federn, 1949). The movement between familiarity and strangeness creates a surplus of terror and anxiety in the subject, and the experience of this split becomes uncanny.

Lacan referred to Federn’s concept of estrangement when describing Hamlet’s rejection of Ophelia. The revelation of the queen’s adultery and his father’s injunction to kill the adulterer make Hamlet reject Ophelia as his object of desire: she had become associated with his mother. As Gertrude betrayed him with Claudius, so Ophelia betrayed him with Polonius, her father, who forbade her to see him: thus she stayed away from her lover and rejected his letters. At this moment in the play, Ophelia becomes, for Hamlet, “completely null and dissolved as a love object” (Lacan, 1959).

In 1980, there was a celebrated production of Hamlet at the Royal Court Theatre in London. The director, Richard Eyre, in an inspired move, cast Jonathan Pryce, who was playing Hamlet, also as the ghost of Hamlet’s father – as if he had possessed his son: whenever the ghost appeared and spoke, the audience contemplated Hamlet twisting and shuddering in agony while delivering his lines. A deep, cadaverous voice emerged from the depth of Hamlet’s guts, demanding revenge in the most dramatic manner; in this way, a dialogue was established between the character of the ghost and the character of Hamlet within the person of the same actor. Hamlet seemed to observe himself in horror as he was taken over by his father’s words. Pryce’s physical contortions communicated unbearable pain. The audience was not just touched by this pain but was also increasingly disturbed and mesmerised. It was as if the split between actor and character had disappeared: what was happening on stage was real. Watching Pryce caressing his neck and chillingly stroking his chest, the audience became alarmed, and a sense of terror invaded the theatre. Hamlet appeared to be seized and trapped by the soul of the dead: a dybbuk. Those present at these performances at the Royal Court were put in touch with something uncanny, feeling a sense of unreality. Most poignantly, it was later revealed that Jonathan Pryce’s father had recently
died; the young actor was in the process of deep mourning. Lacan’s description of the play as “a tragedy of the underworld” (Lacan, 1959, p. 39) was borne out by this particular performance.

In Jewish folklore, the dybbuk represents a wandering, disembodied soul that attaches itself to a living person and controls his behaviour in order to accomplish a task unfulfilled during his life. The dybbuk is not exclusive to Jewish culture: comparable mythological figures, among many others, are the draugr (Norse and Scandinavian), the ghûl (Arabian), the oni (Japanese), the Nachzehrer and the Wiedergänger (German). In medieval England, there was the revenant. Perhaps the most interesting, and certainly the most famous case of possession in European history took place in the seventeenth century in France in the town of Loudun, an episode known in history as “the devils of Loudun” (de Certeau, 1970; Huxley, 1952; Sluhovsky, 2002; Stephenson, 2014).12

In the case of the dybbuk, the spirit is drawn to a person who is already suffering, weak and vulnerable; he is supposedly going through a predicament similar to the dead person’s. Interestingly, the dybbuk is supposed to know more about the person’s desires than the person does himself. Hamlet’s ghost, turned dybbuk, speaks Hamlet’s desires. This is an instance of the return of the repressed; as such, a ghost is “the most immediate representation of the uncanny” (Masschelein, 2011, p. 120). There is something intolerable about a ghost, neither alive nor dead. The dialectic between the strange and the familiar, central to everything uncanny, also includes the dead, never completely gone from the lives of the living. A sense of transgression is present here: it concerns the crossing of boundaries between the past, the present and the future, as well as the limits between life and death. It is this “coming back (of the repressed) that makes the ghost what it is” (Cixous, 1976, p. 543).13

On her first appearance in the play, Ophelia describes Hamlet’s extreme distress; she knows, without perhaps being fully aware of it, that Hamlet is profoundly disturbed, which prompts her to make a proper, “clinical” description (Lacan, 1959, p. 21) of his depersonalisation:

...Lord Hamlet, with his doublet all unbrac’d,
   No hat upon his head, his stockings foul’d,
   Ungarter’d and down-gyved to his ankle,
   Pale as his shirt, his knees knocking each other,
   And with a look so piteous in purport
   As if he had been loosed out of hell
   To speak of horrors, ...

(\textit{Hamlet}, Act II, Scene I)\textsuperscript{14}

Hamlet seems terrified – as if indeed he were the one coming back from hell, the one to speak of horrors. Ophelia has become alien to Hamlet, Hamlet to Ophelia. The intensity of the depersonalisation is extreme: it dominates his being. It has become \textit{uncanny}. 
The uncanny

Now we can work our way back, via Michel de M’Uzan, to Freud, 1919.

Freud developed his arguments on the uncanny from a linguistic perspective, connecting the term “unheimlich” to words like fright, fear, anxiety, horror (Freud, 1919). He accepted Friedrich Schelling’s definition of the uncanny as the name for everything “. . . that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud, 1919, p. 225). Freud maintained that the uncanny reveals the repression of a fear or trauma that had once taken place – more precisely, it would uncover the return of the repressed threat of castration.

But this does not exhaust the definition of the uncanny. De M’Uzan states that we cannot ignore

those “experiences” that are at the very least closely related to the uncanny, in which anxiety is sometimes absent and where the sexual does not seem to be involved, or at least not regularly.

(M’Uzan, 2009, p. 202, italics in original)

Furthermore, he adds,

I am thinking, among other things, about the phenomena of depersonalisation.

(de M’Uzan, 2009, p. 202)

After this brief reference to Freud’s “The ‘Uncanny’” (1919), de M’Uzan turns to another of Freud’s papers, “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis” (1936). During a visit to Athens with his brother, Freud had felt that the ancient monument at which he was gazing was not real. Freud wrote how, for that moment, he felt that, “What I see here is not real” – a “feeling of derealisation” (Entfremdungsgefühl) (1936, p. 244). This is when what is actually reality appears strange to the subject. Examples of derealisation, where the reality of what is being seen cannot be believed, abound in literature. The following is an extreme example:

“Eerie”, Joe thought. “A chitinous multilegged quasiarachnid and a large bivalve with pseudopoedia arguing about Goethe’s Faust”.

(Dick, 1969, p. 108)

Depersonalisation, in contrast, takes place when the subject’s own self becomes strange. H.G. Wells lucidly writes,

At times I suffer from the strangest sense of detachment from myself and the world about me; I seem to watch it all from the outside, from somewhere inconceivably remote, out of time, out of space, out of the streets and tragedy of it all.

(Wells, 1898, p. 31)
In “A Disturbance of Memory on the Acropolis”, Freud contrasted these two closely interrelated phenomena, derealisation and depersonalisation, when we try to keep something away from us, with their counterparts: fausse reconnaissances, déjà vu and déjà raconté: “illusions in which we seek to accept something as belonging to our ego...” (1936, p. 245).

De M’Uzan argues that

strangeness is an impression that is affirmed each time “natural distinctions” tend to become erased – that is, distinctions between the inside and the outside, the ego and the non-ego, the subject and the object, the familiar and the alien.

(da M’Uzan, 2009, p. 203)

A sense of strangeness can arise, threatening the feeling of being “at home”. At that point, we might not be quite able to cope with the difference between the inside and the outside, between closeness and distance from others. Quite appropriately, de M’Uzan also relates this sense of strangeness to “a sort of exaltation” that can be observed during “so-called creative activities” (2009, p. 204). The comfort offered by the presence of the familiar, of the already known, of the “always there”, which we count on for our physical and psychic survival, remains precarious. Between the cracks, the ghosts appear: insecurity, self-doubt, discomfort, anxiety, even paranoia – all ready to jump, making the individual feel alien to himself.16

The most interesting and significant aspect of de M’Uzan’s argument is his contention that the feeling of depersonalisation constitutes “a crucial phase in the development of psychic functioning”; it marks the “moment when the uncanny finds its primordial basis” (2009, p. 206, italics in original). The “stranger anxiety” experienced by most babies between the ages of nine and twelve months might represent one manifestation of this critical and essential psychic development, a genuine instance of terror and anxiety, which seizes the baby, making him at that moment feel endangered, as if his very survival were in question, the world appearing alien and menacing.

Although de M’Uzan does not make an explicit connection with the concept of the mirror stage, his emphasis is very closely related to Lacan’s formulation of the self as a stranger to itself: according to Lacan, the identification with an image in the mirror produces a double of the subject, turning that primitive experience into a source of alienation. The identification is based on an illusion, which turns being into not-being: the familiar becomes unfamiliar.17

De M’Uzan had already elaborated these ideas in Aperçus sur le processus de la création littéraire (1965). In considering the feeling of strangeness as a trace of an “essential activity of the mind”, de M’Uzan recognised and established the uncanny as a developmental event, something that cannot be reduced to hermeneutics or to “mere” meaningful events in one’s life.

Julia Kristeva, another French author influenced by Lacan, thought that the uncanny can be considered “a paroxystic metaphor of the psychic functioning itself” (1988, p. 184). She saw the uncanny as the reappearance of the self as
other: a “me” that is foreign, an alien that is “I”. From a psychoanalytic point of view, this activity of the mind can be considered an unexpected form of transgression associated with primitive imaginary boundary crossings between me and not-me. The consideration of that reappearance of me as other plays a decisive role in any ethical involvement with the alien, the stranger, the foreigner.

Freud’s work on the uncanny cannot be placed in any given theoretical position without imprisoning the concept, imposing rigid boundaries and limiting its importance. de M’Uzan’s and Kristeva’s considerations open the doors for its further elaboration and application.

The uncanny may also emerge when something is present but has not yet become explicit; it might refer to a feeling of anxiety that something is pending, is about to be revealed. There may be contradictions and pauses in our perception, cracks and interruptions, spaces and breaks that remain unsolved. Todorov speaks of the uncanny in literature as provoking a “hesitation” in the reader and in a character of a book; in considering the events narrated, there is uncertainty as to whether to accept a natural explanation or a supernatural one. Such vacillating reluctance creates the moment and the space for the uncanny to be experienced (Todorov, 1970).

In *Cujo*, Stephen King (1981) described the terror experienced by a young child of only four years, named Tad, who believes that a “thing”, half man, half wolf, is prowling in his closet (p. 8). His parents explain to him that such monsters do not exist: they may be shadows that appear to be like the bad things seen on TV. They show him the pile of blankets in the closet, the teddy bear, the reflections from the light in the bathroom. But the monster in the closet refuses to go away: as soon as the parents go back to their bed, the monster, whispering, threatens to eat the child up. Tad, alarmed and full of trepidation, listens in terror: the monster, says, “...you’ll be mine” (p. 12). The child stares at the closet, horrified. Yet he is also fascinated. There is something almost familiar about the monster, something that Tad almost knew. This is the worst thing for him: the feeling that he “almost knew” the monster (p. 8, italics added).

What was hidden but has come to light? Referring to the ideas Freud developed in “Totem and Taboo” (1912–13), one could interpret in the story a projection into the outside world of repressed primitive perceptions that originally belonged to the self: Tad’s internal perceptions are now located outside, in an object (the monster) that inhabits the external world. The monster hidden in the closet is a disguised representation of the child’s internal and repressed bad, angry, persecutory feelings. What is most interesting here is that the child knows it: the projected is almost familiar to him.

I suggest that the Freudian concept of the uncanny, *das Unheimliche*, the dual concept of the simultaneously strangely familiar and disquietingly unfamiliar, may help to describe not only those aspects permeated by conscious “dread and horror”, but fundamental aspects of the aesthetic experience (Freud, 1919, p. 219). Furthermore, as a developmental achievement, the uncanny may be a necessary condition for the experience of the aesthetic. One of the challenges is to
understand how this operates in the aesthetic, in that people can experience pleasure while suffering intense anxiety. The uncanny serves to anticipate a danger, preventing the full development of an anxiety attack; by diminishing the impact of censorship, a certain satisfaction is also allowed by the superego.

The uncanny, a critical and vital moment in psychic development, persists as an important characteristic in our emotional and psychological adult state: it is forever present. The nature of temporality in the unconscious, as understood by psychoanalysis, is therefore crucial in our understanding of aesthetic experience.

Nachträglichkeit

There is in psychoanalysis a theoretical approach that takes a genetic perspective: it follows and describes the different stages of development of the libido. This is a “spatial” form of measuring time, which starts from Point A and moves towards Points B, C, D, etc. There is also a concept of time that only emerges with the development of the ego, marked by the dynamics of absence and presence of the breast and the mother. However, it is the concept of Nachträglichkeit that turns the psychoanalytic notion of time into something distinctive and specific. Here, time is understood as a logical – that is, not linear – structure of the human mind. It necessarily encompasses (a) the a-temporality of the unconscious, as described by Freud; and (b) its negativity, as described by André Green (1993). Let us revisit the concept.

In a letter to Fliess, Freud referred to his “Project for a Scientific Psychology” (1895a) as a “kind of madness” (Masson, 1985, p. 152). He also called it a “consuming passion”, a “tyrant” (Masson, 1985, p. 129). This particularly ambitious writing project was not a great success. Inevitably, one sympathises with Freud’s mental torment while, at the same time, one cannot but admire his passionate tenacity. And yet, reading the “Project”, difficult as it is, has its rewards: the interplay between later developments in Freud’s thinking and the earlier concepts of the “Project” is remarkable.19

Part II of the “Project”, entitled “Psychopathology”, is dedicated to “the analysis of pathological processes” (1895a, p. 347). The fourth subsection is entitled “The Hysterical Proton Pseudos”. These terms, James Strachey tells us in a footnote, come from Aristotle’s Prior Analytics, “a work dealing with the theory of the syllogism which was later included in what came to be called the Organon”. Strachey adds: “[Aristotle’s] chapter deals with false premises and false conclusions, and the particular sentence asserts that a false statement is the result of a preceding falsity (proton pseudos)” (p. 352 fn).

According to Freud, hysterical symptoms (as shown, he says, by clinical evidence) occur in the sexual sphere, and he wishes “to explain the special psychological determinant” of the symptoms via the study of the “natural characteristics of sexuality”. He then proceeds to give us an example – that of a patient, Emma, who was unable “to go into shops alone”. Freud writes:

As a reason for this, [she produced] a memory from the time she was twelve years old (shortly after puberty). She went into a shop to buy something, saw
the two shop-assistants (one of whom she can remember) laughing together, and ran away. . . . In connection with this, she was led to recall that the two of them were laughing at her clothes and that one of them had pleased her sexually.

(Freud, 1895a, p. 353)

Freud argues that Emma’s explanation, as well as “. . . the memories aroused [do not] explain [either] the compulsion [or] the determination of the symptom”. Further analytic work revealed a second memory, unconscious at the time of what Freud calls “Scene I” (going into the shop when she was twelve years old):

On two occasions when she was a child of eight she had gone into a small shop to buy some sweets, and the shopkeeper had grabbed at her genitals through her clothes. In spite of the first experience she had gone there a second time; after the second time she stopped away. She now reproached herself for having gone there the second time, as though she had wanted in that way to provoke the assault. In fact a state of “oppressive bad conscience” is to be traced back to this experience.

(Freud, 1895a, p. 354)

It is worth quoting Freud’s text in full, so as to see the way he pursues this theme further. He writes:

We now understand Scene I [shop-assistants] if we take Scene II [shopkeeper] along with it. We only need an associative link between the two. She herself pointed out that it was provided by the laughing: the laughing of the shop-assistants had reminded her of the grin with which the shopkeeper had accompanied his assault. The course of events can now be reconstructed as follows. In the shop the two assistants were laughing; this laughing aroused [unconsciously] the memory of the shopkeeper. Indeed, the situation had yet another similarity [to the earlier one]: she was once again in a shop alone. Together with the shopkeeper she remembered his grabbing through her clothes; but since then she had reached puberty. The memory aroused what it was certainly not able to at the time, a sexual release, which was transformed into anxiety. With this anxiety, she was afraid that the shop-assistants might repeat the assault, and she ran away.

(Freud, 1895a, p. 354)

The explanation offered by Emma (the memory from the age of twelve) apparently explained for her the present-day symptom (the fear of going into shops alone). Nevertheless, it is only at the point of unconsciously linking it to the early Scene II (only remembered later) that the symptom was formed. The trauma became meaningful through the link established by, among others, the signifiers “laughing” and “clothes” – “the most innocent” of ideas, says Freud. Furthermore, Freud describes how, in the late Scene I “. . . we have the case of a memory
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arousing an affect, which it did not arouse as an experience . . .” (1895a, p. 356). Nevertheless, he argues, as in other typical cases of hysterical repression, “We invariably find that a memory is repressed which has only become a trauma by deferred action” (1895a, p. 356, italics in original).

Thus, the later Scene I gives meaning Nachträglich to Scene II, which had earlier failed to register, to be symbolised and represented at the time of its occurrence; it needed a later event for it to become significant. In the case of Emma, the meaning of the signifier, “clothes”, was initially denied in the early Scene II but later recovered through Scene I. The memory of the shopkeeper’s sexual attack gained its true traumatic relevance only Nachträglich: first through the neurotic inhibition created by her symptom (fear of going into a shop by herself) and then by the consequent memory of the assistants’ laughter, which was offered by her as an (incomplete) explanation for the phobia.

Nevertheless, it is not that clear what made the memory of the shopkeeper traumatic. One cannot simply assume, as Freud did, that it was because of her youth (she had been eight years old). As it was also a memory of an event, could one argue that the original Scene II became traumatic after the event because it brought back Emma’s wish to return to the shopkeeper for a second time? Furthermore, could it be said that there was already an original and primal scene of seduction, prior to the shopkeeper’s abuse, which was awakened by his action? When one speaks of “original” and “primal”, one is referring to a scene of seduction not exclusively accounted for by the patient’s narrative, by the mere “facts” reported.

In the “Project” we not only trace the background of Freud’s later ideas, we also find the development of an original and extremely fertile way of understanding trauma. This is one of Freud’s fundamental clinical and theoretical contributions. First, we have the memory of an intense event, a violent shock of some kind (the visit to the shopkeeper); then, there is Emma’s inadequate response to it (the psychic wound produced by the memory of the shopkeeper’s actions and the denial of its impact); and, third, there are the long-lasting effects of the shopkeeper’s abuse in the mind of the young woman (shown in the symptom of not being able to go into a shop) which become relevant Nachträglich. It is only through the memory of an event at a later stage that the memory of the visit to the shopkeeper becomes pathogenic. In psychoanalysis, this is the meaning of the statement that “hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences” (Freud, 1895b, p. 7). Nachträglichkeit describes how an early impression which has an exciting effect on a child is not necessarily registered as traumatic at the time; nevertheless, the experience leaves a residue, a mnemic trace. The experience becomes traumatic a posteriori through a particular interpretation in later life of something that was already there but unknown. The connection itself remains unconscious.

Nachträglichkeit is important because it helps us to understand the tragic in human beings through the return of the repressed and the compulsion to repeat. If the past determines the present through the return of the repressed, what we have become also modifies what we once were in the past. Giving meaning to the past
helps us to structure the present, which then determines the construction of the future through the compulsion to repeat.

_Nachträglichkeit_ does not imply that the subject “revises” past events in the present. If this were the case, it would just be a simplified way of understanding psychological retroactivity, through which all the past is constantly reinterpreted from the present – something closely related to Jung’s concept of “retrospective phantasies”. For him, the adult reinterprets his past through his phantasies of reconstruction, a kind of defensive manoeuvring, the expression of a wish to escape from neurotic difficulties of the present to an imaginary past. Freud’s concept is much more subtle than Jung’s; its complexity makes it theoretically specific and relevant. As Laplanche and Pontalis point out: “It is not lived experience in general that undergoes a deferred revision but, specifically, _whatever it has been impossible to incorporate fully into a meaningful context_” (1967, p. 112, italics added). The past event is not endowed with a new meaning; the resignification is the reactivation of an already given meaning that was not registered in the first place – it is not “retroactive” in any simple way.

The importance of this is multifaceted. It is what makes a primal scene traumatic, meaning only ascribed after the event, not at the time it happened – if indeed it ever happened. Once it has become traumatic after the real or phantasised event, it will influence and determine the subject’s present psychological circumstances and emotional state of mind: the past is bequeathed with “psychical effectiveness” in the present (Laplanche & Pontalis, 1967, p. 111) and, as such, it will also influence and determine the future. Without _Nachträglichkeit_, it would be impossible to explain the sexual character of repressed memories.

No individual has just one linear story to tell: there are many stories in a subject’s history. This applies to the individual as much as to the society and the culture in which he or she lives and participates. The past may have been traumatic, and it has remained undigested or not symbolised: it will continue to beckon us from the future, changing the course of the story. The monster in the closet in Stephen King’s story, _Cujo_, will not easily go away: the monster (from the past) will wait (in the present) so that he can eat Tad up and inflict suffering on him whenever the occasion arises (in the future).

This is what is at the core of the concept of the compulsion to repeat. Lacan masterfully described it thus:

What is realized in my history is not the past definite of what was, since it is no more, or even the present perfect of what has been in what I am, but the future anterior of what I shall have been for what I am in the process of becoming.

(Lacan, 1953/1977, p. 86)

**Psychic reality and the aesthetic**

Art, literature and psychoanalysis do not have the same viewpoint, but they all deal with psychic reality (Green & Edde, 2004). This concept was first described
by Freud as “thought-reality”, which he opposed to “external reality” in the “Project” of 1895. By the time of the 1914 edition of The Interpretation of Dreams (1900), he had changed the term to “psychical reality”, remarkably characterised as “a particular form of existence, not to be confused with material reality” (1900, p. 620).23 Laplanche and Pontalis, in offering their definition of “psychical reality”, state that “. . . fundamentally, what is involved here is unconscious desire and its associated phantasies” (1967, p. 363).

Psychic reality is to be considered (both within and beyond the limits of the clinic) as the particular, internal form of mental representations of oneself and others, of things and events in the mind of the subject. Nevertheless, the relationship between the mind of the subject and reality is not a simple one. As we have learnt from Freud, the judgement of attribution precedes the judgement of existence (Freud, 1925). First, we accept what is good and reject what is bad; only later, based on this first judgement, do we pronounce our judgements about the existence of reality. Since it involves the unconscious, psychic reality is profoundly instilled with the uncanny. Freud made it very clear in his article on this subject when he said: “We ourselves speak a language that is foreign . . .” (1919, p. 221). Julia Kristeva described it thus:

> With Freud . . . foreignness, an uncanny one, creeps into the tranquillity of reason itself, and, without being restricted to madness, beauty, or faith any more than to ethnicity or race, irrigates our very speaking-being, estranged by other logics. . . .

(Kristeva, 1988, p. 170)

A painting, a short story, a film does not communicate to the subject a meaning that is already given. There is nothing intrinsic or given or natural to the aesthetic object: the aesthetic object itself generates the conditions for meaning to be created. This meaning does not belong to the past: it is there to become realised through the work of the subject’s psychic reality (which includes the past). This psychic reality does not precede the work: the work itself creates the unconscious perceptions that did not exist previously.

Standing in front of a particular work of art or reading a literary text, we may recognise something that we might not be able to name: it will be experienced as unfamiliar. The object offers a resistance to being known. At the moment of aesthetic appreciation, the object forces the subject to survive a “diaphanous cloud of unknowing” (Meltzer & Williams, 1988, p. 179).24 There will always be unconscious reminiscences that are active in our psyche but will remain independent of our memory – they will unexpectedly and unsuspectingly come to us; they will disconcert us while we are contemplating a work of art, reading a short story or novel, listening to music, watching a film. This may not happen to everyone nor will it occur with every work of art: no generalisations can be made. We can only say that some forms of art will be appreciated by some people; some will enjoy them, others will be especially touched, and still others might find them too
overwhelming. If we are going not so much “to understand” the artistic object or
the literary text as to allow ourselves, instead, to become involved with it, there
will be a demand for uncertainty to be tolerated: uncertainty, opaqueness, doubt.
The relationship with the artistic object cannot be resolved: it is steeped in the
ambiguity of something both familiar and unfamiliar, uncanny.

Josh Cohen has argued that, “. . . this is where art and psychoanalysis have
their deepest affinity – in choosing to stay rather than abandon the darkness . . .”
(2013, p. 57). Darkness is not something separate from life. Darkness works like
the negative of a photograph: the negative makes the conditions for the picture
to appear, like the example of hand-prints in primitive paintings. The powerful
influence of a trauma comes from the fact that it remains in that darkness, in the
negative. Absurd dreams, the strangest of symptoms, memories that seem to come
from nowhere, bizarre thoughts arising from events of everyday life are all the
result of a dynamic process originating in an area of darkness. This area may be
unreachable and unknown, but this does not mean that it is without meaning: it
is this meaningful area of darkness that allows for a commonality of experience,
an affinity between the aesthetic disciplines and psychoanalysis. It denotes a cor-
respondence as much as a like-mindedness.

Commonality of experience

The uncanny, unconscious temporality and psychic reality are three psycho-
analytic concepts that form the basis for a possible commonality of experience
between aesthetic experience in art and literature and psychoanalysis. Moreover,
aspects of the borderline experience, as it appears to the psychoanalytic clinician
treating patients in the consulting room, may throw some further light upon that
commonality.

In the borderline experience there is a failure of the defence functions of the
go: it is as if the subject cannot defend himself, against either internal impulses or
external events. The perception of reality may be anxiety-ridden and some threats
might appear unmanageable (Gammelgaard, 2005); this will depend on the suc-
cess or failure of the subject’s contact-barrier (Bion, 1962; Freud, 1895a), of his or
her skin ego (Anzieu, 1985). In the borderline experience, the natural distinctions
that we assume as normal may also be erased: terror and anxiety can arise; the
subject may not feel “at home” any longer; depersonalisation may prevail.

The commonality of experience between art and literature and the psychoana-
lytic clinic exists on the borders between them; one does not represent a sup-
plement to the other. It evokes a correspondence and an identification but also
confronts the differences between them. Understanding this commonality does
not imply that we are necessarily able then to “understand” art or literature or even
psychoanalysis: each of these realms demands different efforts and represents dif-
ferent challenges.

Roger Kennedy has suggested that “perhaps we are . . . an amalgamation of
many fragments, narrative threads and voices, as a dream is an amalgamation of
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many different themes” (1998, p. 61). He quotes Heinz Lichtenstein’s view of human identity as a “theme with variations”:

The mother imprints upon the infant not an identity, but an “identity theme”. The theme is irreversible, but is capable of variations. . . .

(Lichtenstein, 1977, p. 78)

Once subjects have accepted something else within, this Other, once they have given up the illusory need for a unified self, they can then consider the possibility that what takes place in their psychic scenario, including seemingly inexplicable psychological events, happens for a reason. Thus, they may become curious and consider that these might be worth thinking about. The same curiosity is demanded by a work of art or literature and may produce similar anxious reactions in the subject. We will then know that this particular work of art, this literary text, has reached us: it has meaning for us.

There is inevitably a paradox in this commonality of experience – a paradox that cannot be overcome: it connects and, at the same time, separates. The concept of a partage du sensible, proposed and developed by Jacques Rancière in a different theoretical context, may be helpful (Rancière, 2000). Partage is translated as “distribution” or “partition”. It conveys both a sharing, such as of goods or knowledge, and a separation, a partition, let us say of property. For the experience to be shared, it also needs to be divided. Psychoanalysis and the aesthetic share the task of making a representation of the unrepresentable, but they are separated by their own individual and contrasting ways of making the attempt. Art and literature have the capacity to create something unfamiliar within the familiar reality; psychoanalysis reveals and identifies the unfamiliar already present in that apparent reality.

According to Geertz, the existence and presence of artistic and literary objects in and through our imagination shows that ideas are “visible . . ., they can be cast in forms where the senses, and (through the senses) the emotions can reflectively address them” (1983, pp. 119–120, parentheses added). The world of painting and sculpture is different from the world of literature, and neither is related, in terms of aims and methods, to psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, all deal with ideas and emotions. This is what allows for links and relationships to be made between different realms of experience.

Artistic objects, the people who create them, the different modes of aesthetic appreciation and the sentiments that the works arouse in individuals cannot be conceived or imagined apart from ordinary life. Nevertheless, if art is to exist, it is not only because there are painters and sculptors. If the arts are to be appreciated, it is not just a question of the pleasure involved in seeing the created objects. As Rancière has argued, art exists because it evokes specific ways of looking at the artistic object. That is how it may be identified as art. The identifying gaze is the result of a complex process of differentiation (2004, p. 6) in which the production and the reception of the creative work are mutually indispensable.
Psychoanalysis, art and literature are not isolated: they share, as I have described, a commonality of experience. Although they reveal different ways of feeling, modes of perceiving and styles of thinking, they are related and connected, in particular, through the phenomenon of the uncanny.

Notes
1 In a later work, the same author referred to the concept of “Aisthesis” to designate “the mode of experience according to which [. . .] we perceive different things, whether in their technique of production or their destination, as all belonging to art . . . because it concerns the sensible fabric of experience within which they are produced” (Rancière, 2011, p. x).
2 Consider, for example, the following: “The term ‘aesthetic’ was first used in the eighteenth century by the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten to refer to cognition by means of the senses, sensuous knowledge. He later came to use it in reference to the perception of beauty by the senses, especially in art. Kant picked up on this use, applying the term to judgements of beauty in both art and nature. More recently, the concept has broadened once again. It now qualifies not only judgements or evaluations, but properties, attitudes, experience and pleasure or value as well, and its application is no longer restricted to beauty alone” (Goldman, 2001, p. 255).
3 It is in this spirit that one should understand the famous Latin dictum, navigare necesse est vivere non est necesse – to sail is necessary, to live is not. This was attributed by Plutarch to Pompey the Great. It was made popular in South America by the contemporary Brazilian singer Caetano Veloso.
4 In the realm of aesthetics, John Dewey took up the challenge of describing art as experience. This became the title of Dewey’s book, in which he gathered the development of his thoughts on aesthetic matters. According to him, the true nature of experience is to be found in “an experience”, which exemplifies, as it were, the very nature of the thing experienced. “An experience” has a persistent, ubiquitous quality which gives it its character; it forms a unity where all its parts, whether intellectual or emotional, are organically related; it carries things from the past and projects something into the future (Dewey, 1934).
5 Saudade is a Portuguese word that has no direct translation into English. It describes a deep emotional state of nostalgic longing for an absent something or someone that one loves. Saudade brings forth sad and happy feelings together: sadness for the longing (absence makes the heart grow fonder) but simultaneously also pleasure in experiencing that very longing. The two sentiments go together. One might experience saudade in the recognition of something familiar and loved in the most unexpected, unfamiliar places. However, one can also feel saudade while facing something totally alien in a familiar place. In saudade, absence and presence, negative and positive cannot be separated.
6 It was published in the Internationale Zeitschrift für Psychoanalyse and later translated, in public recognition of their friendship, by Dorian Feigenbaum, who had been Tausk’s classmate at the University of Vienna. The translation was published in 1933 in the Psychoanalytic Quarterly. Tausk was a highly gifted but troubled young man. His short life ended tragically in suicide when he was forty-two years old (Roazen, 1969; Roazen’s account should be read in conjunction with Eissler, 1971). Tausk’s paper became a classic in both the psychiatric and the psychoanalytic literature.
7 In classical psychiatry, estrangement was thought to be a disturbance of the “reality function” – the inability to recognise something or somebody, previously known.
8 In the eighteenth century, people used to visit the hospital to stare at the patients as entertainment. For a penny, visitors could peep into their cells, view the “freaks” and enjoy and laugh at their tricks and antics. Entry was free on the first Tuesday of every
month. In 1814, Matthews was moved to Fox’s London House, a private asylum in Hackney. In that same year, there were 96,000 visitors to Bethlem (Jay, 2003).

9 Otto Rank’s Der Doppelgänger (The Double) had already been published by then (1914).

10 In 1966 Gordon G. Globus and Richard C. Pillard compared Tausk’s influencing machine to the equally elaborate and mysterious torture machine in Kafka’s short story “In the Penal Colony” (1919). This “very complex machine” (Kafka, 1919, p. 151) was especially created in the penal colony to torture and slowly kill condemned men; all men in this place were sentenced according to the only guiding principle: “Guilt [was] never to be doubted” (1919, p. 145). Globus and Pillard suggest that this machine, comparable to Tausk’s description of the influencing machine, is a disguised projection of the victim’s body.

11 Estrangement also became a central concept for existentialist authors, who used it to describe alienation from society as well as from oneself. For Marxist authors, alienation described the gulf between the self and the world at the point when the work of a human being is turned into a commodity, when it becomes (in a full market economy) just another consumer article; the work becomes reified. Reification permeates the whole system of capitalist society; it creates a state of mind that suffuses all institutions: all sense of purpose is obscured, and meaning is lost (Lukács, 1923). See also the use of the concept of reification in Sira Dermen’s paper “Endings and Beginnings” (2010).

12 There is also a Polish film, Mother Joan of the Angels (1961), based on this historical episode. It was directed by Jerzy Kawalerowicz and won the Special Jury Prize at the 1961 Cannes Film Festival.

13 The references to similar themes in contemporary culture, whether in literature or in films, are multiple, abundant and varied. A popular television drama, The Returned, made in France under the title of Les Revenants (2012), was shown one year later in the United Kingdom to good critical responses. It represents an interesting, albeit ambiguous adaptation of the French film of the same title (2004). An extraordinary phenomenon I have come across in the contemporary literature on the subject has been reported by Richard Lloyd Parry in an article in the London Review of Books (2014). While he was researching for a book on the 2011 tsunami in Japan, he says, “Haltingly, apologetically, then with increasing fluency, the survivors spoke of the terror of the wave, the pain of bereavement and their fears for the future. They also talked about encounters with the supernatural. They described sightings of ghostly strangers, friends and neighbours, and dead loved ones. They reported hauntings at home, at work, in offices and public places, on the beaches and in the ruined towns. The experiences ranged from eerie dreams and feelings of vague unease to cases . . . of outright possession” (2014, p. 14). The examples that followed this statement make chilling reading, even for the sceptical reader.

14 All Shakespeare quotations are from the Arden edition.

15 In his discussion of Freud’s use of the concept of the uncanny, Michel de M’Uzan (2009) suggested that there is a word missing from Freud’s list: bizarre. Indeed, this word is not present in his text – at least, not in the French and English translations of his work. The word denotes something unusual, strange, perhaps also unexpected, grotesque and shocking.

16 Richard Dawkins has suggested that, from the very beginning of life, the human brain is structured in such a way as to take the perceptual world for granted (Dawkins, 1998). For him, our sense of awe and wonder at the marvellous complexity of life, at the universe and nature, becomes numbed, “anaesthetised” by familiarity. We can understand this as the fulfilment of a much needed adaptive function: making things familiar, reassuring and, consequently, manageable. From the beginning, certain things would
have had to be assumed: for example, if the baby cried, the breast would eventually reappear – although there would never be any guarantee. These assumptions would eventually develop later into a general tendency in the individual not just to take the perceptual world for granted, which makes us all anaesthetised through familiarity, but, equally important, to “naturalise” things: we adjust them, change them, revise and bend them; we make them “ours” as yet another tactic of obtaining reassurance.

17 Taking Lacan’s notion of ego development according to the mirror stage as his reference, Šadeq Rahimi argued for “a reading of the notion of the uncanny that draws on direct and metaphorical significances of the ocular in the development of the human ego” (2013, p. 453).


19 The importance of the “Project” goes beyond Freud himself. Sebastián José Kohon (2012, 2014) put forward the idea that Bion’s contact-barrier and related concepts (alpha-function, containment), which are commonly used in contemporary psychoanalytic writings, should be understood with reference to the economic/energetic aspect of Freud’s metapsychology and the “binding” of the drives, as developed by Freud in the “Project”. André Green took some of Freud’s ideas in the “Project” as a point of reference for this elaboration of his concept of le temps éclaté (Green, 2002, 2005).

20 I have argued elsewhere that, because of our splitting of the ego, there is a profoundly absurd contradiction at the core of human knowledge, making the subject deny unconsciously what has been gained consciously. For example, having discovered the unconscious phantasies in the sexual theories of children, Freud nevertheless tried to justify them either on the basis of perception or for reasons belonging to the reality of the children’s past (Kohon, 1999a, pp. 167–170). We find this ironic paradox in Freud’s thinking about the case of Emma in the “Project”: Freud mistakenly attributed the process described above to “biological” reasons – that is, to early scenes being deferred until adolescence.

21 Although this concept has been studied, used and developed primarily by French psychoanalysts, it has not been entirely overlooked by British psychoanalysts. I referred to the question of Nachträglichkeit in my introduction to The British School of Psychoanalysis: The Independent Tradition (Kohon, 1986). The concept was used by Juliet Mitchell in her understanding of the differences between Freud and Melanie Klein (Mitchell, 1986). Rosine Perelberg (who prefers to use the French term, après-coup) explored the concept in her paper on baby observation, which won the Sacerdoti Prize in 1991 (published in 2008). Most notably, Perelberg (2006, 2007, 2008) traced some of the issues in British psychoanalysis concerning the subject of time to the “Controversial Discussions” of 1941–1945 (King & Steiner, 1991). She described how temporality operates along several axes, creating the possibility of “multiple temporalities” (Perelberg, 2008, p. 32), with at least seven dimensions: development, regression, fixation, repetition compulsion, the return of the repressed, the timelessness of the unconscious and après-coup. Perelberg argued that the various notions of time in Freud’s work constitute a structure, the complexity of which arises from the concept of après-coup. In fact, she maintains that the psychoanalytic notion of time gives meaning to all other psychoanalytic concepts. Roger Kennedy has used the concept in his understanding of the dynamics and mutual influence of the past, the present and the future (Kennedy, 1998). Other British authors who have referred to this notion, each following a different understanding of the concept, include Christopher Bollas (2000), Dana Birksted-Breen (2003) and Ignês Sodré (2005).

22 This quote from Lacan was also translated thus: “What is realized in my history is neither the past definite as what was, since it is no more, nor even the perfect as what
has been in what I am, but the future anterior as what I will have been, given what I am in the process of becoming” (Lacan, 1953/2006, p. 247).

23 Strachey clarifies in a footnote that the word “material” was only added in 1919, replacing the previously used “factual”.

24 The expression “the cloud of unknowing”, quoted several times by Meltzer and Williams in their book (1988), was originally used by Christian mystics. It is comparable to John Keats’s reference to “Negative Capability” (letter to George and Thomas Keats, 22 December 1817, in Keats, 1899, p. 277). In another letter, Keats also quoted Wordsworth’s equivalent idea of “the burden of mystery” (letter to John Hamilton Reynolds, 3 May 1818, in Keats, 1899). Bion (1970, p. 125) was the one who originally quoted Keats’s reference: “... capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason”.

25 In general terms, but not exclusively, I would prefer to speak in terms of “borderline experience”, which is potentially common to all subjects, not just to those diagnosed as suffering from a “borderline Personality disorder” (see Kohon, 2007).

26 Gabriel Rockhill, as translator of Rancière’s work, offers a concise description of a number of concepts used by the author. In his “Glossary of Technical Terms”, Rockhill refers to le partage du sensible as “... the implicit law governing the sensible order that parcels out places and forms of participation in a common world by first establishing the modes of perception within which these are inscribed. ... Strictly speaking, ‘distribution’ therefore refers both to forms of inclusion and to forms of exclusion. The ‘sensible’, of course, does not refer to what shows good sense of judgement, but to what is aisthēton, or capable of being apprehended by the senses. ... In the realm of aesthetics, Rancière has analysed three different partages du sensible: the ethical regime of images, the representative regime of art, and the aesthetic regime of art” (italics and bold in the original, Rockhill, 2000, p. 85).
Chapter 2

Louise Bourgeois and Franz Kafka

Of lairs and burrows

It is only rarely that a psycho-analyst feels impelled to investigate the subject of aesthetics.

Sigmund Freud, “The ‘Uncanny’”

According to Steiner, “psychic retreats” (1993) are mental places of safety into which subjects withdraw to avoid anxiety and psychic pain, a way of protecting themselves from emotional contact. His description specifically refers to the clinical situation of a patient in treatment. Whenever the patient withdraws in a manner that is excessive and too frequent, this creates special difficulties and presents a serious challenge to the analyst’s technique. Steiner describes the psychic retreat as “a protective armour or hiding place” (p. 1), a psychic space where patients can hide in order to experience a sense of protection. These spaces appear in patients’ fantasies and dreams in the form of “a house, a cave, a fortress, a desert island, or a similar location” (p. 2). They are defensive systems which, for Steiner, constitute true pathological organisations of the personality. He compares the patient to “a snail coming out of its shell”, emerging with great caution from his hiding place (p. 1). In most cases, he argues, the retreats become permanent residences rather than temporary refuges. Steiner believes that psychic retreats are present in psychotic and neurotic as well as in borderline patients, but, in his view,

they are always pathological, even though they may serve an adaptive purpose and provide an area of relief and transient protection.

(Steiner, 1993, p. 5)

Most significantly, he suggests that they may be used by patients to make progress in the treatment difficult and, often, impossible.

It can be argued that, while at times becoming pathological, “psychic retreats” exist in all of us as part of a normal development of the personality; they may not be exclusively pathological and may exist in different forms and intensities. At one point in his work, Steiner considers this possibility, but then, as we have seen above, he decisively places psychic retreats outside or beyond the realm of “normality”.

I would argue that it is only when psychic retreats are intensely rigid that they become extreme and pathological. While we undoubtedly depend on others to develop our sense of identity and need their recognition in order to derive personal meaning and satisfaction, we also need to acknowledge and maintain a “non-pathological, indeed necessary silence at the core of psychic life” (Cohen, 2010). Eigen (1973) has referred to a “sacred zone of safety”, an “uncracked I-kernel”, a stillness of the self that is active, searching and seeing: not pathological or dead, but alive and kicking. This silent core in each of us is connected to the possibility of creating and nurturing a private self (Modell, 1993) – a self that can ignore and at times actively reject the cultural narratives imposed on us through the process of socialisation. Winnicott (1963) had similar ideas, as I describe below.

Given the popularisation of Steiner’s concept, it is worth establishing a distinction between normal and private emotional mental refuges, on the one hand, and pathological psychic retreats, on the other. In the normal refuges, in contrast to pathological retreats, silence would be possible, aloneness can be experienced without regrets, and the experience of absence does not necessarily turn into persecuting emptiness.

In an attempt to distinguish different ways of understanding these private places of the self, I turn to the work of Louise Bourgeois and Franz Kafka. As psychoanalysts, we have always been somewhat privileged in that we can count on the help of artists, writers and poets for our understanding of complex psychic phenomena. An artistic creation does not “create” something: there is an unconscious knowledge already in existence, which is (re-)found and thus discovered in and through the work of art. The aesthetic objects in art and literature renew the possibility of thinking about that something that is in one sense already known, deepening our understanding of it.

“Inspiration comes from retreat . . .”

The name of Louise Bourgeois will always be associated with her monumental sculpture, Maman (Figure 2.1).

This nine-metre-tall spider shelters a sac full of marble eggs – a ferocious, terrifying and powerful representation of motherhood. The original steel version was first exhibited in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern in London for the opening of the museum in 2000; it now has a permanent residence outside the museum, by the River Thames. There are other copies of the work around the world, one of which was installed in Les Tuileries, Paris, in 2008.

In 2007–2008, part of Bourgeois’s extraordinary collection of paintings, sculptures, drawings, assemblages and architectural cells, all of which defy simple categorisation, was exhibited at Tate Modern. Her creative work, her journals and writings, and the way she referred to them in interviews, showed an awareness of the subject’s need for private places of psychic safety. Her aesthetic creations identify the subject’s dilemmas concerning relatedness and non-relatedness; they
Louise Bourgeois and Franz Kafka

also portray different ways of conceiving, thinking about and understanding the
great variety of potential psychic refuges.

Bourgeois underwent psychoanalysis. According to her diaries, she seemed to
have thought continuously about her feelings – particularly her negative feelings:
she names aggression, jealousy, envy, competition, revulsion, hate and more. She
was tormented by these feelings, suffering deeply from guilt for the hurt she felt
she inflicted on those she loved. Above all, and dominating her life, was her worst
fear: the possibility of sliding from frequently experienced emotional confusion
into psychic chaos. All this anguish, distress, agony and pain existed alongside
a capacity to experience good and loving feelings. In 1980, perhaps inspired by
the tapestry restoration workshop run by her parents during her childhood, she

Figure 2.1 Louise Bourgeois, *Maman* (1999). Bronze, stainless steel and marble;
927.1 × 891.5 × 1023.6 cm. Installed in Les Tuileries, Paris, France, in 2008. Col-
lection The Easton Foundation. Photo Georges Meguerditchian. © The Easton
Foundation/DACS 2014.
declared, “. . . I cannot resist repairing things” (quoted in Kuspit, 2007). Her words could be applied to her artistic creation.

Bourgeois’s career started not as a sculptor, but as a painter. In 1947, she presented her second solo exhibition of seventeen paintings at the Norlyst Gallery in New York. The invitation to the opening incorporated a drawing of a woman, *Femme Maison* (1946–47) (Figure 2.2), whose upper body, including her head, is trapped by a four-storey house with a double basement. The only visible parts of her upper body are her tiny arms, one pointing up, the other downwards.

In the painting of the same name (1946–47), the basement of the house disappears, allowing the woman’s breasts to be shown; the legs can only be seen just above the knees. Bourgeois created a whole series of artistic pieces on the theme

![Figure 2.2 Louise Bourgeois, *Femme Maison* (detail) (1947). Ink and pencil on paper; 25.2 × 18.1 cm. Collection Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York. Photo Eeva Inkeri. © The Easton Foundation/DACS 2014.](image-url)
of the femme maison – a theme to which she returned in her paintings and sculptures throughout her life. It represents an apparently suffocating space, where a woman feels ostensibly trapped, and yet this is also a home, at least at times a place of safety, full of childhood memories, both good and bad. This ambiguity would, in the long run, come to characterise and define much of her work.

If on the invitation to the exhibition the original figure of the woman in the drawing of the Femme Maison was literally confined and locked in by a rectangular outline, sculpture came to Bourgeois’s rescue and offered her newer and different possibilities for self-expression. The Personages (rigid, minimalist, elongated standing figures) created in the mid-1940s and 1950s did not have proper sculptural bases. They were fragile: walking around them one felt that, if pushed, they could easily fall. In fact, for Bourgeois, they had nothing to do with sculpture; three decades later she declared that they were meant to be just “physical presences. That was an attempt not only at recreating the past but controlling it . . .” (Bloch, 1976, p. 372).

The numerous journals that she kept and the considerable number of interviews she gave make it clear that the wish to control the past, her anxieties, her fears and her confusion, and the intense drive to gain a hold over her existential despair formed, progressively, part of her creative work.

Bourgeois experienced great difficulties in socialising and relating to people. But when she declared that “inspiration comes from retreat . . .” (Morgan, 1988, p. 30), she was accepting the need for a creative privacy of the self. This is best represented by her series of interior spaces, above all the ones entitled Lair. Most of the materials used in the construction of these pieces (latex, wax, resin, hemp and plaster) are fairly easily handled and controlled. In the process of being turned into artistic creations, they are altered and transformed. Naturally, at one point they have to be left to set and solidify. Only then do they become unchangeable – unless destroyed. That having been said, what is created with these materials does not evoke in the viewer the feeling of definite completion. There is not the harshness, severity or austerity of a work in metal, nor the sense of security that wood suggests to the viewer. Bourgeois was using this type of material in the context of profound changes in the artistic communities of Europe and New York, where she was living in the 1960s, when young artists started using non-traditional materials, like latex and plaster. The materials used in her creations relate to the paradoxical qualities suggested by the lair as an aesthetic object.

The Lair (1962) (Figure 2.3) is a spiral formation, evoking the shells grown by molluscs as protection against potential predators. In fact, Bourgeois described a lair as a “refuge”, representing a subject’s “search for privacy and a means of escape”, in particular from other people (interview with C. Trane in 1982, quoted in Morris, 2007, p. 166). She spoke of a lair as “a place you need to go, a transitory protection” (Bourgeois, 1988/1998, p. 152).

Each of the lairs, she argued, seems to have an internal life: it is this that makes them “grow” to a certain size. Looking at this sculpture, only about 55 cm in height and of a similar size in diameter at its periphery, one senses or imagines the
presence of a living being under it, the shield protecting it from the outside world. It is a refuge from the outside world, and whoever or whatever lives inside is relatively sheltered in its intimacy and privacy. It was this particular sculpture at the Louise Bourgeois: Retrospective exhibition at the Tate Modern in 2007–2008 that made me think of alternative understandings of mental and emotional refuges.¹

Significantly, Bourgeois acknowledged that a lair could also become a trap, but she claimed that this was not one of her fears: “I do not expect to be trapped”, she said. She understood the spiral, once again, as “an attempt at controlling the chaos”. She asked, “Where do you place yourself, at the periphery or at the vortex?” The experience would be different, depending on where one placed oneself. Is the lair a safe shelter, a sanctuary, an asylum? There is one thing that seems to be very clear: “At no point in the work is there an escape from the self, it’s always an escape from others”.²

One lair is not equivalent to another. Each one in the series could be said to represent a different kind of private refuge; they may not be traps, but none could necessarily be assumed to represent a place of guaranteed safety.
In another of her creations, *Lair* (1963) (Figure 2.4), the spiral seems to have collapsed onto itself.

While *The Lair* (1962) contains a concealed and protected interior, a space one could imagine inhabited, the smaller *Lair* (1963), only 24 cm high, does not suggest such a possibility. Here, if once there was a potential living space, it has now disappeared under its own weight. A lump of raw material, a mass of swelling matter, there is not much elegance in this figure. We may conclude that, at times, the lair does not fulfil its purpose. Private refuges may vary a great deal in terms of their internal structure, their success and their effectiveness.

In yet another piece in this series, *The Lair* (1962) (Figure 2.5), a small pyramid-like structure, 35 cm high, has a round hole in one of its walls, an opening suggesting a mouth, or perhaps, given the many erotic references in Bourgeois’s works, a vagina.

Whatever it may represent, it is not a structure that evokes feelings of safety. There are smaller triangular holes in another wall. There is a striking contrast between the idea of a pyramid, an impregnable bastion that is meant to protect its hidden treasures for eternity, and the feeling of vulnerability conveyed by this small structure.
Fée Couturière (Fairy Dressmaker) (Figure 2.6) belongs to the same period in Bourgeois’s life (1963) and can be compared to the series of lairs.

This white sculpture was first made in plaster and then later reproduced in bronze and painted white. It has a tear-drop shape and hangs like a nest with bulges and half-hidden entrances. The viewer can peer into the various holes, perhaps even feel tempted to put a hand inside, to get a sense of the tunnels within.
Is it a house or a castle? In fact, it looks closer to a bird’s nest, with several rooms and different levels; Bourgeois compared it to a labyrinth. The viewer is uncertain about where the entrance could be, where the exit. The apertures in this piece also make it seem like a deformed mask, those empty eyes, wounds and mouths

Figure 2.6 Louise Bourgeois, Fée Couturière (1963). Bronze, painted white, hanging piece; 100.3 × 57.2 × 57.2 cm. Collection Louise Bourgeois Trust, courtesy Hauser & Wirth and Cheim & Read. Photo Christopher Burke. © The Easton Foundation/DACS 2014.
ready to scream. This work represents another form of refuge, a hollow form retrospectively linked by Bourgeois to the caves at Lascaux, which had made a great impression on her. She believed that her visit to the caves crystallised her awareness of “an enveloping negative form, produced by the torrent of water that has left its waves upon the ceiling” (Bourgeois, 1998, p. 74).

Twenty-three years later, in 1986, Bourgeois constructed another kind of lair, this time entitled Articulated Lair (Figure 2.7), an open, rather desolate space, created by articulated panels of painted steel over three metres tall.

The viewer in this case could step inside the private space of the lair; this was a more vulnerable refuge. It was flexible and was not always exhibited in the same shape; it could be expanded or contracted. Various elongated rubber objects hung from the walls formed by the panels which were moveable. There was an uninviting low stool which could be positioned anywhere within this vacant space; one could rest on it but it did not immediately convey a sense of security. The artist described the space as a place of isolation: the viewer could walk in but there was nothing to see, nobody around, nothing happening. In fact, Bourgeois described it as, “. . . not unsafe, but [. . .] empty . . .” (quoted in Storr, 1986, p. 84).

Figure 2.7 Louise Bourgeois, Articulated Lair (1986). Painted steel, rubber and stool; 335.3 × 335.3 × 335.3 cm. Collection The Museum of Modern Art, New York, USA. Photo Peter Bellamy. © The Easton Foundation/DACS 2014.
And yet, the piece also appears to offer an invitation to participate, to enter this open place, perhaps even to search for the missing person in it. Bourgeois seems to play a double game of *fort/da* with herself and with the viewer. A powerful sense of ambiguity is at the centre of this aesthetic experience. Could the spectator perceive something uncontrollable, chaotic, the source of great anxieties and fears? There is something extremely sad, but is it unavoidably hopeless? The work communicates fragility and vulnerability, and yet, paradoxically, it is open to the world.

Bourgeois’s works include completely enclosed cubicles, fully furnished rooms, and structures, like *Precious Liquids*. This is an ageless cedar-wood water tower, salvaged from the roof of a New York building. These towers, some of which have been restored, can still be seen at the top of buildings in the city. In this case, the tower was transformed into a room with an opening on one side and an exit at the other end. Welded in steel over the entrance is an inscription: “Art is a guaranty of sanity”. Bourgeois made a point of clarifying that she did not mean to say *the* guarantee of sanity; art may be one way, among many others, of arriving at some kind of equilibrium. This is seen by Bourgeois as “becoming a sociable person” (1998, p. 235).

On entering the room, one finds a desolate bed, standing in a pool of water, representing (according to the artist) intense emotions and bodily functions. The bed is surrounded by empty glass vessels hanging from metal poles. Opposite the bed, a large coat hides a small dress hanging from the wall. Bourgeois saw the over-sized coat as representing a voyeur or, rather, a “flasher” (a “beautiful word”, said Bourgeois, which does not exist in French). The dress represents a girl who cannot escape the perverse invasion; her presence “probably has to do with certain memories” (1998, p. 235). In spite of the explanations offered by the artist, the meaning of these objects remained mysterious.

Bourgeois further developed the themes of confinement and freedom, safety and vulnerability, shelter and exposure in the series *Cells*, a number of different structures simulating actual rooms, sometimes fashioned out of salvaged wooden doors and at other times made of cage-like metal grids, resembling more a cage or a jail than a refuge. In commenting on one of them, *Cell (You Better Grow Up)* (1993), Bourgeois stated,

> First there is fear, the fear of existence. Then comes a stiffening up, a refusal to confront the fear. Then comes the denial. The terror of facing ourselves keeps us from understanding and subjects us to the repetition of acting out. It is a tragic fate.

(Bourgeois, 1998, p. 231)

Hope, she claims, is given by self-understanding; it is what makes an artist a better artist. In concluding her comments about this particular cell, she says:

> The world that is described and realized [in the cell] is the frightening world of a child who doesn’t like being dependent and who suffers from it. So the moral of the Cell is, you better grow up.

(Bourgeois, 1998, p. 233)
Perhaps the most important of these constructions, certainly the largest of these cells, is Passage Dangereux (1997) (Figure 2.8).

The structure takes the form of a corridor with several spaces. Each of these open rooms contains a variety of objects: old chairs, tapestries and fragments of tapestries and bed frames. As a spectator, one cannot avoid imagining a narrative, full of pain and anguish and loss – sadness everywhere. Biographical or not, the viewer is not invited to participate. We are definitely excluded; we are only witnesses, outsiders. Bourgeois revealed as much as she hid behind an imaginary No trespassing sign. In fact, this is exactly what she did at the beginning of a television interview in 1993 (Coxon, 2010, p. 66).

There are very few bodies of contemporary artistic work (particularly the series of Cells) characterised by such a literary representation of the artist’s life. Robert Storr described how the stories told by Bourgeois’s work tend to extend, engender and enmesh each other . . . they overlap and intertwine . . . they are full of digressions and apparent contradictions, [nevertheless] their existential and imaginative continuity prevents those contradictions from tearing the fabric they collectively weave, from permitting factual details that are logically or chronologically incompatible to fray it beyond repair, or leave loose threads sufficient to unravel it.

(Storr, 2007, p. 21)

Bourgeois’s work pushes us to engage with her creative pieces in a completely personal way. In considering each piece, one can for the moment live in a no-man’s

Figure 2.8 Louise Bourgeois, Passage Dangereux (1997). Mixed media; 264.2 × 355.6 × 876.3 cm. Ursula Hauser Collection. Photo Anders Allsten. © The Easton Foundation/DACS 2014.
land of anxiety and persecution, between inside and outside, between self and others. This makes the viewer establish a dialogue, not so much with the artist or her creation as with the viewer’s own self, past, memories, thoughts, experience. When Bourgeois says, “you better grow up”, she is saying it in solitude, to herself. As viewers, we are also alone in our response. In this sense, the dialogue is always with one’s own self, for the viewer as much as for the artist. We recognise ourselves in the art of Bourgeois, but the familiarity of a bedroom very easily turns into an alien place, a space potentially invaded by a sense of dread. The very obviousness of the furniture and the clothes and the tapestries creates the conditions for an extra-ordinary moment: this is the instant of the aesthetic experience. This experience is not completely translatable; it can be interpreted in many different ways. The artist has created the work, but there is no definitive authority that can be attributed to the creator of the object. The “truth” of the artistic object does not belong to its creator. At its most familiar, where nothing can be said, things turn upside down: the viewer creates the work of art; art comes into existence through the viewer. In the very unfamiliarity of the work, I am forced to recognise something other, but I also become other. Maurice Blanchot has described this as the “solitude of the work” (Blanchot, 1955, p. 64).

And it is this word, “solitude”, which now brings us back to psychoanalysis and to Freud’s paper. It is precisely in his paper on “The ‘Uncanny’”, where he asks, “And once more: what is the origin of the uncanny effect of silence, darkness and solitude?” (1919, p. 246). Nicholas Royle invites us to mull this over (2003, p. 109): why “once more”, when in fact Freud is posing this question for the first time? There seems to be something uncanny in Freud’s text itself: silence, darkness and solitude have become mutually related, brought together by Freud’s question. A few pages later, Freud insists:

Concerning the factors of silence, solitude and darkness [pp. 246–247], we can only say that they are actually elements in the production of the infantile anxiety from which the majority of human beings have never become quite free. This problem has been discussed from a psycho-analytic point of view elsewhere.

(Freud, 1919, p. 251)

“We can only say . . .” Freud says. And, in any case, he argues, this “problem” has already been “discussed . . . elsewhere”. In other words, perhaps one should not ask any more questions because no answers will be forthcoming. Nevertheless, within the context of what we know, the unknown returns to haunt us.

Bourgeois’s work brings to life not just the opposition between the conscious and the unconscious, the recognisable and the unidentifiable, the individual and the social, the private and the public, but also the very structural fracture between these counterparts, always separated, always together. Furthermore, her works suggest the impossibility of a resolution of this paradox.

We cannot avoid our own pain, our inevitable sadness, all those regrets about our past, the mourning for the people we have lost, the opportunities we missed,
the pain we have inflicted on our loved ones. Bourgeois’s creative work may be understood as an affirmation and a confirmation of Winnicott’s ideas concerning the need to respect a silent core at the heart of our being which creates and nurtures the privacy of our selves, a privacy coloured and affected by feelings of the uncanny and the bizarre. The pain can only be faced while taking risks, not by saving oneself for a distant future. This is what the great Spanish poet Antonio Machado conveyed in Proverbios y cantares (1912), when he wrote,

\[\textit{Caminante, no hay camino,}
\]
\[\textit{se hace camino al andar.}\]

(Walker, there is no road, the road is made by walking.)³

We need, therefore, to distinguish the experience of private refuges from a proper state of withdrawal, a pathological, defensive, psychic state originally described by Winnicott (1955, 1988). It is only when the rigidity of the withdrawal is extreme that we can then speak of pathological psychic retreats. I would also suggest that such extreme forms of withdrawal define what have become known as the borderline states of mind in the clinic. This distinction is important for our understanding of the aesthetic.

### The Burrow

The world is a dangerous place. I felt like a happy animal in its own burrow – weathertight and safe.

(Virginia Woolf, in a letter to her sister, 7 August 1908)

Let us consider the following quotation from Marguerite Duras:

Finding yourself in a hole, at the bottom of a hole, in almost total solitude, and discovering that only writing can save you. To be without the slightest subject for a book, the slightest idea for a book, is to find yourself, once again, before a book. A vast emptiness. A possible book. Before nothing. Before something living, naked writing, like something terrible, terrible to overcome.


The aloneness of the artist, the total solitude of the writer facing the nothingness of a blank page, the emptiness of the blank screen, all this can be terrifying. Could that void become a place of safety? Will it offer shelter and protection? This experience is so familiar to the writer, so well known in the predicament of the painter and yet, again and again, so unknown, so nameless, so mysterious. If the writer and the artist have been there before, why does it feel so frightening? Why do
they want to be there, anyhow? What is this hole which they are so anxious to enter and from which they fear they might never emerge? As Margaret Atwood says, for the writer “[the] well of inspiration is a hole which leads downwards” (2002, p. 176). Actually, it can also lead nowhere. And yet, the writer and the artist feel completely compelled to go back inside. It is without fail a challenge that they need to overcome, again and again. And if, at some point during the creative process, they feel content, they will not necessarily relax or feel at ease; they are rarely free from anxiety or worry.

Margaret Atwood described becoming a writer as

the change from docile bank clerk to fanged monster in “B” movies. Anyone looking might have thought I’d been exposed to some chemical or cosmic ray of the kind that causes rats to become gigantic or men to become invisible.  

(Atwood, 2002, p. 14)

This is the stuff of horror movies, where “the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced”, as Freud declared when describing the effect of the uncanny (1919, p. 244). Nevertheless, Atwood did not become a monster; as far as we can gather, she has not grown pointed teeth nor can she walk through walls. Presumably, it is the writing that saves the writer, as painting saves the painter, from becoming that monster, from dying, starving and drowning at “the bottom of the hole”. The achievement of an artist and a writer is to respond to the challenge and the wish to become one. The survival of this challenge is in great contrast to the tragic destiny of Jack Torrance, the fictional character from Stephen King’s The Shining (1977), formerly a teacher who wishes to become a writer but who never makes it. From longing to find a place of safety as a winter caretaker at a hotel in the Colorado mountains, his attempt at creating a psychic refuge (presumably, an escape from his history of alcoholism and violence) defeats him. In fact, he can only pretend to be writing a novel; instead, he goes steadily and dangerously mad. At the end, he attempts to murder his wife and his own five-year-old son, his life ending in a violent explosion. No salvation here.

Jack Torrance’s experience can be compared to the struggles of the animal in Franz Kafka’s “The Burrow” (1931a).  

Kafka wrote several stories in which people turned into animals or animals were transformed into people. Most famously, there is “Metamorphosis”, but also “A Report for an Academy” and “The New Lawyer”, as well as many fragments of other stories. In Kafka’s writings, animals relate to the human world in strange ways: dragons, snakes, storks, dogs and “unearthly horses” appear in a variety of bizarre circumstances. And then there are his proper animal stories: “Investigations of a Dog”, “A Hybrid”, “Josephine the Singer, or the Mouse Nation” and his last, unfinished, short story, “The Burrow”, of which I now give a brief summary.  

The creature in “The Burrow” is not identified: the reader knows only that its dream is to construct a place where peace will never be disrupted, quiet will be absolute and stillness will reign. In a world that is perceived as self-destructive and
aggressive, the animal wants to create a “wholly perfect burrow” and, within it, a “castle stronghold”, to provide an unassailable fortress against the threats posed by “the war of extermination that has been going on” on the outside – an absolutely safe existence. And yet, how to keep the aggressive outside away from the burrow? The animal, a solitary being who feels excluded from the world, never appears certain that such safety can ever be achieved. His best hope is that the world itself, actively engaged in a war of extermination, will never discover his refuge:

There are many enemies . . . but they battle against one another, and thus occupied, they race past the burrow.

Nevertheless, the creature has to admit to himself that an enemy – any enemy – could break into his den; his seclusion might not be ignored by others, nor will it necessarily be respected. Even in complete seclusion, he will be at the mercy of “the first comer who would search slowly but surely and force his way in”. He becomes obsessed with “defensive measures”, which involve frequent alterations of the burrow. This forces the animal to adopt a position that gives him absolute security: he places himself at the entrance to his lair, keeping an eye on both the inner and the outer world simultaneously:

I [. . .] secretly spy upon the entrance to my dwelling – this time from outside – for days and nights on end. People may call it foolish, but it affords me an ineffable joy, and it comforts me.

The security from the outside world has to be complemented and guaranteed by security from within: an impossible predicament. It dawns on him that all feelings of safety are an illusion:

Well, one wakes up quickly, with a start, from one’s childish dreams. What kind of security is this, really, that I am keeping an eye on? Have I any right to judge the danger that I am in while I am in the burrow, according to the experiences I have while I am here outside?

In his vigilance at the borders, he feels that he has become more defenceless than he was before. His enemy might, in fact, be even more watchful than he is. He has to remain in his burrow so his enemies will accurately perceive his presence; his own scent should be in the air so that they will not dare attack him:

. . . is not the presence of the full scent often the prerequisite for normal danger?

“Normal” it may be, but the animal still feels exposed to a surprise attack, which he might not be able to recognise properly while he is in the burrow. Unable to feel safe either in the interior castle stronghold or in the outside world, he cannot find any pleasure. An intense scrutiny of the world thus develops, transforming small
events into something terribly threatening. The fear results in further undermining of the animal’s confidence – a self-defeating exercise.

In response to his experience of extreme agony, the world is assimilated to the self, and the animal’s self becomes the world:

I and the burrow belong so indissolubly together . . . nothing can part us for long. . . . You (the burrow) belong to me, I to you, we are united . . . here is my castle which in no way can belong to anyone else . . . the burrow and I belong to one another. . . .

Disturbing cracks appear in the walls of his refuge: the futile exercises of self-protection render the beast progressively weaker and more and more vulnerable. Whenever he finds himself entirely alone, the animal is happy – but the threatening world outside never ceases to exist. He is enticed by “profound sleep”:

. . . to sleep profoundly and simultaneously keep close watch over myself. To a certain degree I have the distinction not only of seeing the spectres of night in the helplessness and blind trustfulness of sleep, but also simultaneously of facing them in actuality with calm discernment, possessed of the full strength of my waking state.

But, the animal wonders:

No, I am actually not observing and watching my sleep, as I believed, but on the contrary it is I who sleep while the destroyer keeps watch.

He is awakened by a “hissing” noise. Now, the “real” enemy emerges: the menacing “hissing” that wakes him up is a frightening presence that can come only from within his own self. As readers, we understand that the noise can only be imaginary – that the animal himself is his worst enemy. This possibility is suggested at the beginning of the story, when the animal declares,

I have never seen (the supposedly horrendous adversaries), but legend tells of them and I firmly believe in them. They are creatures of the inner earth . . . you hear the scratching of their claws just under you in the ground, which is their element. . . .

Scratching or hissing: noise is alleged to be the ultimate evidence of the enemies’ existence: they have never been “seen” by the animal, but their presence is supported by “legend”. In genuine paranoid mode, he identifies his own voice as coming from outside, but the sound remains incomprehensible to him. He believes that the war has finally entered his chambers:

the castle stronghold has been swept into the turmoil of the world and into the dangers intrinsic to the world.
The creature goes insane and is utterly harassed by the persecuting sounds: “my imagination will not rest . . .”. He starts destroying his carefully constructed burrow, hurting himself badly in the process. There is a hint here, in the text, of a possible awareness in the animal’s mind that his own self might be the source of the threats he suffers. In confusion, the animal wonders, “Perhaps I am in somebody else’s burrow. . . and now the owner is boring his way towards me”.

The animal ends up hating his own home: “. . . to be honest I cannot endure the place”. But there is no exit.

The text does not offer any explanations of the animal’s behaviour; there are neither psychological clues nor emotional reasons that allow the reader to make symbolic connections or interpretations; the text does not offer any resolution. Everything remains abstract and, in the emptiness of the creature’s life, his anxieties, worries and motivations cannot be rendered intelligible. All the reader knows is that the originally grandiose construction now stands defenceless: the animal is no longer a “young apprentice” but an old, defeated “architect”.

This is one of the most dramatic and claustrophobic of Kafka’s stories; it is impossible to do justice to it in a brief summary. Most poignantly, Kafka died before completing this story.

In 1976, Manuel Ross stated, without further elaboration, that

Kafka’s description (in “The Burrow”) comes as close as any to describing the states of panic and estrangement in the borderline which so often precede acting out. It is the paradigm of estrangement.

(Ross, 1976, p. 310, italics added)

In “The Burrow”, Kafka portrayed a creature that cannot properly create a place in which to feel safe; after so much struggle, the animal ends up being completely alienated, deterritorialised. He fears that someone else is occupying his own body: states of panic on the one hand; separation, withdrawal and alienation on the other.

This geographical element is echoed in the concept of abjection, which is defined by Kristeva (1980) as an ambiguity that does not respect borders, positions or rules. In the borderline experience, according to Kristeva, the subject, always an exile, asks, “Where am I?” rather than “Who am I?” Furthermore, she speaks of “the fortified castle of the borderline patient”. Nevertheless, this feeling of security does not last: sooner or later, the walls of the castle will, inevitably, crumble. Thereafter, while looking desperately for a safe home, the subject will regularly feel that his or her prized place in the world is under threat of being lost.

An important concept, comparable to Rey’s claustro-agoraphobic dilemma (Rey, 1977, 1979), is Mervin Glasser’s “core complex”, which he believed was essential for the understanding of the perverse structure. According to Glasser (1979), there is in perversions “a deep-seated and pervasive longing for an intense and most intimate closeness to another person”, a wish to merge with the object in a “blissful union”. While this might be part of normal loving desires, in a pervert the longing to merge is not “a temporary state from which he will emerge”: there is a real threat of a “permanent loss of self”. Consequently, there develops
the experience of an “annihilation anxiety”, forcing the flight from the object, “retreating emotionally to a ‘safe distance’”, where the subject remains isolated in something comparable to a pathological psychic retreat. A vicious circle is thus created: the extreme and painful isolation will make the individual seek the state of oneness from which he had originally run away.

Nevertheless, not all patients suffering from this claustro-agoraphobic dilemma are perverse. They might have perverse character traits and practices but they have not found a perverse “solution”, where all forms of pleasure are ultimately subordinated to the pleasure offered by the perversion. While the pervert is exclusively preoccupied with the denial of the differentiation of sexes, the difference between generations and the negation of the other’s pleasure, the borderline is, for example, much more concerned with the exclusivity of his frail narcissism: nobody else can be king. He would like to be the exclusive, absolute chosen master; he ends up feeling like a true suffering slave.

I have previously written that

in growing up, the human subject is by necessity forced to unconsciously surrender to the other’s desire. It is a process of social learning by which the individual’s subjectivity [comes into being]. The social environment imposes this learning on the subject, who gives up or tones down his unconscious desires for the price of survival, acceptance and recognition. . . . A process of de-subjectivation allows subjectivity to develop. However, it is never to be fully achieved or completed, otherwise, one would witness the triumph of the death instinct at the service of the Other. (At a socio-political level, tyrannical, totalitarian and repressive governments attempt and, at times unfortunately succeed in imposing extreme forms of de-subjectivation on their citizens. In Western democratic countries there is growing concern about the restrictions and controls imposed by their political leaders and government figures, such measures being justified through rationalised versions of an over-protective and religious morality). The subject has to remain free to recreate meaning, to be unpredictable, to surprise himself and others through his actions. The alternative is to inhabit a self that functions similarly to a protective institution; like a jail or a hospital, a family or a neighbourhood, the institutionalised self becomes a safe refuge which the fading subject [is] unwilling to leave.

(Kohon, 2005a, p. 94)

In taking up permanent and static residence in their psychic retreats, borderline subjects not only find a form of narcissistic safety, however fragile, but also gain sado-masochistic satisfaction from the relationships they establish with their objects (however precarious the existence of these objects). In their state of mind they cannot tolerate uncertainty, inconsistency, ambiguity or contradiction, nor can they play. There is only a frantic search for reassurance that is never fulfilled. Something in them turns into an internal tyrant, a terrorist, who is idealised and to whom they gladly submit. This is especially relevant to the treatment of these patients because this scenario is projected onto the scene of the treatment and the figure of
the analyst. The sado-masochistic relationship is then recreated in the analysis, the analyst becoming the patient’s persecutor. The borderline subjects feel that they have lost their freedom in and through the psychoanalytic treatment itself, that the analyst has become a cruel tyrant and torturer who keeps them trapped: thus, they feel unable to escape from the analysis except through an explosive acting out.6

Ideally, patients will come to accept that this distorted idea of safety, this belief in extreme forms of psychic retreats, is illusory in real life; their own personal, persecuting “hissing” belongs to them, and no other. This acceptance cannot be achieved without genuine psychic pain and arduous working through. Part of the therapeutic task (of abandoning pathological burrows and establishing alternative modes of being that would allow for a creative privacy of the self) consists in recognising that – as for everyone else – paradise has not only been lost: it has never existed.

According to Henry Sussman, “The Burrow” represents “an extreme” kind of fiction created by Kafka. He argues that

his writing has now descended to a scene which is, in its every dimension, severe – an entirely self-contained subterranean enclosure whose reference to the outside is every bit as incidental and deceptive as it is inescapable. Darkness is the only raw material available. . . . The earthen passageways and walls of the burrow describe a barren narcissism.

(Sussman, 1977, p. 100)

Sussman maintains that the discourse of the animal portrayed in the story is “human discourse”: here, animalism is not “merely an anticipation of humanity”. In this case, the humanity present in the monologue of an unidentified burrowing animal has been reached “only after humanity has been lived” (p. 101).

Kafka described how the frontiers of the beast’s refuge are experienced as permeable and easily broken. One wonders whether there may be another side to this story – a reference to the feeling of being buried alive and an unconscious allusion to the return of the undead, the ghost.7 Hamlet refers to the ghost of his father as a “mole”. In the play, the ghost, the spirit of Hamlet’s father, is rustling about under the stage, demanding:

Ghost: Swear by his sword.
Hamlet: Well said, old mole. Canst work i’th’ earth so fast?
A worthy pioneer! Once more remove, good friends.
Horatio: O day and night, but this is wondrous strange.
Hamlet: And therefore as a stranger give it welcome.
There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio,
Than are dreamt of in your philosophy.

(Hamlet, Act I, Scene 5)

Kafka’s text started with the animal saying, “I have completed the construction of my burrow and it seems to be successful”. By now, the reader knows better. The completion never took place: what started as idealisation (“it is secured as safely
as anything in this world can be secured . . . ”) ended up in denigration, destruction and resentment. Nevertheless, knowledge of the failure was already there, contained in the first words of the text: it “seems” to have been successful. . . .

The whole project was one of failure from the start. At the end of the story, we are left in ignorance. As he destroys his burrow, is the animal also destroyed? Is the creature dead or alive? Or is the animal going to end his life by being buried alive, something that Freud considers a “terrifying phantasy”; for him, this idea constitutes “the most uncanny thing of all” (1919, p. 244; see also Bondeson, 2001, quoted in Royle, 2003).

“The Burrow” is a good portrayal of the emotional instability of a human subject who faces immense difficulties in negotiating the borders between the inside and the outside. In its burrow the animal, although experiencing a fundamental tension between the inside of the construction and the “reality” of an exterior, has no real relationships with objects in the outside world. There are no objects out there, in reality: the “outside” has no significance, except as a threat from an imagined, malevolent Other (about whom nothing can be known) or as an impossibly suffocating demand exercised from the outside upon the subject.

**The permanent isolation of the individual:**

**creativity and silence**

In psychoanalytic theory, there has long been a particular emphasis on the social aspects of the self. The writings of Donald Winnicott are an exception. He suggested the idea of a “still and silent spot”, an “isolate” self at the centre of our being (Winnicott, 1963), which cannot easily be reached and, possibly, although experienced, cannot be known. Winnicott emphasised the need to recognise this “non-communicating central self, forever immune from the reality principle and forever silent” (1963, p. 192). Mostly inspired by Winnicott, other psychoanalytic authors developed ideas along similar lines, attempting to do justice to the need for privacy and solitude in human beings.

From the beginning of life, there is an indispensable dialectic between socialisation and privacy. Socialisation involves the parents imposing their desire, demands and expectations on the child. On the other hand, being able to maintain a privacy of the self, one that excludes others, may well be how the child develops a sense of safety and security. Psychologists and child analysts have long known that negativism in a young child – for example, his capacity to say “no” – helps to make him a psychologically autonomous subject (Spitz, 1957, 1958). Through this process of opposition and negativism, the subject becomes capable of “spontaneous gestures” (Winnicott, 1960). Winnicott was adamant about this:

> I am putting forward and stressing the importance of the idea of the permanent isolation of the individual and claiming that at the core of the individual there is no communication with the not-me world. . . .

(Winnicott, 1963, p. 190)
This suggests a particular view and a specific understanding of the theory and practice of psychoanalytic treatment: if, at some level, a true and authentic inner experience is not communicable, then the analyst will have to respect its inviolability and “learn to respect rather than coax [it] into speech” (Cohen, 2010). There is a profound dilemma, well described in Winnicott’s works, concerning the subject’s wish to be – and not to be – discovered and emotionally in touch with others. In the process of growing up, this dilemma is reflected and dramatised in the particular and quasi-mythical moment, often referred to in the psychoanalytic literature, when the presence of the mother enables the baby to play in solitude. And yet, paradoxically, her presence potentially impinges on the infant’s privacy, conceivably interfering with the baby’s creativity. The creation of much-needed private refuges may be linked to and developed from the capacity of the child to be alone in the presence of the other.\(^9\)

Winnicott, while making reference to Freud’s concept of the anaclitic type of attachment, argues that silence in a psychoanalytic session might not be evidence of resistance but may, on the contrary, constitute an accomplishment on the part of the patient. Being alone in the presence of another is a necessary paradox that cannot be eliminated, avoided or resolved. Furthermore, a permanently isolated part of the self, and the possibility of using private refuges to ensure that this isolation remains protected, could represent an important developmental achievement, not a pathological trait. Specifically, it is both the result and proof of “the mother’s continued existence” in the mind of the child (Winnicott, 1958/1965, p. 33). The capacity to establish – and the possibility of using – inner psychic spaces and refuges isolated from others makes the subject feel real: it allows for the experience of continuity of self, helping the subject to become creative. In this sense, periods of non-relatedness are as vital as states of relatedness. Revisited in adolescence, the “preservation of personal isolation”, is, according to Winnicott, “part of the search for identity . . .” (1963, p. 190).

Importantly, it is likely that this secret area of experience may also be at the origin of human artistic creativity, an attempt at making that secret area an object of communication and sharing. Being secret, it is still familiar. It cannot be reached, known or investigated, and it remains personal. One may want to describe it as uncanny. It may, as such, be suitable for aesthetic enquiry, as Freud suspected (Freud, 1919).

Notes
1 See the comment about lairs by Marina Warner in the catalogue of the exhibition (Warner, 2007, p. 166).
2 The quotations in this paragraph all come from Louise Bourgeois, edited by Frances Morris (2007, p. 166).
3 Translated for this edition.
4 The quotations that follow are taken from Kafka (1931a, pp. 325–359). To make the reading more fluent, I will not refer to the specific pages.
5 Deleuze and Guattari (1975), in referring to Kafka’s life and work, have spoken of a geographical opposition between the process of deterritorialisation and that of
They took as their point of reference the story of “Metamorphosis”, where the subject’s own body is conquered and displaced – thus constituting, they claim, the most absolute form of deterritorialisation: the subject is expelled from his own body.

6 See “Borderline Traces and the Question of Diagnosis” (Kohon, 2007).
7 While researching the bibliography for the present book, I somewhat belatedly came across Nicholas Royle’s *The Uncanny*, a book published in 2003. Taken together with Masschelein’s work (2011), they clearly show how the psychoanalytic concept of the uncanny has unquestionably become part of contemporary critical studies: literary criticism, history, politics, etc. Royle’s book, written in an expansive style, offers different perspectives while covering a number of themes; I found it evocative and inspiring. Moreover, there is a chapter entitled “Mole”, which refers to Kafka’s “The Burrow”.
8 Including Michael Balint, Enid Balint, Michael Eigen, Masud Khan, Thomas Ogden, Marion Milner, Wilfred R. Bion, Donald Meltzer, Arnold Modell, Michael Parsons, Adam Phillips, André Green and others.
Chapter 3

Kafka meets Borges
From geography to temporality

In the land of Sona-Nyl there is neither time nor space, neither suffering nor death.

H. P. Lovecraft, The White Ship

Marie Rudden (2011) has described a “secret cocoon”, a private, internal space to which her musician patient would withdraw whenever he became anxious and confused in his sense of reality. Rudden referred to the diverse functions of such withdrawals, during which, her patient told her, he would masturbate and play music, accompanied by grandiose, erotic daydreams and aggressive fantasies, while also experiencing the fear of getting “lost” in them. This need to withdraw changed during the course of the analysis: the shifting of the “cocoon” states enabled the patient to develop a more creative and freer sense of self. Rudden was inspired by this case (which she mentions briefly at the beginning of her paper), and it encouraged her to pay more attention to similar predicaments in other patients. Before proceeding to write about a more lengthy case, she wrote,

I have learned to pay particular attention to such secret “places” in my analytic patients, especially those who have experienced their parents to be intrusive into their sense of reality and autonomy. I have noted the adaptive and defensive aspects of the patients’ withdrawal, which allows the secret expression of fantasies related to autonomy, domination/submission and to the fear of psychic annihilation. Once the conflicts and fantasies about withdrawing to the “secret place” are analysed, these patients can more easily access the generative aspects of their “private selves”.

(Rudden, 2011, p. 360)

In developing her argument for the consideration of the positive aspects of a private self, she reviewed some of the literature, quoting a diversity of psychoanalytic authors, such as D.W. Winnicott, Arnold Modell, Leonard Shengold, Donald Meltzer, Thomas Ogden, Philip Bromberg and Piera Aulagnier, as well as writers like Orhan Pamuk and Edward Said. Rudden, writing from a theoretical
orientation quite different from that of many of those quoted, confirmed the view that not all private refuges should be considered as “pathological”. There are psychic retreats and psychic retreats.

Marina Mojović (2011) extended Steiner’s concept of the psychic retreat to what she describes as social-psychic retreats, unconscious structures that may underlie certain forms of social pathology and social trauma. They may involve trans-generational repetition through the unconscious creation of specific social-sychic formations within social systems such as families, institutions, organisations and societies. They may be positive or negative, partial or total, and may become, whether transiently or permanently, part of the dynamics of social systems.

Mojović also brought up the question of whether,

in certain circumstances, especially in connection with trauma, some of (the psychic retreats) might be considered as “normal” defensive organizations, which are helpful for survival by protecting the person from greater regression and by providing a sort of transient arrest or moratorium to development until the capacities for growth recover.

(Mojović, 2011, p. 210)

She referred to the work of Hopper (1991), who emphasised the positive aspects of what he called encapsulations and their positive manifestations in social formations, especially in traumatised societies. Hopper, inspired by the work of W.R.D. Fairbairn, W. R. Bion, D. W. Winnicott, Sidney Klein and Frances Tustin, described his concept of encapsulation as

a defence against annihilation anxiety through which a person attempts to enclose, encase and to seal-off the sensations, affects and representations associated with it . . .

(Hopper, 1991, p. 607)

For Hopper, the fears of annihilation are linked to intra-uterine and birth experiences: he suggested that fundamental primitive parts of the self could become trapped in repetitive movements in non-developmental processes within an autistic chamber. The entire traumatic experience would thus become encysted in “unconscious prototypes”, later associated with other traumatic experiences in life. In his view, they can be negative when they seal off horrendous experience and bad objects but, whenever they offer containment to healthy parts of the self (in order to protect the self from “bad experiences”), they can be positive. Hopper, like Mojović, considers that these processes also take place at a social level.

In discussing both the privacy of the self and the pathological forms of psychic retreats, space has so far been considered as central to the understanding of the subject’s dealings with external and internal realities. Negotiation of the relationships between self and the outside world has been understood through reference
to a geographical concept: the desperate need to live in a shell as a protective
shelter, a burrow that has become a cell, a prison where the fear of being invaded
prevails over everything else, a state of being where neither motion nor progress
nor development seems possible. This predicament can result in omnipotent stasis
dominating the subject’s life.

From scientific, philosophical and epistemological points of view, we are con-
fronted with the fact that space and time cannot be kept apart: the intellectual
separation of space and time in the experience of human beings is arbitrary. In this
respect, space and time belong to what Derrida referred to as one and the same
originary unity, formed by the combination of the “becoming-time” of space and
the “becoming-space” of time (Derrida, 1976). Many philosophers and episte-
mologists have expressed similar views.

In the visual arts, Willem de Kooning has articulated this in a concise expres-
In other words, it keeps on going in time: it changes, it does not stay still. This
is what allows the visual activity of what is called “the picture plane” to remain
disengaged from the material support of the actual canvas. The space of the paint-
ing becomes an activity, a movement that takes place in time. It is not static. In
the case of de Kooning’s own work, the specific use of abstract means to suggest
representational themes denotes the complex ways in which space and time are
combined. De Kooning’s paintings were thought of as “action painting” (Rosen-
berg, 1952) or “situations” (Greenberg, 1954). Rosenberg famously wrote,

At a certain moment the canvas began to appear at [sic] one American painter
after another as an arena in which to act – rather than as a space in which
to reproduce, re-design, analyse or “express” an object, actual or imagined.
What was to go on the canvas was not a picture but an event.
(Rosenberg, 1952, p. 22, quoted in Elderfield, 2011, p. 18)

An “event” is the actual or contemplated act of an occurrence – anything that hap-
pens in a given space, at a given time. Rosenberg had de Kooning in mind.

tells us of Don Grosa, a famous hypnotist of bulls (he uses the term sugestio-
nador, for which there is no English equivalent). On 1 January 1901, he is to
appear in the bullfighting arena of Madrid, following the performance of the three
matadores announced for the day’s events. There is a black table and a chair at
the very centre of the arena; on top of the table is a black cup, containing a pair
of dice which (the audience knows) are loaded. Don Grosa appears, dressed all in
black from head to toe. Silence. He walks to the table, sits on the chair, picks up
the cup containing the dice and, after shaking it, he upturns it, without uncovering
the dice. Motionless, both hands on the table, he sits, looking at the gates. Then,
a slight nod of his head indicates that they should be opened and the bull let loose
into the arena. When the bull appears, all there exists is a man, Don Grosa, in
complete silence, engrossed in his own solitude. The bull stamps, snorts, careens
towards the scene in the middle of the arena – but there is nothing there except this statue of a man.

Bulls do not charge immobile objects: they do not break their skulls charging lamp posts. Don Grosa, all in black, turns not a hair: he believes that the statue’s indifference to time will, just for an instant, also be his. If he stays still enough for long enough, death will not see him; it will pass him by. Everything will stop, time will be hypnotised, becoming will never become. Disguised as a statue, Muñoz writes, all Don Grosa is doing, in wanting to cheat death, is “to dress himself of space” [sic] (p. 283, italics added) – dressed in space, so time will be frozen and the future will forever be postponed. We do not know what happens, in the end, to the intrepid and resolute Don Grosa. But we do know that the future can never be postponed: it will take place, whatever we attempt to do. Of course, one’s life does not need to be as interesting and as risky as the life of a sugestionador attempting to hypnotise time to illustrate the point.

To appreciate the originary unit of time and space, I turn again to Kafka and then to a great admirer of Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges.

Maurice Blanchot argued that Kafka’s writings should all be considered as fragments. Fragments, he said, constituted and defined Kafka’s style (Blanchot, 1949). Having considered “The Burrow”, an unfinished piece, I now consider another incomplete text by Kafka, “The Hunter Gracchus”. There are two versions of the story: it was first published in 1931, but only the second version was described by the editors as “A Fragment” (Kafka, 1931b, 1936). Since the two versions are closely related, I quote from both, without making any distinctions.

The Hunter Gracchus is a dead man although “in a certain sense”, claims Kafka, he is also alive. Many years ago, the Hunter died, falling from a cliff in the Black Forest while hunting. He has been dead for “fifteen hundred years” and yet he has been travelling the “earthly waters” in an old boat “without a rudder . . . driven by the wind”. The Hunter has stayed alive because the death ship “lost its way”. This may have been caused by “a wrong turn of the wheel” or “a moment’s absence of mind on the pilot’s part”. Nobody seems to know why the ship got lost. In any case, poor Hunter Gracchus never manages to reach the other world. At one point during his journey he reaches a harbour and is visited by the Burgomaster of Riva, who demands that the Hunter tell him, briefly but coherently, “how things are with you”. The dead and yet alive man responds, “Ah, coherent! That old, old story. All the books are full of it . . . you, man, sit here and ask me for coherence . . .”.

The Hunter Gracchus seems to have lived happily before his death. “I had been glad to live, and I had been glad to die”, he confesses. It was only at the moment of embarking on his journey that, Hunter Gracchus believes, “the catastrophe happened”. He seems to have dropped out of all real human contact: he is everywhere and nowhere, roaming the earth, wandering eternally in a zone halfway between life and death. He is not able to find a place to live or die; nothing determines his existence. Living in this absurd and unreal situation, he has tragically lost all “coherence”: nobody can understand him, nor can anyone – even he – truly grasp his desperate predicament.
Is he immaterial, then? Is he one of the undead?

What has happened to the Hunter Gracchus? What has been his transgression? Who is he? Why is he wandering haplessly, not able to envisage a proper end to his journey? Gracchus’s ship offers a universal symbol of destiny and completion, but it will take him nowhere. This is not the death ship of the Pharaohs, nor that of the Vikings nor a Polynesian ship collecting the dead from different islands. Nor is it an American Red Indian burial canoe nor the boat that took Scyld of the Sheaf to another world gift-covered when he had arrived to conquer the Danes, as told in the Old English epic, Beowulf. All these dead knew who they were.

But nor are we close to the angst of the hopeless adolescent rebellion suggested by Rimbaud’s poem, “The Drunken Boat”, where he uses the image of a boat to represent a man’s journey through life. If only the Hunter’s boat would sink! The Hunter Gracchus despairs in this attempt to identify himself: “I am . . . I am – no, I cannot; everybody knows it, and am I, of all people, to tell it to you?” “Everybody knows it” – so he claims, so he hopes. He frantically tries to normalise the situation, which is (as Gracchus seems well aware) the least “normal” imaginable. There is no explanation concerning his past that would justify his endless journey. Since there is no room for memory, there cannot be an end, either in the present or in the future.

There is a genuine sense of depersonalisation, a frightening subjective experience of unreality; the Hunter uses words but cannot offer the simplest explanation. The Hunter’s guest, the Burgomaster of Riva, although eager to learn the hero’s story, is unable to comprehend anything he is told by the Hunter. He is not enlightened by the Hunter’s replies; on the contrary, he remains bewildered by the lack of continuity in his responses.

As in other stories by Kafka (who never gives a “proper” authorial explanation of the incomprehensible events described), the Hunter Gracchus finds himself outside an established order of the world. His search is miserable and fruitless; there is no symbolic world with established limits; his world has turned chaotic, uncertain and hopeless. Tragically, the Hunter could not have foreseen the aimlessness of his travels and now he is forever stuck in futile repetition. He can only attribute his misfortune to a “wrong turn of the wheel” or to the distraction of the pilot.2

Travelling forever towards one’s resting place can be as dire and extreme as being buried alive. The latter only “appears” to be more horrific than the former. In the first instance, the man seems alive but he is “really” dead; in the second instance, the man seems dead and buried but is categorically alive. The result seems to be the same. As Edgar Allan Poe makes the narrator say in “The Premature Burial”:

The boundaries which divide Life from Death, are at best shadowy and vague.

(Poe, 1844, p. 955)

Maurice Blanchot, commenting on Kafka’s story, claimed that anxiety in human beings does not originate only from the fear of death:

If night suddenly is cast in doubt, then there is no longer either day or night, there is only a vague, twilight glow. . . . [If] Existence is interminable . . . we
[would] not know if we are excluded from it [. . .] or whether we are forever imprisoned in it. . . .

(Blanchot, 1949, pp. 8–9)

Anxiety, argues Blanchot, also comes from the fear that death might also be taken away from us, that nothingness might not be there, that there might yet be more existence.³

Freud argued in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,”

If we are to take it as a truth that knows no exception that everything living dies for internal reasons [. . .] then we shall be compelled to say that “the aim of all life is death”.

(Freud, 1920, p. 38)

The idea that there might be “something else” beyond death can awaken disconcerting feelings – unless, of course, the notion is understood exclusively within a religious context. Towards the end of his life, Jorge Luis Borges argued in many recorded interviews that not dying would have been his worst nightmare: no possibility of ending, no possibility of feeling that one has accomplished a task – that of living. He may have written a story like “The Immortal” (1949), but Borges was certain that he did not want to be immortal.

The Hunter’s journey resembles what Lacan described as the Real. The Real is “the impossible”, says Lacan (1964, p. 167), never expected and yet never avoidable. It is the world of tychê, a Greek word that Lacan took from Aristotle’s Physics to designate “accident” or “chance”. Tychê describes events that happen outside human control, the encounter with the Real, the object of traumatic repetition. In reality, we manage to survive the Real by marking its boundaries by symbolic means: if we cannot identify the Real, we can at least mark it as different. Let us imagine a prisoner in a cell, in solitary confinement, with no windows, no natural light, no newspapers, no television and no exchange of words with any other human being. The prisoner would not be able to count the days by marking the wall; he would have no way of telling the passing of time. He would progressively go mad. Once reality cannot be found, imagined and/or negotiated, we find we are living in the Real. The Real is that which, when you stop believing in reality, does not go away.⁴ The story of Hunter Gracchus is a complex but accomplished literary embodiment of the most elusive and difficult concept in Lacan’s writings.

Reading Kafka’s “Gracchus” does not motivate the reader to wish to expand the character’s history: to know more about his past or his relationships does not seem to be relevant to the text. Instead, the reading of the story demands the acceptance of scenarios that exist in the form of invisible symbolic inscriptions (as described in the work of Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok: Abraham, 1975; Abraham & Torok, 1976). They may represent fragments that need to be reconnected to some larger story but this narrative will never fully be completed.

There is something unsaid in these literary texts: unresolved contradictions, perhaps even gaps or abrupt changes in the story, moments that become uncanny
Kafka meets Borges

(see Felman, 1977/1980). The unsaid has nevertheless not remained secret: it is suggested by the writer, and, although the reader is not necessarily or immediately able to put it into words, he or she feels its presence. The uncanny raises its head through the structure of the text; it is not the content of the text that produces the uncanny effect (Lloyd Smith, 1992).

Abraham and Torok argue that a predetermined, self-evident development in childhood cannot be assumed; the authors question the assumed universality of individual development. If developments in childhood do not follow predetermined ways, then it follows that the traumatic potential of an event is defined only by its effects, not by the nature of the event. There is no singular event that can be defined as traumatic; events become traumatic because, for one reason or other, they cannot be psychically metabolised. If experiences are not digested and integrated into the individual psychic life, they remain split off, kept in isolated psychic regions. Abraham and Torok speak of psychic phantoms: what remains unknown and, therefore, undigested is the subject’s assimilation of an alien subjectivity that did not belong to him or her in the first place. The subject incorporates secrets, silences, absences and traumas that belong to the past; we are all the creation and the result of family stories from previous generations. For the most part, these stories are invisible, speaking through the voice of strangers through “cryptonyms”, words that hide rather than reveal a meaning.

The experience of the uncanny produced by a work of art may evoke not so much the experience of a repressed event but the psychic confusion caused by unknown secrets that have not allowed the subject to live his or her own life. The traumatic is present in experiences that are impossible to know, to verbalise, to integrate into the subject’s psychic life. They belong to external influences outside the individual’s immediate lived experience. The Hunter’s journey portrays the encounter with something that seems to be outside language, something that cannot be symbolised. It cannot be imagined, it has no name, there are no words to describe it – hence, its traumatic character.

Abraham wrote that

the “phantom”, whatever its form, is nothing but the invention of the living . . . [and it] is meant to objectify, even under the guise of individual or collective hallucinations, the gap produced in us by the concealment of some part of a love object’s life. The phantom is therefore also a metapsychological fact: what haunts are not the dead, but the gaps left within us by the secrets of others.

(Abraham, 1975, p. 171)

Abraham argues that the concept of the phantom is not related to a process of mourning, because what is referred to is not the loss of an object of love: “What comes back to haunt are the tombs of others” (p. 172). It is a formation that has always remained unconscious; it has passed from the parent’s unconscious to the child’s. The author characterises it as having the function of a ventriloquist: it is
like a “stranger within the subject’s own mental topography” (p. 173); and, he adds, “The phantom which returns to haunt bears witness to the existence of the dead buried within the other” (p. 175, italics in original).

Buried within the other, but kept in an inner crypt in some isolated part of the subject’s self: this is not an identification with the lost object. It is the result of an incorporation, where the dependency on the dead object is well guarded and kept alive; the dead commands the subject’s desires: the dead is alive.5

The concept of the phantom is relevant to the reading of Kafka’s story because it points out Gracchus’s ignorance of what has determined his fate; he appears to be unable to work out the repressed wishes that might have motivated him, the unconscious impulses that have led to his predicament. The endless perambulation of the Hunter Gracchus also evokes the experience of exile, when a subject, having been forced to leave his country of origin, remains in a pathological state of malignant mourning that cannot be resolved, a viciously persistent homesickness. As André Aciman described it: “What makes exile the pernicious thing it is, is not really the state of being away, as much as the impossibility of ever not being away . . .” (1999, p. 10). Away, from where? From home? There is no home – evermore. Home no longer has any meaning. Perhaps there never was a home, even though, paradoxically, it may be profoundly missed. Home is no longer the space one might hope to occupy: there is no experience of safety. Most poignantly, time has become frozen in melancholic abjection.

“Funes el memorioso” (1942) is a short story by Jorge Luis Borges. It first appeared in June 1942 in the newspaper La Nación: it was published two years later in Borges’s book Ficciones. The first English translation appeared in 1954. “Memorioso”, a word commonly used in Spanish, means “having a vast memory”. Its English equivalent, “memorious”, is probably not as frequently used nor well known.

The narrator recounts how he has been asked to contribute to an anthology of recollections of Ireneo Funes. He remembers meeting Funes for the first time in 1884 while riding with his cousin. Funes, then a teenage boy, lived in Fray Bentos, which (apart from identifying tins of corned beef) is a small town in Uruguay. The youngster was known for “certain peculiarities”, says the narrator. In fact, we know from another source (Borges, 1941a) that he was a compadrito mágico, a “magical street punk”, a “lad with a swagger” who was “normally unhappy”. His mother was una planchadora (a woman who does the ironing), and his father, a difficult man, was un rastreador (a tracker). He had been expelled from school as a child for literally copying two chapters from a book, including illustrations and maps, as part of his homework. He was incredibly lazy, and at his funeral people remembered very little of him: a visit to una estancia (a ranch), another visit to un burdel (a whorehouse). And yet, because of his perception and his memory, he is defined by Borges as a “precursor of supermen”, a “suburban and limited Zarathustra”. Borges claims that, without any doubt, he was “a monster”.

From the text of the story itself, we learn that Funes avoided contact with people. He could always tell the time with utter precision, without the aid of a
chronometer. This ability is never questioned by the narrator who, at some stage, travels back to Buenos Aires. A few years later, upon his return to Fray Bentos, intending to relax and study some Latin, he learns that Funes has been paralysed in a riding accident and is now hopelessly crippled. Soon the narrator receives a note from Funes, requesting the loan of some of his Latin books and a dictionary. Disconcerted, he sends Funes what he regards as the two most difficult works in his possession.

Days later, the narrator is urgently called back to Buenos Aires. As he packs, he remembers the Latin books and goes to Funes’s house after dinner to collect them. Directed by Funes’s mother, the narrator walks through a patio towards Funes’s room, which is dark (the mother had warned him that her son tended not to light the candle) and smelling of damp. As he enters the room, he is greeted by Funes’s voice, out of the blackness. Funes is speaking in Spanish and Latin, enumerating the cases of prodigious memory cited in the Historia Naturalis by Pliny the Elder. He reveals that, since his fall from the horse, he remembers everything in full detail; his perception is perfect, infallible. He remembers, for example, the shape of clouds at all given moments, as well as the associated perceptions (muscular, thermal, etc.) of each moment. No events and no thoughts are ever lost to him. After his injury, Funes lives completely in the present; while being intensely vivid, the present becomes excruciatingly excessive.

The remarkable abilities of this uneducated young compadrito have become the dramatic source of his failings. Funes, it was announced earlier in the text, suffered from “certain incurable limitations”. In order to pass the time, Funes was now engaged in constructing an absurd and completely useless system, elaborated with great care, which gave every number a different, arbitrary name. Seven thousand and thirteen had become “Napoleon”. The number five hundred was now “nine”. Seven thousand and fourteen had become “the railway”. Within a few days, he passed the twenty-four-thousand mark, and this was done without any need to write down any of the new “names”, since he had perfect recollection. The narrator correctly points out to him that this is the exact opposite of a system of enumeration, but Funes is incapable of understanding or at least unwilling to do so. We are told that he was not “very capable of thought”. Funes’s world is full of intolerable details, trapped in the infinite nature of the particular. Although he is pointedly aware of the passing of time, he cannot forget anything. He cannot, for example, recognise his own face in the mirror and does not even have this minimum narcissistic satisfaction. Every time he looks at himself, there is a new face staring back at him. Does he feel depersonalised? Funes cannot sleep, and he sees life in its absolute specificity, its immanence; he lives in “a multiform, instantaneous and almost intolerable precise world”. In the end, we learn that Funes dies the most prosaic of deaths from congestion of the lungs.

Funes’s tragedy is to live completely in the present, with no capacity for forgetting. When he remembers a day, the past becomes a present, and the future is always to be remembered. Past and future collapse in a present that remains too
“present”, too specific and detailed. Normally, we make sense of time through the capacity to forget, which is the condition whereby our memories acquire meaning. Funes’s incapacity to forget represents another way of freezing time so as to deny its passing. Since there is no forgetting, there is no story to be recreated from memory; repression does not exist for him. To remember has no meaning for him; nothing needs to be understood, confronted, challenged; his remembering is uni-dimensional: there are no subtleties here. Funes cannot sleep, therefore he cannot dream. His project is to catalogue what he remembers: a dead world, where there is no room for the Freudian unconscious.

In contrast to Funes’s “good” memory, the persistence of memory in Proust is a memory that has been lost, to be consequently re-created. Involuntary memories (Proust) survive in a lived time, full of discrepancies and misrecognitions, invaded by strange connections and mutilated by empty spaces. It is a psychoanalytic memory: you cannot remember the smell of your mother when you were a baby but the perfume of the woman passing you in the street is dissolved and recreated in the memory of other bodies that you have known and lost, including that first one of childhood. The woman whom you now caress and kiss is made familiar through the memory of other women that you have loved: paradoxically, the same memory of other bodies will also make her a stranger. In the words of Hélène Cixous, “The sense of strangeness imposes its secret necessity everywhere” (1976, p. 525). In this resides the dialectics of heimlich/unheimlich.

In not being able to make proper sense of time, Funes cannot move; he remains in a very confined space. Having lost his capacity to forget, he cannot relax enough to sleep. In finding it difficult to sleep, he cannot dream. As Ogden writes,

The world Funes created was meaningless in that relationships among its parts adhered to no system of logic. . . . Funes existed as a dreamer of a meaningless dream that he did not know he was dreaming . . . [and] it [was] impossible to distinguish waking from dreaming . . . impossible to go to sleep and to wake up.

(Ogden, 2005, p. 52)

And, Ogden adds,

The opposite of a good dream is not a nightmare but a dream that cannot be dreamt; what might become a dream remains timelessly suspended in a no-man’s land where there is neither imagination nor reality, neither forgetting nor remembering, neither sleeping nor waking up.

(Ogden, 2005, p. 53)

While Gracchus lives between the quick and the dead, lost in the fog without a rudder, Funes suffers, instead, from a most desolate and useless capacity; in him, there is symbolic impoverishment (Kohon, 2005a, 2007), a form of concrete thinking, confined to describing facts and events. It has also been described by
French colleagues from the Paris Psychosomatic School as operational thinking (pensée opératoire). They described a form of thinking devoid of phantasy, a kind of two-dimensional psychic functioning, expressed (in the case of psychosomatic patients) only in physical complaints (Marty & de M’Uzan, 1963).

Gracchus and Funes, in their own different ways, both create intense feelings of uncertainty in the reader: *Who am I? What do I feel?* The aesthetic experience of reading will always demand the autobiographical from the reader. By itself, this would be enough to elicit the uncanny in any aesthetic experience, but there is a particular twist to reading these works by Kafka and Borges. I have enjoyed reading them, but, in ways that felt disturbing, sense and meaning have been taken away from life. I almost wished that the events narrated had remained secret. And yet, being alien to me, I fully recognise them. Both stories represent something that otherwise eludes representation: a burial that never happens, keeping the dead alive (Gracchus); a life full of empty facts, a life that cannot be experienced, life in death (Funes). There is something almost comical about the predicament of these characters; nevertheless, their presence perseveres in the mind of the reader as something profoundly unsettling.

Gracchus and Funes both resemble and help us to recognise some of the accounts given by patients when describing their mental breakdowns – their “catastrophe”, as the Hunter calls it. In this context, we may better understand the experiences of those subjects who cut themselves. They try desperately to keep the Real at bay, to give limits to the Real by attempting to find the exact location of bodily boundaries. From such patients, who most frequently would also be described as borderline in the clinic, we often hear: “cutting makes me feel real . . .”. They would otherwise be adrift in the Real, lost on their journey, finding no meaning in life, getting nowhere.

This adds to the confusion between birth and death – a phenomenon that appears to be particularly evident in the case of schizophrenic patients. Elsewhere I have described a patient who was, among other things, caught in the deluded maintenance of a prenatal union with his mother (Kohon, 1976, 2005a). He wanted to paralyse time, to live a mummified existence; his actions were frozen acts without a morrow (Minkowski, 1933). At times, the deliria of severe schizophrenic patients seem to be permanently crystallised in their fragmentation, forever running in the same place. This is most dramatically reflected in schizophrenic coprophagy, in which there is “a rejection of the irreversible character of physiological processes . . . which conditions the irreversibility of biological temporality” (Gabel, 1963).

Winnicott emphasised in his work a particular way of using a number of traditional English words: *dreaming, living, fantasising, being, holding, using, communicating, playing, relating* (Gammelgaard, 2005). These words all denote a process that takes place *in time*: they refer to a creative movement, a motion that involves and promotes change. The meaning conveyed by these words is in sharp contrast to notions of stasis and inertia; it represents the reverse of emptiness and barrenness, of lack of progress or growth. It can be argued that these are the
psychic functions that, in the borderline experience, the subject finds very difficult to implement and exercise.

In spite of his difficulties in fully acknowledging his predicament, Funes declares towards the end of the long night spent with the narrator: “My memory, sir, is a rubbish dump”. Thus, somewhere in his mind there is an awareness of the futile, senseless projects he has embarked upon: to catalogue what he remembers – a dead world. We are faced once again with the impossible world of the Real. In the words of Hélène Cixous, “The sense of strangeness imposes its secret necessity everywhere” (1976, p. 525). In this resides the dialectic of heimlich/unheimlich, the realm of the uncanny. Here, a specific surplus of terror and anxiety pervades the aesthetic experience.

Notes
1 I am grateful to Earl Hopper for the reference to Mojović’s paper, as well as to his own work.
2 According to Eric L. Santner, the history of unredeemed suffering that has attended “the foundation, preservation, and augmentation of institutions in the human world” is not only represented by dissolution and loss of energy, not just by “merely . . . going dead; it is equally one of perpetual intensification and agitation”. Santner, in writing about the works of fiction of W.G. Sebald, has referred to this “peculiar sort of animation”, this “ex-citation” in terms of “undeadness” (Santner, 2006, pp. 114–115). He described in detail how the figure of Kafka’s unhappy hunter, the undead wanderer sailing the earthly waters, “haunts” Vertigo (Sebald’s first prose work). It is worth mentioning here that Anneleen Masschelein speaks of “Sebald’s poetic of the uncanny . . . a unique blend of fiction, history and photography” (2011, p. 148).
3 In the case of Dorian Gray (Wilde, 1890), the boundaries are pushed back and forth: there is a changing movement between magnificent beauty, on the one hand, and chilling and disturbing monstrosity, on the other. Dorian is embalmed (dead) in the apparent beauty of his eternal youth (life); his portrait, showing a progressively hideous and repulsive ugliness, which materialises his mortal sins, is in fact approaching death.
4 I am here paraphrasing Philip K. Dick: ‘Reality is that which, when you stop believing in it, doesn’t go away’ (from “How to Build a Universe That Doesn’t Fall Apart Two Days Later”, 1978/1985).
5 Although aware of their mortality, and perhaps because of it, human beings have always speculated about their finitude. In literature, this has created a particular genre, both oral and written, dedicated to the description of immortal figures and to a meditation on the mortality of human beings. Is death inevitable? Is there life after death? Can one escape death? These themes appear in many works of modern literature, where death is feared and immortality desired. There is an important distinction to be made between being undead and being immortal. The immortal is supposed to live forever. In contrast, the undead, although dead, cannot leave the world of the living or returns because he is unable to depart properly from it.

A prominent example in world literature of a human being as “immortal” is Jorge Luis Borges’s short story “El Inmortal”, included in the collection El Aleph in 1949. The narrator tells the story of Joseph Carthapilus, an antiquarian from Esmirna (Izmir), who offers the six volumes of Alexander Pope’s translation of the Iliad to the princess of Lucinge, in London, 1929. In the last volume, she finds a manuscript written in English by Marco Flaminio Rufo, a Roman tribune disillusioned with his participation in a war. During a sleepless night in Thebes, a mysterious rider, exhausted and wounded,
reaches his camp and falls from his horse near Rufo’s feet. Before dying, the man tells Rufo of a river in Africa whose waters bestow immortality on whoever drinks from it. In hearing this, Rufo sets out for Africa with a band of soldiers and mercenaries. At the end of harsh journeys and dangerous adventures, Rufo discovers that immortality is a dreadful sentence. Indeed, only death makes sense of living: each act of the living makes sense only if it carries the risk of being the last one. The only thing that Rufo wants now is to find the other secret river, the one that will restore to immortals their finitude. Rufo finds it years later, by chance, in the North of Africa, on 4 October 1921. He declares, “Once again, I am like all men”. Human life gains meaning when a subject realises that he is not immortal; his own life-project is bounded and defined by this realisation.

In naming the author of the discovered manuscript Joseph Carthapilus, Borges alludes implicitly to the legend of the Wandering Jew (Carthapilus was one of the names given to that mythical character). Homer, as the Troglodyte who accompanies Rufo to the City of the Immortals and waits for him, reflects another version of the wandering Jew. The first literary record of such a poor soul as the wandering Jew, doomed to wander around the world forever even though he is dead, dates back to 1237 in R. Roger of Wendover’s *Flowers of History, Comprising the History of England from the Descent of the Saxons to A.D. 1235; formerly ascribed to Matthew Paris (1849)*, which is available for free as an e-book from Google. The author included a short section entitled “Of the Jew Joseph who is still alive awaiting the last coming of Christ”. After appearing in many different guises, the wandering Jew makes his most popular entrance in people’s imagination in 1602, in a German chap-book. The legend spread throughout Europe, becoming especially popular in France. The *Histoire Admirable du Juif-Errant, Lequel Depuis L’An 33, Jusqu’ L’Heure Presente Ne Fait Que Marcher*, from 1767, enjoyed great success and is still available in print. In it, the Jew courts many dangers in vain, hoping to end his misery in death. There have been innumerable versions of this legend by writers from different periods and countries – including Mark Twain (1835–1910) and Pär Lagerkvist (1891–1974).

The Hunter Gracchus, in losing whatever meaning death may have, has lost the value of life. When the fictional “immortal” in Borges’s story has his mortality restored in the end, he can sleep in peace, knowing that one day he will die – like everybody else. [An interesting clinical use of this story, together with another story by Borges, “The Circular Ruins”, was made by Catalina Bronstein (2002).]
Juan Muñoz and Anish Kapoor
Of drums, double binds and non-objects

. . . it’s not a matter of observing facts nor of inventing stories.
I don’t have to provide evidence for what I propose and yet
I must be convincing.
The object isn’t offered to the gaze and yet it exists.
J.-B. Pontalis, Love of Beginnings

A frozen normality
Juan Muñoz was a Spanish artist who died suddenly in 2001, aged forty-eight, at
his summer home in Ibiza. Among his many exhibitions in London, Juan Muñoz –
A Retrospective at Tate Modern in 2008 was a huge success, showing the full
range of his creativity. Like Louise Bourgeois, he produced sculptures, drawings,
collages and works that included light and sound; he wrote scripts and designed
theatrical installations; he was also a curator, critic and essayist. When he was
once accused of a “dangerous, excessive bent towards literature” in his crea-
tions, he retorted that, yes, indeed, he was in fact a “story-teller” (Juan Muñoz, in
Muñoz & Poinsot, 1987).

I met Juan in 1971, when he was nineteen years old: he wanted to be a writer,
an artist, an actor. He was enamoured with life, travelling through Europe with
a rucksack on his back, with the following inscription: Tarzán y su puta madre.
Then I completely lost track of him – until after his death. I walked around that
2008 Retrospective without realising that Juan Muñoz was that Juan Muñoz. I can
still remember the tone of his voice, his restless presence, the passion he felt for
everything. For him, it was as if la vida cotidiana – ordinary daily life – was the
inevitable and yet unusual scene of the extraordinary, the unexpected.

At the memorial service in New York in October 2001, Richard Serra recalled,
in his “Eulogy for Juan Muñoz”, how Muñoz recognised that the subject of his
creations was “grief, caught in a moment of time . . . ”. Serra suggested that art
attempts “to protract time to the longest extent possible . . . to make time stand
still . . . ” (2001). Muñoz’s is not decorative work: its meaning is to be found “in
the essence of a lingering sorrow” (Serra, 2001, p. 139).
Let us imagine a stool. This is a common enough object in everyday life. Imagine it dangerously placed near the top of some stairs – silent, static. Time has stopped: the stool is frozen, petrified. Nevertheless, the mere possibility of its fall creates a disturbing sense of danger. The object does not necessarily make the spectator imagine the stool falling, nor does one feel the need to move away in fear. Strangely, it makes one feel lonely. It invites the spectator to become a fully committed participant, not just an observer. The reaction of the one who looks will be determined, among other things, by whether the subject is capable of playing. Otherwise, it is just conceivable that looking at the stool almost at the point of falling will leave people cold, untouched, or make them feel frightened.

Muñoz described his sculpture, *Wax Drum* (1988) (Figure 4.1), thus: “... an object that has left its reason behind” (Muñoz & Lingwood, 1995, quoted in

![Figure 4.1](Juan Muñoz, *Wax Drum* (1988). Wax, metal and scissors; 30 × 40 × 40 cm. ©The Juan Muñoz Estate, 2015.)
Wood, 2008). It is a realistic representation of a drum, made of wax, hung from a wall in a tilted position, the way it would be carried and played in a marching band in the real world. (In fact, this was illustrated by a photographic *Self-portrait* (1995), in which Muñoz is playing a similar drum.) Like a stool, this is another “ordinary” object; here, the drum is dramatically transformed by a pair of metal scissors that puncture its skin. The “ordinariness” of the two items, the drum and the scissors, is altered by association to an ear(drum) that has suffered irreparable damage. We are left puzzled and shocked.

In contemplating these two pieces at the 2008 exhibition at Tate Modern, I was struck by the experience of eerie silence, despite the presence of other people. Time had stopped. If only one could hear the stool falling and the drum beating, then the sense of time would have been restored; reality would return to the familiar. Given the lack of sound, there was no way in which we could identify the moment in time as “different”. The distinction between the familiar and the alien had been erased. The aesthetic experience inscribed in these two objects produced a sense of menacing strangeness: what was represented here?

*Double Bind* (Figure 4.2) was an installation occupying the whole of the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern in 2001. The installation was separated into two levels;
two lifts went up and down in continual motion but there was no access to either level. The lower floor consisted of a dark area, unsettling, gloomy and empty, installed under a false ceiling that suggested the floor above. The upper floor itself revealed a series of large holes or shafts; some of them were optical illusions. One was rather surprised to discover human figures on the upper level.

In the artist’s own words,

This kind of anonymous place, a sort of extended underground like a car park, is very familiar to us. . . . It is never night time and never daytime . . . it could be anywhere in the world. . . . No one seems to own them, there is no sense of responsibility for them, no desire to make them more than they are. They just exist down there.


The space created by the artist seemed, at first sight, familiar. Most of us, members of the public, walked around this extraordinary installation, sometimes whispering to our companions, sometimes in silent absorption: we were forced to suspend our judgement of reality. There were hatchways where balconies, stairways and doorways were visible. One might have wanted to sit and watch but there was nowhere to sit, apart from the floor. One had to keep moving around, searching for something, a sign, something that would reveal the meaning of it all. And then, looking up through the openings, one could see human figures half-hidden in the interiors. They seemed to appear from nowhere and were going nowhere, unreachable. There was no sense of time here, no sounds: the human figures were forever confined to a still and inaccessible world. Did I hear a whisper coming from above? Please, say something. The onlooker became the one looked at by a population of strangers indifferent to one’s presence, absorbed in themselves and their own world.

A double bind occurs whenever an individual or group receives simultaneously conflicting messages, one message negating the other. An appropriate response to one message will inevitably result in a failed response to the other. Irrespective of the response, the person will always be wrong. More to the point, the person cannot escape the situation, which becomes an emotionally disturbing trap. Where there are two conflicting demands, the situation goes beyond a simple contradiction: the victims of a double bind have difficulties, above all, in defining the exact nature of the paradoxes in which they are caught. Each demand belongs to a different logical level, and yet neither can be ignored. The demands are, at one and the same time, familiar and yet experienced as completely alien.

The whole of Double Bind was painted a uniform pale grey, a colour that made any hope for individuality disappear; both the structure and the figures were placeless and timeless. One walked around it underneath, wanting to peer up into the rooms, to participate – an impossible enterprise. One could only feel excluded and mystified: this was the stuff of nightmares. As Gertrude Stein wrote in her autobiography, referring to Oakland, the place of her birth: “There is no there there” (1937, p. 289). After thirty years in Paris, she had returned to find that her house was no longer there, her school was no longer there, her park was no longer
there, her synagogue was no longer there – not in space, not in time. The past was another country: the place had become meaningless. Similarly, in the huge Turbine Hall of Tate Modern there was no “there”. Silence became too loud, the sense of emptiness too present. Without knowing exactly why, one was left with the impulse to escape from this claustrophobic environment. It represented a borderline world between stillness and movement, fiction and reality, a world of alienation where human interaction did not exist. We were a few steps from the River Thames but perhaps going walkabout on Mars would have felt more comfortable.

At the 2008 Retrospective, Muñoz exhibited a series of mysterious human figures. Created with uniform and depersonalised features, they had no sexual identity. Appearing as rather small human beings, some of them had lower bodies consisting of heavy spherical bases. For example, Listening Figure (1991) (Figure 4.3), made in bronze, leans against the wall, straining to hear what is on the other side.

*Figure 4.3* Juan Muñoz, *Listening Figure* (1991). Bronze; 135 × 74 × 73 cm. Photo courtesy Walrus/Creative Commons. © The Juan Muñoz Estate, 2015.
The spectator is struck by the intent quality of the listener. What could be going on? We cannot guess; we are strangely fascinated and yet equally perplexed.

The same aesthetic experience is repeated in *Conversation Piece* (1996) (Figure 4.4), where similar figures, this time made of resin, interact with one another in a peculiar atmosphere of furtive restraint.

The eyes of these figures are organs that cannot see; they are covered by something – cataracts? tissue? – that blinds them. A complete lack of genuine contact is suggested by the figures, resembling perhaps many social situations in reality. Could this be a representation of a conversation among human beings? Again, silence dominates this particular encounter; it is difficult to imagine any language being used. Nevertheless, there is an edge to this scene: these “people” reflect human conflicts, angers and resentments, congealed in time. Do they convey any hope? Is there ever going to be any resolution to their conflicts? The public is witness to awkwardly rigid gestures that convey, in their own vagueness, a sense of alienation. The characters could not be properly identified or understood; I was intrigued but felt hopelessly excluded from their dealings.

Finally, there is Muñoz’s masterful creation, *Many Times* (1999) (Figure 4.5): it consists of one hundred identical human figures, this time with legs but no feet,
standing either by themselves or in small groups, all alike, dressed in identical grey clothes – and they are all smiling.

At first sight, there appears to be a mutual emotional involvement. But soon an uncanny mirroring effect starts to take place: the apparent social exchange is, rather, one of an unending fixed reflection. The happy faces are unreliable and misleading: the initial suggestion that they are communicating with each other cannot be trusted.

This experience was appraised by Muñoz himself, when, perhaps evoking what Winnicott and Lacan wrote about mirrors, he declared,

My characters sometimes behave as a mirror that cannot reflect. They are there to tell you something about your looking, but they cannot, because they don’t let you see yourself.

(Schimmel, 2000, p. 150)

A mother who cannot reflect the image of her baby, failing to identify him or her, creates a world of impossible meanings and an alienated response in the infant. As subjects, we need other subjects so as to experience the mutual recognition necessary for the emergence of our own subjectivity within a given space and time. We can imagine a baby, deprived of a properly alive emotional response from the mother, falling into a depersonalised world of bodies and spaces; the baby can watch but cannot get involved. People around the baby exist only at a distance; there is no real intimacy, no genuine sympathy. Real emotional intercourse is impossible.

The mother gives meaning to the baby’s experience, a meaning that the baby cannot yet create or have by himself. The mother anticipates what the baby is to discover. This was described in Lacan’s reformulation of the mirror stage in his *Seminars* (1960–61). In his revised view, the image offered by the mirror is internalised and libidinally invested by the infant (thus confirming the child’s existence as a whole) because the parent, holding the child up to the mirror, offers a (verbal) gesture of approval. We have a significant scenario here: the parent’s recognition of the child in the mirror is what becomes truly important. The child is not, after all, the one celebrating on his own the discovery of his specular image in a mythical moment of narcissistic jubilation (as originally described by Lacan, 1936 [1949]). It is the parent – or parental figures – saying (signifying) “you, you, that is you” who offer the necessary recognition and acknowledgement. The other-than-himself of the mirror is pulled away, forced either to look at the mother or at least listen to the mother. The intervention of a linguistic code establishes the presence of a third term, right from the start.

From a different perspective, Rosine Perelberg has made a similar point, speaking of the meaning that is produced *between mother and baby*. Using the analogy of music, Perelberg wrote,

> When the mother reinterprets the baby’s feelings and thoughts it is not an act of translation but of production of meaning. The meaning is not in the mind of the baby but in the mother’s formulation.  

*(Perelberg, 1997, p. 184)*

The visitors to Tate Modern may have thought that they could get involved in the exchanges among the hundred human figures. At first, there was a kind of exhilaration in being there, mixing with the figures. Then it turned into a feeling of unrest: we were only viewers, forever left outside, isolated and disaffected. We could not make a coherent story out of these figures and had to endure the impenetrable encounter without quite knowing where we were: not quite outside time, nor quite inside; not quite belonging to that space, not quite outside it: a true borderline experience. There was no possibility of finding our reflection in a mirror, no signs to be read, no dialogue to be established.

If, at the start of the visit, there was anticipation in walking around these figures, it was likely that the viewer would soon feel stranded, disoriented, undecided.
The elusiveness and the ambiguity of the figures were disturbing: they were completely alien to me and yet ever so familiar – so recognisable and, at the same time, so far away (Figure 4.6). Their presence created a unique space and a peculiar atmosphere in a huge room of the gallery in which “one [did] not know one’s way about . . .” (Jentsch, 1906, quoted in Freud, 1919, p. 341).

In the end, who was the spectator? Who was the exhibit? Jorge Luis Borges, greatly admired by Muñoz, described (1952a) the conundrum: the characters of a fictional story can themselves be readers or spectators. Why could not, then, the reader be part of a fiction? What if the reader or spectator were fictitious? Here, we could remain in the realm of sameness, nothingness, estrangement, all in the guise of frozen “normality”.

Muñoz once declared that he created his works in order to explain to himself things that he could not understand otherwise (quoted in Cooke, 1999, p. 2). This is what distinguishes a subject who can manage to survive the nightmares, fears, persecutions and chaos of his inner world through creativity, giving representation to the unrepresentable, from one who cannot generate meaning in his life.

The void, the emptiness and the search for meaning

Anish Kapoor has lived and worked in London since the early 1970s, when he moved from Mumbai. He has produced a number of large works, including Taratantara (1999), a piece 35 metres high installed in the Baltic Flour Mills in Gateshead, and Marsyas (2002), a large work in steel and PVC covering the 320-square-metre Turbine Hall of Tate Modern. Several of his sculptures are permanently sited in open spaces. His remarkable Cloud Gate, a 110-ton stainless steel sculpture with a mirror finish, has been permanently installed in Millennium Park in Chicago. In the rich, large, complex and very popular exhibition that opened in September 2009, the five galleries of the Royal Academy were dedicated exclusively to his work – the first time an artist was honoured in this way.

The variety of Kapoor’s creative output has disconcerted art critics and commentators. How are his pieces to be judged? He crosses artistic boundaries, especially between sculpture and architecture. At every crossroad, Kapoor establishes new meanings, generates uncertain references, invents new shapes and objects that inevitably force the viewer to take risks. Ideas and associations are inexorably awakened. There is always a subtle touch of irony, perhaps even a certain cheekiness, or at least an intelligent, authoritative irreverence.

The sense of freedom communicated by this work may result from Kapoor’s belief that form itself has a “propensity to meaning” (Lambirth, 2009). In one of his many interviews, Kapoor referred to an episode reported in the press:

In India people started to venerate a huge stone weighing a hundred tons which fell off the trailer of the lorry transporting it to the temple where it was to be carved into an idol.

(Tieberghen, 2007, quoted in de Loisy, 2009, p. 43)

This is a dramatic illustration of Kapoor’s contention that there is a drive in human beings that allows meaning to emerge from form. His observation about the fallen stone was as follows:

The idea is deeply rooted in the human psyche, there is always the possibility that an object might manifest itself, might create itself.

(Tieberghen, 2007, quoted in de Loisy, 2009, p. 43)
This idea informs the title of one of his monumental creations, *Svayambh* (Figure 4.7). The word is translated from Sanskrit as *self-generated* or *born by itself*. The work is a deep-red wax block that moves back and forth, almost imperceptibly, along a set of tracks; its appearance suggests a train passing through the doorways of the gallery. Seemingly forced through the restrictive frames of the doorways, it leaves behind smeary traces of its material – a mixture of Vaseline, paint and wax. This piece was shown at the Anish Kapoor exhibition towards the end of 2009: it moved back and forth in the elegant atmosphere of the rooms of the Royal Academy of Arts. There were children jumping about, parents and grandparents moving around them, masses of people.

Nevertheless, finding out that *Svayambh* had been created for the solo exhibition at the Haus der Kunst two years earlier sent shivers down my spine. The potential meaning attributed to this monumental piece changes considerably according to the different sites in which it is viewed. The understanding of the significance of this enormous red mass, suggestive of compacted blood, could not be more different in the context, on the one hand, of the august and impressive rooms of the Royal Academy of Arts in London and, on the other, of the galleries in Munich in a building inaugurated in 1937 as the Third Reich’s first colossal structure of Nazi propaganda, celebrating Aryan art.

![Figure 4.7 Anish Kapoor, Svayambh (2007). Wax and oil-based paint; dimensions variable. Installation view: Musée des Beaux-Arts de Nantes. Photo Cécile Clos. © Anish Kapoor, All Rights Reserved, DACS 2014.](image-url)
Images of the trains from Claude Lanzmann’s *Shoah* kept intruding and, for brief moments, inhibiting my enjoyment. Was Kapoor aware of this imaginary connection? How could he not be? And even if he had not made this particular association, how could the connection not be there?

Homi K. Bhabha, a critic and interlocutor of Kapoor, speaks of “a diffusion of identity” of the artistic object in his work, arguing that

the meaning of a work is enunciated somewhere *in between* the part and the whole; or the past and present; or seriality and singularity; or metaphor and metonymy.

(Bhabha, 2009, p. 28)

According to Bhabha, there is a loss of the autonomy of the artistic object, a “sur-rendering of its sovereignty”. The object itself surrenders to the viewer, the only one who is capable of creating the object.

Kapoor, in referring to his creations, uses a language that includes concepts such as *non-objects*, *void-objects*, *proto-objects* and *negative objects*. The references to the dynamics of presence and absence, of materiality and spirituality, are reminiscent of the work of D.W. Winnicott, who described the existence of an intermediate area of experience in human beings, a virtual and yet very real place created by the mutual contribution of inner reality and external life (Winnicott, 1971). For Winnicott, this is an essential part of being and of living.

Kapoor challenges the viewer to work out the differences between objective perception and subjective imagination. The aesthetic experience demands the subject’s capacity to play, to be surprised by the object and challenged to take possession of it, to give a meaning to it. If the primary object exists, according to Winnicott, precisely in the place where the baby is ready to create it, so in Kapoor’s work the subject will similarly find the (aesthetic) object whenever he or she is prepared to create it. In the borderline experience, this is precisely the area that the subject finds difficult to identify, negotiate, occupy and use.

The gigantic piece of red wax makes its way back and forth through the doorways of the Royal Academy of Arts: the monster sheds itself each time, taking the form of an object that could not have been predicted. It is not frightening as such, yet it is impressive and imposing. With each passage, it leaves traces of a red excretion, and this changes its form at the next turn. Although the creation is one massive aesthetic object, the whole and its parts are in conflict with each other: the audience is confronted with a tension that demands resolution. Space, virtual space, provisional space, dispersed space, transitional space, and the interaction between each of these different spaces in time is what exists at the heart of Kapoor’s creations. If there is a narrative, this is ultimately created and developed by the spectator.

Installed at the Kunsthau Bregenz in 2003, *When I Am Pregnant* (1992) (Figure 4.8) is one of Kapoor’s most extraordinary, and yet simple, pieces, made of wood, fibreglass and paint.
Looking at it from one side, close to the wall, it bulges out – a rounded protruding shape that inevitably, given the title, alludes to a pregnant woman. However, walking around, towards the front of the swelling, the presence of the perceived object slowly disappears; the object is no more, it has vanished. We are living now in the transitional space and transitional time of the simultaneous presence and absence of the object; we move from fullness to emptiness in an encounter that produces a mixture of excitement and anxiety, anticipation and discomfort.

Together, artist and spectator create this transitional space. Winnicott (1951) has shown that the creation of a transitional space is not a conscious effort: it just happens. It arises from a certain need in the child, who is then able to feel that he is not at the mercy of his projections nor at the mercy of his objects. The infant can play, laugh, tease, share jokes, be naughty or nasty, and, above all, participate...
in a commonly shared space before he feels and experiences himself as a complete, separate being. The transitional object is not the object he would really want forever, but he can make use of the illusion offered by it. Elizabeth Wright (1984) considered the game of a father throwing a baby up in the air, only to catch him on the way down. There is an intermediate realm of experience in which the conscious and unconscious minds of both father and baby meet; there is a mutual interplay. The father “was not throwing the infant away – only up, to be caught again in safety” (p. 98). The child knows, and yet does not know, what is going to happen when he is thrown up into the air. He can expect that he will be caught, but the pleasure comes, in fact, from the risk of not being caught and, in the next instant, by the discovery that he is safe in his father’s hands. The father also knows that his intention is to catch his baby but his unconscious might still betray him.

This is the area of the uncanny. Something at first surprising, threatening, unfamiliar turns familiar through the sheer repetition of the game: the baby learns to trust the father to catch him. But the father may, at each throw, introduce a slight variation: perhaps this time he utters a different sound or he opens his eyes wider. Perhaps he does not smile as broadly as in the preceding throw – or has he now prolonged the fall a little longer? The familiar and known may turn unfamiliar at any point. The transitional area of experience here is the mutual production of the game. André Green (1973) has described this meeting between two subjectivities as *transnarcissistic communication* (1973/1986, p. 322). We are always witnessing a double phenomenon, a meeting of two narcissisms. The meeting-point creates a psychic space, the playground where aesthetic pleasure takes place, an illusion. There is no void here. The absence can actually be imagined, created, sustained and tolerated.

Let us consider another example, *Non-object (Pole)*. This sculpture, made of stainless steel and measuring 239 × 202 × 202 cm, was created in 2008 and shown at the Royal Academy of Arts exhibition the following year. The distortion created by the industrially polished mirrors in the series of *non-objects* turns our view of the world upside down. In fact, Anish Kapoor reproduced a similar sculpture for the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, calling it just that: *Turning the World Upside Down* (2010) (Figure 4.9). In this instance, the artist also dramatically changed its dimensions: located in the Crown Plaza of the museum, it stands 500 cm tall, with a similar diameter.

The original piece may be interpreted as an inspired representation of what in the borderline experience can only be experienced in a negative form: the subject creates a hallucination in order to hide the non-representation of a loss. It is the negative effect of trauma: since a past event has not been incorporated as an experience, it cannot be given emotional or psychic meaning. The trauma cannot be understood. It is not a perception that has been greatly intensified and distorted. In the borderline experience, the content of a representation could not have been symbolically transformed, nor could it be given psychic quality. There are only distorted fragments of reality – arguably, a misleading and even grotesque reproduction of facts. Since the trauma is only experienced as a negative,
it can only become “an excess of energy, an unbound perception” (Botella & Botella, 2005, p. 116).²

The reflections in the mirror, quickly changing and disappearing, are not recognisable. Familiar, or unfamiliar? Where are we? What do we see? What are we doing? Most importantly, who are we? To be alive is to confront these questions. We can see here the relevance of the Freudian uncanny. There is no traumatic narrative as such, but the experience is one of shock: the event is that of a repetition of something that may never have happened.

Building for a Void (1992) (Figure 4.10), is a concrete and stucco tower, 15 metres high, created for Expo’92 at Seville. Climbing a ramp, the visitor reaches the opening to a round, empty room, painted white except for the floor, in the middle of which there is a round black surface. In approaching this small circle inside the room, one is consumed by the fear of being engulfed, of falling into a void that resists being properly perceived, named or described.

This construction is closely related to another of Kapoor’s creations, Descent into Limbo (1992), originally installed at Documenta IX, Kassel, De Pont Foundation for Contemporary Art, Tilburg. It followed the same principle: another entirely white space with a round, black surface on the floor, an apparently mysterious round cavity that threatens to swallow the visitor who ventures too close to it. This is not just “limbo”, an intermediate place lost between a point of departure.
and a point of arrival. It is closer to an illusory, astonishingly frightening *inferno* that has been waiting, summoning us to join this “intimidating emptiness” (Van Winkel, 1995/2010, p. 167). One feels the temptation, against Dylan Thomas’s advice, just to “go gentle into that good night”. This feels a very real possibility: to descend into it, to jump into it and wish to disappear. This is both exciting and dreadful.

*Descent into Limbo* itself justifies seeing Anish Kapoor as an artist of vertigo. Kapoor has referred to the concept of the void thus:

> The void has many presences. Its presence as fear is toward the loss of self, from a non-object to a non-self. The idea of being somehow consumed by the object, or in the non-object, in the body, in the cave, in the womb. . . . This is a vision of darkness.

(Bhabha & Kapoor, 1993, p. 59)

The void has many presences – this is the work of the negative (Green, 1993).

The fear of being consumed by the object (or by the void, by the darkness) is an experience frequently encountered by psychoanalysts. It is a fear of not being able to keep a safe distance from an object that will, in the end, inevitably want to devour the subject (see Bouvet, 1958; Kohon, 2007). This makes treatment especially difficult: all psychic contents, all emotions and thoughts will disappear in the vast emptiness of a “blank hole” (Green, 1998). As Green described it, an original de-cathexis of the primary object has left a psychic void, sometimes inhabited by a dead mother. Absence becomes an uncanny experience because it cannot be symbolised; it can then only be experienced as death. The “normal” dynamics of give and take are impossible for these patients: closeness is not available to them because it threatens to become deadly fusion.
The psychoanalytic literature describing similar experiences in patients is plentiful and very rich and gives a moving account of the clinical difficulties encountered by psychoanalysts. The concept of the contact-barrier, both in Freud’s and in Bion’s understanding, can be a useful theoretical tool. In describing the area between conscious and unconscious, the constant transformation of beta- into alpha-elements, and, ultimately, the differentiation between the internal and external world, it helps us to appreciate the complicated internal struggles that a subject suffers in the development of psychic structures like the self, essential for negotiating the contact with reality (See S.J. Kohon, 2012, 2014).

Tustin (1972, 1981) described how the discovery of otherness is experienced by autistic children as a petrifying discontinuity: they do not seem to have the capacity to integrate the experience of an other by the usual means of representation and symbolisation. It is not a matter of the denial of the physical separation from the mother; it is the child’s awareness of the fact that mother and infant are not in a state of reciprocal continuity. The very awareness of bodily separateness between self and object is experienced as traumatic – in fact, “as a ‘black hole’ associated with elemental panic and rage about the seeming loss of part of his body” (Tustin, 1981, p. 11). It is the discontinuity, not the separation, that is felt to be an unmitigated loss, a hole inhabited by persecutory objects. Tustin described the autistic barriers raised by the child against the development of symbolisation (1990). They create states of non-differentiation between self and other, accompanied by a more or less pronounced lack of demarcation in the patient’s representation of the world.

The fear of the loss of boundaries represented in Juan Muñoz’s works reappears in the work of Anish Kapoor as the fear of being consumed by the object. Both artists have been able to represent something that is non-representable for the non-neurotic patient (see Botella & Botella, 2005). I discussed in Chapter 1 how, in the 1980 production of Hamlet at the Royal Court Theatre, making the ghost present was represented through Hamlet’s hallucination of an absence (of the dead father). Hamlet was taken over by the ghost, but he also, at the same time, took over the ghost: he became the ghost. An absence could not be represented, and yet it could become alive and be heard: Hamlet lives inside Kapoor’s black circle.

Muñoz and Kapoor realise in their work what the analyst treating non-neurotic patients is challenged to do: to form an inner perception (figurability) that enables a representation to come about. This, with luck, will help the subject to learn how to suffer, enabling him or her symbolically to occupy that specific psychic space where otherwise there is only an untrustworthy, dangerous void.

Notes
1 Car parks, like motorways, airports lounges, supermarkets, etc., motivated Marc Augé to speak of “non-places” – places that are only thought of in generic terms, without any properly profound meaning (Augé, 1992).
2 Winnicott speaks in “Fear of Breakdown” (1974) of what “has already been”. The Botellas argue that, in their view, “Something fundamentally evident for the subject
that should have happened did not happen . . .” For them, this is a negativity; there is no positive of the trauma (Botella & Botella, 2005). See also André Green (1993).

3 Juan Muñoz designed something comparable on the floor of the Turbine Hall at his 2002 exhibition at Tate Modern: the surface appeared to be pierced with a series of large black holes or shafts, some of which equally suggested the idea of an illusory void.
From churches to sculptures

The Matter of Time and the work of Richard Serra

In one of his writings, Juan Muñoz refers to the work of Francesco Borromini. Describing Sant’Agnese in Agone, a seventeenth-century Baroque church in Rome facing onto the Piazza Navona, he argues, “In truth, the columns here neither hold anything in place nor support anything. In its highest reaches, [the church] resolves itself in decoration, and in that way it recreates itself” (in Muñoz, 2009, p. 54). In fact, as far as this particular church is concerned, Borromini’s influence does not seem to have been particularly significant. The first designs were drawn up in 1652 by Girolamo Rainaldi and his son, Carlo. The following year they were briefly replaced by Borromini, and he was, in turn, replaced by his great rival, Bernini. Finally, in 1668, Carlo Rainaldi was reinstated as the main architect.

Muñoz argues,

The centre of any Borromini church, the lantern, is always elliptical. It has two centers. The beam of light that descends from it resembles a slow, helicoidal, ascending movement. And vice versa. Two in one. . . . Everything is epiphany, representation of the whole by means of the whole itself, by means of the mystery of light in space, by means of the mystery of light, of space.  
(Muñoz, 2009, p. 57)

There is a Borromini church in Rome, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, to which these comments certainly apply. Designed by Francesco Borromini for the Carmelitas Descalzas (Barefoot Trinitarians), a Spanish order of the Catholic Church inspired by Santa Teresa de Ávila and San Juan de la Cruz, both renowned for their poverty and their commitment to austerity, it was built between 1638 and 1641 and dedicated five years later to San Carlo Borromeo. Remarkably small, the church became known as San Carlino. In spite of its size, the significance of
the building is enormous; it is considered to be a masterpiece of Roman Baroque architecture (Figure 5.1).

The space available for its construction was limited, at the corner of two intersecting roads, which presented problems for design. Furthermore, on each of the four corners there was a fountain that had somehow to be incorporated in the plans. They are still there today.

Borromini brilliantly managed to devise the complex ground plan of the church from interlocking geometrical configurations (Figure 5.2). In those days, it was argued that the proportions of buildings should reflect those of the human body: after all, the argument went, the body of Adam was modelled not only by God but also in his image and likeness. Buildings were supposed to follow equivalent
divine designs. Although he was accused by his rival, Bernini, of abandoning the anthropometric basis of architecture, the truth was that Borromini’s plans derived from medieval building procedures learned in Lombardy and handed down from generation to generation. He was certainly following tradition.

The church’s interior is both extraordinary and complex. One does not feel that this is a building made up of walls and floors and ceilings. At San Carlino, in the small space between the entrance and the altar, Borromini squeezed the upper and lower extremities of the oval so that it took on an undulating contour; this was then extended to the elevation. The walls have an alternating convex and concave treatment; this makes it hard to discern the complicated geometric floor plan. Looking up at the dome, one cannot grasp the shape of the church. The walls, weaving in and out, seem to be made of a material that is flexible and malleable (Figure 5.3). This undulating contour is relevant to the discussion later in this chapter of Richard Serra’s work.

The actual space occupied by the ground floor is very small. Walking around it and looking at the walls, one could imagine them, potentially in motion: niches, mouldings, doors, all moving. The lack of sharp corners, which Borromini intensely disliked, only increases this dynamic illusion. Since the space created seems to move, this can only take place in time.
The church is a true architectural gem. The ornamental sunken panels of the dome are thrown into sharp and deep relief by a clever hierarchical structuring of the light: the symbol of the Holy Trinity, at the top of the lantern, is brightly lit. The light gradually filters down to the darker, lower body of the church, creating a magical atmosphere (Figure 5.4). Inevitably, even religious sceptics like myself are compelled into some kind of spiritual contemplation. In every sense, San Carlo is exceptional.¹

Let us briefly leave Borromini and turn to Richard Serra, the Californian sculptor. Serra first studied literature; then, while supporting himself as a student by working in the steel mills of the West Coast, he changed to studying art. Working at the mills was undoubtedly to become a big influence on the creation of his works in steel.² By 1966, he was making his first sculptures in fibreglass, rubber
and molten lead, which, at times, he hurled in large splashes against the walls of galleries or studios. However, he was better known at the time for his minimalist constructions made out of large rolls of sheet metal.

At one time, Serra was part of the “process art” movement, which considered that the end product of art, the object artistically created, was not and should not be the principal focus of the artist’s project. Artists believed that it was the process implicit in the act of creation itself that mattered. They were concerned with the actual doing: motivation and intentionality were all intrinsic to the process itself. The product was never considered to be the relevant object of art nor was the meaning of the artistic object. This brought them close to the ideas of other American artists of the time, like de Kooning, Pollock and the “action painters”.

Figure 5.4 Francesco Borromini, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, view of dome from interior (1638–1641). Rome. Photo courtesy Christine G.H. Franck.
As a consequence of this understanding, artists expected the viewer to be similarly engaged in the process – to be a participant. Thus, sculpture, for example, having been relieved of its symbolic role and freed from the traditional pedestal, became an integral part of the real space of the viewer. This determined a new relationship between the spectator and the object: viewers were encouraged to move around, sometimes on, in or through the sculptures, many of which could not be fully understood without this examination through movement. The experience of an object became crucial to its meaning. Consistent with this perspective, Serra created a number of public sculptures, all of them site-specific. They included Berlin Block for Charlie Chaplin (Berlin), Terminal (Bochum), Twain (St. Louis), La Palmera (Barcelona) and others.

In the early 1980s Serra created and installed in the Federal Plaza of New York City his Tilted Arc (Figure 5.5), a simple gentle curve, 3.5 metres high, made of rusting steel.

The material used by Serra is known as weathering steel, a group of steel alloys developed to eliminate the need for painting. If exposed to the weather for several years, it forms a stable, rust-like appearance. In other words, the steel is allowed to rust in order to form a “protective” coating. Nowadays, one can see this popular

![Figure 5.5](image-url) Richard Serra, Tilted Arc (1981). Weatherproof steel; cylindrical section: 3.65 m high × 36.5 m along the chord × 6.35 cm thick. Federal Plaza, New York City. Photo courtesy Gagosian Gallery. © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2014.
material being used not just in public sculptures but also in gates of modern buildings, garden artefacts and small decorative pieces.

In spite of the obvious verticality of this work, it seemed to invite the person walking around or passing by to go in – except that there was no “in”. The space around the arc was completely open but, as the vertical axis tips, the arc slants to one side, ever so slightly, so as to create a sense of an inside and an outside. This effect was later to become an important characteristic of Serra’s creations. Although many people considered it a very interesting piece of new creative work, some of those working in the area complained bitterly that the sculpture obstructed walking through the plaza. In response to suggestions that the piece should be moved somewhere else, Serra strongly argued that his creation was specific to the place: it could not be placed anywhere else. He stated that “to remove the work is to destroy it”. This became a famous public debate and the source of deliberations about the freedom of the artist. Unfortunately, Serra lost the argument, and eight years later the sculpture was dismantled and taken for scrap. His work of art was indeed destroyed; it was cut up and separated into different fragments. Nobody knows its final destination.

Over the years Serra expanded his spatial and temporal approach to sculpture. He persisted in concentrating his efforts primarily on large-scale, site-specific works which created a dialogue with the surrounding landscape. For example, Clara-Clara (Figure 5.6), two curvilinear arcs, simultaneously concave and

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**Figure 5.6** Richard Serra, *Clara-Clara* (1983). Two Cor-ten steel curves, $3.40 \times 36$ m each, 5 cm thick. Les Tuileries, Paris, France. Photo courtesy Michael Reeve. © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2014.
convex, both doubled and inverted, are installed in the Tuileries between the Jeu de Paume and the Orangerie.

The relative simplicity of the original *Tilted Arc* in New York was now, three years later, transformed into a subtle and complex creation. It was not just a matter of inside and outside; the space created by these two new arcs produces a disconcerting effect. A very tangible sense of the uncanny emerges: if this looks so simple, why does it have such an unsettling effect?

Serra’s *Snake* (Figure 5.7) was made between 1994 and 1997 for the inauguration of the Guggenheim Museum of Bilbao. It consists of three enormous, parallel serpentine ribbons of hot-rolled weathering steel and is now permanently installed in the museum, although it cannot be strictly described as “site-specific”. The three parallel elements slope continuously in different directions. Although it weighs around 180 tons, this colossal piece is experienced paradoxically through its negative spaces. The two tilted snaking passages created by the ribbons, one open towards the top and the other closed, create a rare sense of motion and instability. The two passages determine two different, simultaneously spatial and temporal situations.

![Richard Serra, Snake (1994–1997). Weathering steel, three units, each comprised of two conical sections; each section 4 × 15.85 m, overall: 4 × 31.7 × 7.84 m, plate thickness: 5 cm. FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, All Rights Reserved. Photo Erika Barahona-Ede. © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2014.](image-url)
At the same museum, there is also the *Torqued Ellipse*, created between 2003 and 2004. And it is this that brings Borromini’s architecture and Serra’s sculptures together. It was in Borromini’s church, San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, that Richard Serra experienced an extraordinary sensation. While standing in a side aisle and looking at the oval space on the floor and the same oval on the ceiling, he formed that idea that they were at right angles to each other. If we could reverse the process and imagine that the oval we see in Figure 5.8 was the dome, this would probably give us an idea of what Serra thought he had seen.

Once he moved to the central aisle, he realised, of course, that he was wrong. The illusory change in the position of the object resulted from a change in the position from which it was viewed. This, Serra called a *peripatetic perception* (Serra, 1994, p. 29). The concept of “peripatetic” refers, in astronomy, to the apparent position of a star among more distant stars, a position that changes when viewed from opposite sides of the earth’s orbit. In general physics, it refers to an apparent change in the position of an object resulting from a change in the observer’s position (Figure 5.9).

This is also known as a *parallax view* – the apparent displacement of an object, or, more precisely, the shift of its position against a background caused by a change in the position of the observer (see Chapter 5). There is only one object but
it is seen from two different positions; the reality is one but each person observing the same object can see “different” objects. Žižek argues that the observed difference cannot be reduced to something “subjective”; one cannot attempt simply to reduce or reconcile one position to the other; there is no possibility of a dialectical “synthesis of the opposites”. Instead, there is an irreducible gap between the positions themselves, “a purely structural interstice between them” (2005, p. 214). Thus, arguments about what is the “reality” are completely useless. If there was “one” truth, this would only reside in the very gap, in the shift of perspective itself between the two positions.

Frequently, in human conflicts, different parties have their own particular perceptions of the “truth”, which are impossible to reconcile. If there were one truth, this would reside only in the very cleft between the parties.

In contrast to the Heisenberg principle (“the object can never be known”), in this view the object can implicitly be determined and known – but only indirectly.
It is a paradox: the object itself may be unrepresentable, but this does not mean that one should not keep on trying to represent it.

Once Serra realised that his initial perception of the oval was wrong (distorted by his position in the church), he asked himself this question: how can one create, how can one *make* a representation of a misrepresentation such as the one he experienced at the church? In other words, how could misrepresentation *be* represented? This was the aesthetic challenge.

By Serra’s own account, his initial idea was breathtakingly simple: to take the cylindrical spatial volume of the nave, the central hall of the church, and to torque it in elevation. He used two small wooden ellipses held by a dowel, parallel but angled to each other. This allowed him to create the template of a “wheel”, which he then cut out in lead and rolled in different positions. Any piece can rise in elevation but this not only leant inwards, it was also torqued and turned outwards. In changing the angles at which these ellipses were set to each other, he was able to assemble different models for his sculptures. In the documentary films made on his work by Maria Anna Tappeiner (2005, 2006), Serra is seen drawing a bagel, splitting it in two and moving the two parts around in an attempt to demonstrate this process of misrepresentation.

It has to be understood that, in the process of torqueing an ellipse, Serra was able to create an image that had not been seen before. It was theoretically possible to create it but it had not previously been thought of: the form did not exist in architecture, nor had it been imagined in sculpture or ceramics. The void between the top and the bottom ellipse became the point of departure for the creation of forms (Figure 5.10).

Since the forms lean either in or out, there is no perpendicular line between the sections. Thus, one cannot ever have a clear picture of the surface. At the museum I walked around these sculptures several times but I always ended up caught in the movement of the walls, which made me feel dizzy.

Although the catalyst for the creation of the *Torqued Ellipse* was Borromini, he was not the only influence on Serra. While living in New York City in the 1960s, he was struck by the work of contemporary dancers like Simone Fort, Denorah Hay and Lucinda Childs and, above all, by the work of Yvonne Rainer, the American dancer, choreographer and experimental film-maker. She was at the centre of the *avant-garde* of the contemporary dance world of the time, treating the body as the source of an infinite variety of movements, employing repetition, patterning, games and tasks that later became standard features in modern dance. As with the artists mentioned above, there was no need to explore the motivations for the work, or to be concerned with its meaning. Rainer’s most famous piece was *Trio A* (1966), which has been widely adapted and interpreted by many other choreographers. Through the dancers’ work, Serra realised the importance of the idea of the human body just passing through space. Movement itself became the object of art. A different awareness was imposed on the viewer by the physicality of the body of the dancer, and this inspired Serra to think about sculpture in similar terms.
For Serra, another, perhaps unexpected, influence came from a six-week visit to Japan in 1970. This proved particularly important, for visiting the Zen gardens in Kyoto reinforced Serra’s growing preoccupation with work that was defined through the processes of its reception. In walking around the wonderful gardens, Serra discovered that a vision of these places could not be reduced to a simple image (Figure 5.11).

The wider movement implied in walking and looking forms part of an aesthetic, experiential *gestalt* demanded by the surrounding landscape: the subject actively participates in such a way that anticipation, memory, attention and concentration all form part of that *gestalt*. Without it, what is created by the gardener cannot be conveyed or appreciated (Figure 5.12). Serra realised how much *time* participated in the perception of *space* – time, space and movement become one, inseparable. Serra referred to this as “physical” time: it can be shortened or lengthened, but it is always articulated within the experience of the surroundings.

Following Serra’s return from the East, the space around his sculptures, whether indoor or outdoor, had to be traversed by the viewer so as to experience the work in full. Temporality became extended; vision and contemplation become peripatetic;
the viewer was forced to travel through the pieces as if walking around a Japanese garden. There was no particular centre to this experience. Notions of identity, causality and continuity were critically brought into question: the parallax view indeed included the sense of self. Serra spoke of peripatetic perception; nevertheless, perception depends greatly on the subject’s own memory, reminiscence and anticipation (e.g. *Between the Torus and the Sphere*, Figure 5.13).

Serra’s work started to defy gravity and logic. Although they involve large pieces of solid metal, the sculptures appear malleable, flexible; they might have
From churches to sculptures

been made of cardboard or felt. Walking in and around them, they shift in startling ways; the spectator gets caught up in an exploration driven by a mixture of curiosity and admiration.

Both the base of the sculpture and the upper profile of the Torqued Ellipse are perfect ellipses: both have the same radius but they are not aligned. Since they are angled to each other, one frequently sees above one’s head the converse of what is happening at one’s feet. At different moments during my visits, making involuntary gestures that felt alien to myself, I realised I was looking without seeing. How was I supposed to look at this work? I could not remain still: the sculptures refused to be fixed by my gaze.

At a certain point, while walking in and out of the pieces, following a random path, the viewer comes to realise that, in this particular aesthetic experience, time and space are intimately and inevitably connected. Perhaps disoriented and confused by the different spaces created by the sculptures, the sense of time becomes alternatively condensed and prolonged, too “present” or too “fluid”.

I visited the Guggenheim Museum a number of times. From the beginning, I was immensely impressed by Frank Gehry’s building. In the early 1980s, I saw

Figure 5.13 Richard Serra, Between the Torus and the Sphere (2003–2005). Weathering steel, four torus and four spherical sections; each section: 4.27 × 15.24 m, overall: 4.27 × 15.24 × 16.44 m, plate thickness: 5 cm. FMGB Guggenheim Bilbao Museoa, All Rights Reserved. Photo Erika Barahona-Ede. © ARS, NY and DACS, London 2014.
in the Jewish Museum of New York a table lamp designed by Gehry in the form of a fish. Since then, he has created a number of them, all different, all evoking carp. As I recall, in the catalogue of the Jewish Museum, Gehry explained that every Friday his grandmother would buy carp to make gefilte fish for their Shabbos. As a young boy, he would spend a long while looking at the live fish swimming in the bathtub, where it was kept by his grandmother until it was time for the culinary sacrifice. The movement of the carp became, he claimed, the inspiration for his architectural designs. Whether a Nachträglich invention, a playful provocation or a joke, “carp” appear all over his creations: in buildings, furniture, jewellery.

The architectural liveliness of the internal space of the Gehry building runs parallel to the dynamic spirit of the Serra sculptures. After my last visit to the museum, I noted:

As I walk around these sculptures, these big monsters of rusted steel, I begin to lose any sense of time: where am I standing now? How long has it taken me to get here? I look at my watch. Should I go on? Will there be an end to this labyrinth? Can I trust going back, retracing my steps? Will I ever get to the exit? I touch the walls; they offer me support and a certain sense of comfort. But there is this pressing, absurd thought in my mind: how long do I have left until they close the museum?

Serra’s sculptures at the Guggenheim make you curious; exploring them makes you feel that they are impenetrable. And it does not feel very safe; a sense of well-being might never be part of this experience: you have to be willing to “take a walk on the wild side”. Serra’s Torqued Ellipse sculptures manage to produce an anxious and uncertain de-centred feeling in the viewer. Not being “sculptures on a pedestal”, these monumental pieces challenge the viewer to “live” with them. Like the work of psychoanalysis, nothing in these creations can be reduced to their logic. And, most compellingly, parallel to sexuality and in comparison to it, there is an excess in them for which it is never easy to account.

Richard Serra called his pieces in the Guggenheim Museum, The Matter of Time (Figure 5.14). Why time?

Contemplating a work of art, reading a story or a novel, listening to music or watching a film reactivate unconscious reminiscences in our psyche, independently of our memory: they unwittingly and unsuspectingly come to us. While an experience can never be exhausted by the present, the history of a life does not reside completely in the past. Different chronological selves present in our unconscious, belonging to different moments of our life or even to a given moment in time, create an irradiation of heterogeneous signifiers – a process conceptualised by André Green as le temps éclaté, exploded time (Green, 2000, 2002). Through the combination of the work of the negative (see Chapter 8) and the retroactive reverberation and anticipatory annunciation of exploded time, the subject’s psychic organisation is constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed, again and again, over the course of its personal history.
In psychoanalysis, it is said that “the unconscious knows no time”, meaning that there is no notion of chronological time. Different forms of time seem to coexist in our mind. There are, for each viewer, secret, intimate meanings that are recalled and revived through the aesthetic experience of Serra’s work. The aesthetic experience thus becomes autobiographical. Naturally, this applies also to the artist himself, for Serra’s magnificent sculptures evoke the influence of the now defunct Californian steel mills of the 1950s, where Serra worked as a young man, and the alienation and poverty of their workers. The process of creation also contains the images of the modern dancers of New York of the 1960s and the
videos they created, as well as of the ancient and eternal Zen Japanese gardens of Kyoto, each with its own temporality. I was enthralled by Serra’s work, and every time I visited the Museo in Bilbao, my admiration for his sculptures grew.

Walking around these sculptures, in the vast rooms of the museum, evokes the two primitive forms of object relationships – the ocnophilic and the philobatic worlds described by Michael Balint (1959), both theoretically relevant to the borderline experience. The objects that inhabit the ocnophilic world are separated by “horrid empty spaces”; the subject lives from object to object, avoiding potentially panicky feelings either by clinging to them or by moving from one to the next. In contrast, in the philobatic world the objects are dangerous and unpleasant: it is the “objectless expanses” that are felt to be friendly and benign; the “dangerous” objects are there to be avoided; distance is essential. The experience of walking around these steel structures is one of changing rapidly from one mode to another. Although, while surrounded by the steel structures, the viewer may feel that space is necessarily contained and limited by the walls of the sculptures, the possibility of losing a proper sense of time transforms known “space” into an unfamiliar, disconcerting “vastness”. Serra managed to create a scenario where the two ways of relating described by Balint are, at least potentially, experienced in full.

Marion Milner, in describing her efforts to understand the play of a boy whom she was treating, wrote:

A central idea began to emerge . . . the idea that the basic identifications which make it possible to find new objects, to find the familiar in the unfamiliar, require an ability to tolerate a temporary loss of sense of self, a temporary giving up of the discriminating ego which stands up and tries to see things objectively and rationally. . . .

(Milner, 1952, p. 97, italics added)

Milner believed that this was the state of mind described by Berenson as “the aesthetic moment”. This is what Berenson wrote:

In visual art the aesthetic moment is that fleeting instant, so brief as to be almost timeless, when the spectator is at one with the work of art he is looking at, or with actuality of any kind that the spectator himself sees in terms of art, as form and colour. He ceases to be his ordinary self, and the picture or building, statue, landscape, or aesthetic quality is no longer outside himself. The two become one entity: time and space are abolished. . . .

(Beronson, 1950, p. 93, quoted by Milner, 1952, p. 97)

While walking around and going through Serra’s creations, there is no point in trying to “understand” the experience. Since there is no designated “entrance”, there is also no identified “exit”. One chooses how and when to get in and also how and when to get out, but one does not easily feel a sense of freedom. Potentially, the work might provoke threatening feelings that may be perceived as
“alien” to the self; it might also generate hostile emotional reactions, or even feelings of emptiness. The subjects might feel temporarily lost. Here, the aesthetic experience puts the inner resources of the subject to the test: the capacity of tolerating frustration and uncertainties – what Keats described as “Negative Capability” (Keats, 1899, p. 277).

What had been left in me from my past that was recovered at that moment by the aesthetic experience in the present?
Where was I then?
Where am I now?

Meltzer and Williams argued that there is no “inner mystery”, no “secret treasure” in a work of art. In aesthetic appreciation, the viewer has to surrender “his own inner self for observation . . .” (1988, pp. 192–193).

Notes
1 Borromini received very little acclaim for his work during his life. He suffered severe melancholia and at one point burned all his drawings. He was taken ill, and his condition was made worse by hypochondriac hallucinations. He began suffering serious fits, and his doctors decided that he should stop all activity so as to sleep. He was confined to his bedroom. One hot summer’s night, unable to rest and forbidden to work, he rose in a fury, found a sword and made himself fall upon it. It is said that having grievously wounded himself, he recovered a lucid mind. On the other hand, the reported news that he repented and accepted the last rites may have been taken as the signs of his recovery, retrospectively.
2 In the documentary films, Richard Serra: Sehen is Denken and Richard Serra: Thinking on Your Feet, made by Maria Anna Tappeiner in 2005 and 2006, Serra is seen in a steel mill, supervising the creation of one of his pieces, moving around the enormous machinery with great confidence, feeling obviously at home.
3 This seems to be an expectation shared by most of the artists considered in this book: not only Richard Serra, but also Louise Bourgeois, Juan Muñoz, Anish Kapoor, Kurt Schwitters and Joshua Neustein.
4 In 2013 (November–December) there was an exhibition in London at the Gagosian Gallery entitled Frank Gehry: Fish Lamps.
Edvard Munch’s vampires
The effects of Nachträglichkeit

When you’re going back to the deepest things you won’t get to the beginning . . .
Early is not deep; only “later” [...] has depth.

In a short story entitled “Kafka and His Precursors” (1952b), Borges claims that he first thought of Kafka as a completely unique author. Then he started recognising Kafka’s voice in other texts from the past, from literary works of other countries and from different periods in history. These texts included Zeno’s paradox against movement; a strange paragraph from Han Yu, a Chinese writer from the ninth century; the writings of Kierkegaard; Robert Browning’s poem of 1876, “Fears and Scruples”; a story by León Bloy; and a story by Lord Dunsany. Borges gives a brief account of each of these examples, which, he claims, “resemble” Kafka. Nevertheless, none of them look like the other.

This last observation is significant: the writings of these authors foretell Kafka’s work but, without Kafka, we could not read them together with the thought: “this reminds me of Kafka”. According to Borges, a writer would create his own precursors; the work of a writer changes the reader’s conception of the past, as well as modifying the future (1952b, p. 236). Unsurprisingly, what Borges said of Kafka can now be applied to Borges himself: at present, we speak of Borges and his own precursors. It may be difficult to find a clearer literary example of Nachträglichkeit than Borges’s short story.¹

Borges makes it clear that, as a consequence of a modification in our view of the past, we will also be modifying the future. For example, we could argue that, reading Kafka, he sounds like Borges; maybe, just maybe, one could end up thinking that Kafka may have been written by Borges. This is the “uncanny effect” that Harold Bloom described whenever the new poem’s achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor’s characteristic work.

(Bloom, 1973, pp. 15–16)
It is uncanny, or . . . Kafkaesque, as Bloom pronounced it twenty years later (1994, p. 445).

In aesthetics, the uncanny plays an important part in the experience of the artist or the writer. The underlying forces of familiarity/unfamiliarity are always present in the process of creation: there is no way of avoiding the autobiographical in it, the familiar; on the other hand, the creative work will speak something other and it will be spoken by somebody other, unfamiliar. The anxiety of influence (Bloom, 1973) belongs to this area of experience: what is mine, in what I have just written? What belongs to others? The same may apply to the act of aesthetic appreciation, which would also be permeated by the autobiographical.

Oslo was described by Knut Hamsun as that “strange city no one escapes from until it has left its mark on him . . .” (1890, p. 3). The weird and extraordinary Vigeland Sculpture Arrangement, which stands on the bridge at Frogner Park, would undoubtedly contribute to leaving this mark, even on a casual visitor to the city. Disconcerting and impressive, there are 212 sculptures, all of them created by Gustav Vigeland. Men and women, adults and children: an angry, enraged boy; an adult hitting a child; a man and a woman trapped inside a circle; four tall granite columns portraying intertwined human beings, apparently fighting menacing lizards.

On a freezing but sunny winter morning, I made my way from the park to the Munch Museum. The sculptures in the park put me in a strange mood. I contemplated Munch’s The Scream through the eyes of Vigeland’s Angry Boy, and Vampire through the contemplation of Dancer. I saw Ashes, and the misery portrayed in it, through Surprise, which was the result of the collaboration in 1942 between Gustav Vigeland and Ruth Maier, his model, an Austrian refugee who was sent by the Nazis to Auschwitz to die in the gas chambers. I looked at Four Girls in Arsgardstrand through the impression made by the figure of an adult male fighting off a horde of babies, positioned at the edge of a balcony in the park.

The strange mood lingered after the visit to the museum, into the evening, after I contemplated the sunlight disappearing from the Aker Brygge, with dozens of ships entrapped by a completely frozen, motionless sea.

The museum dedicated to the work of Edvard Munch in Kristiania (as the city of Oslo was called for a great part of Munch’s life) is a relatively small building. Looking at the pieces displayed, the visitor does not get an immediate sense of the vast body of work created during the artist’s lifetime (1863–1944). On his death, Munch left over 1,200 paintings, some 4,500 drawings, 6 sculptures, 500 plates and 18,000 prints to his beloved city. Given the extent of his creative legacy, the works can only be shown in rotation. Munch seemed to have kept everything, from simple squiggles and initial sketches to the most accomplished drawings. In addition, there are innumerable literary notes from his sketchbooks and notebooks, which are now in the process of being classified and shown: it has been calculated that there are some 10,000 typewritten pages in transcript. The figures are staggering: somehow – following no acceptable logic – it compares to the realisation that there are 40 islands and 343 lakes within the limits of the city of Oslo.
Edvard Munch considered himself not only a painter but also an author, and this is, in fact, reflected in his paintings. Art critics seem to agree that they all possess a literary quality, a quality shared with the work of other artists explored in these pages: Bourgeois, Muñoz, Kapoor, Serra, Schwitters. They all “tell a story”; each creative work evokes a narrative. Given that everything was kept by Munch, one can trace the connection between the different drawings, each belonging to different stages of one similar theme. This allows for a sequence through his works that forms a temporal narrative. Munch’s conscious wish was that his work should be seen as a whole, in context.

From early in his life, Munch suffered some painful losses. His father was a medical doctor in the army, earning a rather modest income. His mother, much younger than his father, suffered from tuberculosis, dying when Munch was only five. He had four siblings: an older sister, Johanne Sophie, who died when she was fifteen from the same disease as her mother, and three younger siblings. These were Peter Andreas, who died soon after marriage, aged thirty, Laura Cathrine, who was diagnosed as mentally ill when she was very young and also died of tuberculosis, and Inger Marie, the youngest sister, the only one to die in 1952 of old age. Munch’s father was an extremely religious man and an adherent of Lutheran pietism, which often became fanaticism, with accompanying prophecies, visions and mystical states. Munch spoke of his father as nervous and obsessive; he thought that, because of his father’s influence, sorrow and death had accompanied him from the day he was born, planting the seeds of a madness which he always feared. The oppressive religious milieu, the horrific ghost stories told to him and his own poor health contributed to his tendency to have macabre visions and nightmares. For example, the way his father reprimanded his children consisted in sternly telling them that their mother was actually looking down from heaven, grieving over their misbehaviour. Illness, madness and death were feared by Munch throughout his life. In fact, it is likely that he may have suffered from a form of manic depression. While travelling around Europe, he noted in his diary descriptions of visual and auditory hallucinations, and of disturbed behaviour; this culminated in his shooting two joints from the ring finger of his left hand.

Munch also suffered from bouts of alcoholism; in 1908, a psychiatric hospitalisation became necessary because of the intensity of his auditory hallucinations, depression and serious suicidal thoughts.

Perhaps his first great painting, now considered one of his most accomplished works, was The Sick Child (Figure 6.1), a moving and powerful picture that he started painting in 1885. It depicts his favourite sister, Sophie, dying. Her death devastated Munch. Here is a moving description written by him:

> When I saw the sick child for the first time – her pale face with vigorous red hair against a white pillow – it made an impression on me, only to disappear as I worked. – I painted a good picture on the canvas, but it was a different one. – I repainted that picture many times over the years – scraped it off – let it dissolve into layers of paint – and tried again and again to capture that first
impression – the translucent – pale skin against the canvas – the tremulous mouth – the shaking hands – . . . in the end I stopped, exhausted. – I had captured a lot of the first impression . . . but the colours in the painting were not finished – it was pale grey. The painting as a whole was heavy, like lead.

(Munch, quoted in Lampe & Chéroux, 2011, p. 32)

So Munch repainted this picture many times before finally finding the courage to exhibit it. He felt so insecure that he presented it as Study. At the Autumn Exhibition in Kristiania, where he showed it for the first time in 1886, people responded to the painting with laughter, protests and outrage. The critics in the press spoke of it as “an abortion”, a “fish stew in lobster sauce”. But it was a key work of his early creative years.
Afterwards, Munch created numerous versions of this painting. The Sick Child makes perfect sense of his belief that “art grows from joy and sorrow. But mostly from sorrows. It grows from human lives” (quoted by Magne Bruteig, 2007).

Although Munch was somewhat influenced by the French Impressionists and post-Impressionists at the beginning of his career, they did not suit his interest or his art. He wanted to paint situations that were full of emotions, creating expressive and tense atmospheres in his pictures. Feelings and thoughts, memory and imagination, were all to be made available in and through the act of painting. Accused of self-plagiarism when he offered different versions of some of his paintings, Munch argued “that this approach had nothing to do with copying” (Guleng, 2011b, p. 156). It was a way of re-immersing himself, he claimed, in the theme and the subject of the original picture. He hoped that, through repetition, he was creating something new. It may be obvious now, looking back at these repetitions, that Munch reproduced many of his paintings not just out of artistic principles or creative considerations; there were also practical, financial reasons. One set of reasons did not exclude others.

In 1893, invited by the Union of Berlin Artists, Munch presented his exhibition of Studies for a Series: Love. Yet again, his paintings provoked hostile reactions from the public and serious controversy among the critics. After only one week, the exhibition had to be closed, which predictably made him famous. This series later became his well-known Frieze of Life, which he subtitled, A Poem on Life, Love and Death. For him, the three themes seemed to overlap and interconnect.

For the cover of the exhibition catalogue, Munch chose Liebe und Schmerz (Love and Pain): A man, fully dressed, is leaning, taking refuge in a woman’s arms. She bends over him, perhaps naked, embracing him, her hair falling over his head and part of his back. The figures are surrounded by shadows, somewhat threatening and sombre. There is an ambiguity to the picture that suggests a sense of uncanny unreality: although the embrace is a loving one, the hair (falling like tentacles) could be seen as entrapping the man. However the viewer experiences it, there is an absorbing and captivating feeling to the picture (Figure 6.2).

In February 1894, Stanislav Feliks Przybyszewski, a literary friend of Munch, wrote about the picture in what nowadays might appear as surprisingly extreme terms:

A broken man and on his neck the face of a biting vampire... There is something dreadful, peaceful, dispassionate in this picture, the immeasurable fatalism of resignation. The man rolls down and down into the depths of the abyss, without will, powerless, and is pleased that he can roll without will, like a stone. But he does not escape from the vampire, and he will not be rid of the pain, and the woman will sit there forever, and bite him forever with a thousand serpents’ tongues, with poisoned fangs.

(Przybyszewski, quoted in Weber, 2003, p. 24)
In 1895, when the painting was shown in another exhibition in Stockholm, Munch changed its title from *Love and Pain* to *Vampire*.

Vampires, as a subject of literature, were popular at the time. John Polidori’s short story, “The Vampyre”, was first published in the *New Monthly Magazine* in 1819 (promptly translated in Scandinavia the following year). The story was published with the false attribution, “A Tale by Lord Byron”. In fact, the story had its genesis in the summer of 1816. Lord Byron and his young physician, John Polidori, were staying at the Villa Diodati by Lake Geneva and were visited by Percy Bysshe Shelley, Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley and Claire Clairmont. Kept indoors by torrential rain for three days in June, they turned to telling fantastical tales to each other. Fuelled by ghost stories and high on laudanum, Mary Shelley produced what would become *Frankenstein: Or, The Modern Prometheus* (1818). Polidori wrote “The Vampyre” in a couple of days. Despite repeated clarification by Byron and Polidori, the authorship remained confused. In any case, Mary Shelley and Polidori had both been partly inspired by Byron’s unfinished story, “Fragment of a Novel” (also known as “The Burial: A Fragment”, published in 1819). Polidori’s story immediately became a popular success, partly because of the
Byron attribution and partly because it exploited the public taste for gothic horror. Tales of supernatural beings consuming the blood or flesh of the living have been found in nearly every culture around the world for many centuries. Even though the term *vampire* was not used, such activities were attributed to demons or spirits of the dead. The devil was at times considered synonymous with the vampire. In any case, these superstitious beliefs were popular, certainly in Eastern Europe and to some extent in the Nordic countries.

Polidori managed to transform the vampire from an obscure character in folklore to an evil aristocrat who preyed on his victims in the high society to which the authors’ friends belonged. This short story had great influence. After it was published, a plethora of vampire stories appeared. In 1893, for example, Julian Osgood Field’s short story, “A Kiss of Judas”, appeared in the *Pall Mall Magazine*. The illustration was by Aubrey Beardsley; it can be seen today at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Significantly, in Field’s story, the undead, the vampires, have red hair. In fact, it was believed at the time that Judas had red hair.

The year after the 1895 exhibition in Stockholm, Munch, by then better known as an artist, exhibited the same picture (in the form of one painting and two prints) at the influential L’Art Nouveau in Paris. This time, he called it *Les Cheveux Rouges* (*Red Hair*). It was under that same title that August Strindberg was to discuss the picture in *La Revue Blanche*. Unwittingly reaffirming the subjectivity of aesthetic experience, Strindberg wrote thus: “Golden rain falls on the unhappy man, who begs his wicked self on his knees for the grace to be killed by being pierced by needles . . . .”. For Przybyszewski, Strindberg, Ibsen and many other intellectuals who regularly met at a bar called the Black Pig, love was beautiful but dark, exciting but deadly, romantic and yet destructive. Vampires were being seen everywhere.

Nevertheless, in spite of the change that Munch tried to make to the title of the picture, the one given by Przybyszewski stuck: *Vampire* was there to stay. The different versions that Munch subsequently painted, together with the print variations, were all popularly known as *Vampire*. A few years later, Munch was to write to his friend and biographer, Jens Thiis, “[The title] ‘Vampire’ is actually what gives the picture its literary character. In reality it is only a woman kissing a man on the neck” (quoted in Weber, 2003, p. 26).

It was too late. The red-haired woman, a female Judas, was perceived both by Munch’s contemporaries and by later generations as a vampire, sucking the blood of a defenceless man. It was such a successful commercial painting that it reappeared; it was copied and reworked by the artist in twelve different versions. In *Vampire in the Forest* (1924–25), the background is a landscape with a beach and trees positioned vertically. Eight years later, another vampire reappears, this time in a forest full of light.

Przybyszewski was a Polish novelist, dramatist and poet, fascinated by occultism and Nietzsche and obsessed with Satan. In the Middle Ages, the church saw vampires as followers and even assistants of Satan; congregations were threatened through anxiety and terror. Taking Christ’s flesh and blood in communion was one
way of fighting the devil, who relished and fed on the sinner’s blood (Joshi, 2011). Given the importance of blood in the Christian religion, the corresponding and yet paradoxical conclusion was not difficult to draw: in both cases, there was the promise of eternal life (Hansen, 2011). Inevitably, vampires became associated with Christianity, the cross being used to kill them or ward them off. After all, the vampire was not a supernatural demon but a resurrected corpse, a dead person who could come to life and leave its grave – much in the same way as Jesus had risen after his death and burial. The transformation of vampire myths to include Christian elements occurred throughout Europe (Beresford, 2008).³

We can see that from Satan to vampires was but a short distance for Przybyszewski. In certain fanatical forms of Christianity, it was not uncommon to

Figure 6.3 Edvard Munch, Self-Portrait Beneath the Mask of a Woman (1893). Tempera on unprimed wooden panel; 69 × 43.5 cm. Munch Museum, Oslo, Norway MM M 229 (Woll M 310). © Munch Museum.
believe that a deceased family member had become a vampire, responsible for sickness, misfortune and death in the family. Sometimes exorcism was even performed on the dead (Jenkins, 2010). Moreover, consumption, as tuberculosis was then known, had been the cause of death of both Munch’s mother and his beloved sister. It was believed that tuberculosis could be caused by nightly visitations on the part of a dead family member who had died of consumption (Bunson, 1993).

In earlier pictures, Munch had evoked the undead. For example, in *Self-Portrait Beneath the Mask of a Woman* (1893) (Figure 6.3), Munch, aged thirty, appears formally dressed, a rather serious young man.

Above Munch’s head, there is a yellow female face, with exaggerated red lips and red cheeks and dark, thick eyebrows framing her eyes. The idea of the vampire is suggested by the bat wings that emerge from behind her head against a red background suggestive of blood. The seriousness of this young man and his rather formal appearance are betrayed by those wings.

In the etchings entitled *Harpy* (Figure 6.4), Munch also evoked something of a female vampire.

He drew a creature with the upper torso of a woman, showing her breasts, with big, black, open wings instead of arms; the lower body is that of a bird of prey, sitting on a male corpse. In the background, there is a skeleton sitting against a wall, apparently writing or, more probably, sketching or drawing. The etching is very close to the representation of the strix, a monster from the mythology of the Middle Ages. Originally, the word “strix” came from Ancient Greece and designated an owl. In Romanian folklore, as in other European cultures, strixes are the troubled souls of the dead rising from the grave; they are immortal vampires, draining the blood and vitality of their victims. They have two hearts, blue eyes and, of course, red hair.

We can see that the idea and the image of the vampire were already in Munch’s mind prior to the painting of *Liebe und Schmerz*. It could not have taken much for Przybyszewski, consciously or unconsciously, to have picked this up, make the adjudication, and write so “persuasively” about it.

There is yet another twist to this story. Female vampires were unconscious representations of the belief that blood and sperm were closely connected. Przybyszewski wrote a story entitled “Sabbath with Blood and Sperm”, reflecting pseudo-scientific beliefs that sperm and blood were of the same “essence”. Men seemed to believe that their vitality relied upon both substances, and that women wished to steal them from their bodies. So, women vampires were not just “blood” vampires but also “sperm” vampires. In 1912, Ernest Jones wrote an article, originally published in German, in which he refers to the belief in the connection between blood and sperm, entitled “The nightmare and its relationship with certain forms of mediaeval superstition” (1931). Later published as a chapter, “On the Nightmare” (1951), it referred to the fact that the vampire superstition was still very much alive in countries like Norway, Sweden and Finland and to the belief in the connection between vampirism and red hair.
Among Munch’s numerous writings and notes are drafts of the scene represented in *The Vampire*. For example,

He lay his head against
her chest – he heard
the beating of her heart – felt the blood
rushing through her veins – and he
felt two burning lips
against his neck – it
sent a shiver
through his body. . . .

(Munch, quoted in Guleng, 2011a, p. 229)

Munch was never able properly to “finish” his works: every so often, and over long periods, he would add a few brush strokes to a painting. This meant, for example, that he would date a painting after the painting had been started but not necessarily finished. Equally, he might finish a painting but date it fifteen years earlier. In the case of the painting of the red-haired woman, the retrospective resignification created for her gave meaning to this and other paintings \textit{a posteriori}. Since the description made by his friend seemed to make sense (it conveyed a meaning revealed or at least constructed by Przybyszewski’s interpretation), the retroactive resignification determined the way the picture was perceived from then on.

For the next twenty years, Munch painted and drew pictures on the theme of the female vampire, all variations on the kiss of the red-haired woman. If there was ambiguity in the original picture, further works kept on returning to the theme of the female blood-sucker. These were not simple extensions or comments on the original 1895 painting: each subsequent painting and drawing told of a new drama. Nevertheless, it repeated the same melody, the same theme.

Strikingly, famous examples of vampires in the arts were to appear only after Munch’s painting became known as the portrayal of a female undead. They included Philip Burne-Jones’s \textit{The Vampire} (1897) (Figure 6.5) and Henryk Kunzek’s compelling sculpture, \textit{Wampir} (1909) (Figure 6.6).

By the beginning of the twentieth century, vampires had entered the visual arts and subsequently became an important subject of films. From the concept of female vampires to the idea of women as “vamps” was only a small step: from undead blood-suckers they became women who used their sexual attractiveness for the seduction and manipulation of others, a different form of blood-sucking.

What are we then left with, in the end? We know this much: Munch painted a picture of a woman kissing a man on his neck. Przybyszewski described the woman as a vampire; Munch more or less readily accepted both this interpretation of the painting and its re-naming. The re-naming (in Przybyszewski’s present) of Munch’s picture (from what was already past) changed what the future held. What was the “insistence” (see below) coming from Munch’s own childhood that allowed for such an important resignification of his painting? After all, the jump from \textit{love} and \textit{pain} to \textit{vampirism} was not a minor change.

Rosine Perelberg has suggested that \textit{Nachträglichkeit} (\textit{après-coup}) and the psychoanalytic notion of time give meaning to all other psychoanalytic notions. It works, Perelberg says,

\begin{quote}

as a “general illumination” in [Freud’s] conceptual framework, as discussed by Marx in his \textit{Introduction to a Critic to Political Economy}.
\end{quote}

(Perelberg, 2008, p. 24)
It appears as a structure in history through the individual and collective actions of people (Perelberg, 2007, 2008; see also Kohon, 1999a, 2005a). Nachträglichkeit can be understood in terms of a structure because, like Spinoza’s God, it only makes itself present through its effects. In Spinoza’s “radical materialism”, as Antoni Negri characterised it (1990, 2004), God is not revealed except through his “works”; God is nowhere evident except in modes of being. This does not, of course, prove God’s existence. The unconscious also appears through its effects,
otherwise it cannot be “proven” to exist. It is through the effects of Nachträglichkeit that we came to understand the specific logic of time of the Freudian unconscious, its polychronic structure (Green, 2005, p. 181). In this exploded, shattered, fragmented logic, time passes and does not pass at one and the same time.

On the whole, Freud never gave up the deterministic view by which the past governs the present. At the same time, for Freud, while the past (childhood) determines the present, the past itself has been influenced by chance. Consider the following statement: “... we are all too ready to forget that in fact everything to do with our life is chance, from our origin out of a meeting of spermatozoon and ovum onwards – chance, which nevertheless has a share in the law and necessity of nature ...” (Freud, 1910, p. 136).

However, we understand the past through the present only because the past was already full of meaning. There is a quality in this that is specifically human: everything we do is impregnated by this insistence of what might be called the tragic in us. “Tragedy means, above all else”, Alford argues, “that people are responsible without being free” (1992, p. 115). This echoes Freud’s description of Oedipus Rex as a “tragedy of destiny”:

Its tragic effect is said to lie in the contrast between the supreme will of the gods and the vain attempts of mankind to escape the evil that threatens them.
The lesson which, it is said, the deeply moved spectator should learn from the tragedy is submission to the divine will and realization of his own impotence.

(Freud, 1900, p. 262)

Przybyszewski described his friendship with Munch as a relationship in which they both considered each other as their alter ego. What made Munch (perhaps out of his own intimate, personal despair) accept Przybyszewski’s nihilistic attitude of despondency, rather than finding his own personal meaning in his picture? Was the presence of the zealously religious father in Munch’s psychic world a determining influence in some of his creative works? Had this deadly emotional mixture constituted the residue, the mnemonic trace, in Munch’s mind?

It is possible that the idea of the vampire put forward by his friend had made unconscious sense to Munch: it reflected something of a mnemonic trace that had been planted in him in childhood and remained unconscious.

The determinism implicit in the insistence of childhood does not make human beings less responsible. In fact, it is this determinism that makes every human destiny tragic (see Kohon, 2005b). In psychoanalysis, childhood is not only understood as a chronological period in the individual history of the subject: it is an ontological moment, forming the basis of what we later become at every moment for the rest of our lives. The presence of the past childhood in our present is not an accident; it defines our mode of being-in-the-world. It is not so much that childhood “persists” in adulthood; it is a matter of insistence rather than persistence. Childhood insists on being part of us. It cannot be otherwise.⁴

Notes

1 I first heard about this particular understanding of Borges’s story from Víctor Korman, an Argentinian psychoanalyst resident in Barcelona, at the 2010 conference organised by Grupo de Psicoterapia Analítica de Bilbao on “Winnicott y la Psicoterapia Psicoanalítica Hoy: exploraciones, aperturas y fronteras”, where we were both guest speakers.

2 This and other works by Munch were considered by the Nazis as degenerate art and were removed from the German galleries and museums. In 2012, there was an exhibition at the Munch Museum in Oslo, entitled Neither Paint nor Drawing: The Rubbings of Edvard Munch. The curators were referring to the artistic technique created by Max Ernst, described by the artist as frottage: the rubbing of images onto paper. An interesting exhibition of his work was presented at Tate Modern in June–October 2012, entitled Edvard Munch: The Modern Eye.

3 The academic literature on the theme of vampires and the undead is very extensive; it would be impossible to do justice to it in this book.

4 See Grüner (2000).
Chapter 7

Monuments and counter-monuments
Willy Brandt in front of the past in Warsaw

It’s a poor sort of memory that only works backwards.
Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass and What Alice Found There*

For the Aymara people living in the Andes, the past lies ahead and the future lies behind.

**Nunca más!**

Freud believed that it was not acceptable for hypocrisy to be part of the fundamentals of a society. In the first chapter (“The Disillusionment of the War”) of his “Thoughts for the Times on War and Death” (1915), Freud described the sense of disillusionment with the low levels of morality shown by governments and states while wishing to appear as the guardians of high moral standards. In their electoral campaigns, politicians habitually declare their good intentions to bring lies to an end and to eradicate corruption. However, in a great number of cases, this has little to do with their ethical commitments and moral standards.

In politics, duplicity and pretence usually – although not always – go hand in hand with cynicism, suspicion and contempt. If anything goes wrong, it is because somebody else is responsible. Denials are common. Freud did not refer here to an unconscious phenomenon in this respect. In fact, hypocrisy plays a recognisable role in the psychic constitution of the human subject, although we should keep alive the hope for ethical improvement.

Denials, both conscious and unconscious, are daily occurrences at all levels of human existence, individually and collectively – and not just in politics. Together with distortions of memory, they attempt to normalise disturbing, disappointing and traumatic events. History, for example, persistently puts memory to the test, and the two have a complicated relationship with each other. Distortions of memory take many different forms: they can be conscious or unconscious, and all sorts of information, even when available, can be completely dismissed or reinterpreted. On the other hand, memory can also create events in history that never...
occurred; although not true, collective mnemic inventions may still make sense and become meaningful.

One way or another, denial is at the heart of all these possibilities. Stanley Cohen described the many strategies by which human beings simply do not want to know painful facts. In his exceptional, comprehensive study, he described them as states of denial that operate in individuals and groups, small and large institutions, governments and societies (Cohen, 2001). They mainly consist of “assertions that something did not happen, does not exist, is not true or is not known about” (Cohen, 2001, p. 3). This may have, in history and in politics, dramatic and tragic consequences. Nevertheless, such denials are common – witness the Holocaust deniers.

Eric Santner designated this process a form of narrative fetishism, by which he meant,

the construction and employment of a narrative consciously or unconsciously designed to expunge the traces of the trauma or loss that called that narrative into being in the first place... it is a strategy of undoing, in fantasy, the need for mourning by stimulating a condition of intactness, typically by situating the site and origin of loss elsewhere.

(Santner, 1992, p. 144)

Cohen argued that such narrative fetishism became the expertise of the Argentinian junta, led initially by Jorge Rafael Videla from 1976 to 1981. He was followed by Roberto Viola, and then by Leopoldo Galtieri, their reign of terror ending in 1983, after defeat in the Malvinas/Falklands war. As in many other countries, there is a long history of political repression in Argentina, where the torture of political prisoners became institutionalised. It is worth keeping in mind that torture was accepted legal practice in Roman law and still endures, both legally and illegally, in the Western world – witness Guantánamo. In Argentina, as in Brazil, Chile and other Latin-American countries, people were afraid of the police and of the army. People in Argentina were well acquainted with the double discourse of governments: after all, it had been used by all previous repressive political regimes.  Cohen described it as “the simultaneity of literal denial and ideological justification” (2001, p. 82). The members of the junta had become skilled experts in this particular talent and reached perverse levels of hypocrisy that were unprecedented. Cohen writes:

The Argentinian junta created the most intricate version ever of the double discourse. This was an intensely verbal regime, obsessed with thoughts of its opponents. It invented a special language, a clandestine discourse of terror, to describe a private world whose official presence was publicly both denied and justified. At the official level, the junta’s discourse was not merely ideological, but messianic: ultimately, the “Dirty War” was a defence of Western
and Christian civilisation. Argentina had become the place for a final battle of the forces of life against the forces of death. The public discourse was highly coded, full of sanctimonious – even metaphysical – references to purity, good and bad, and the sacred responsibility to eliminate opponents.

(Cohen, 2001, p. 82)³

As one example of the attempt to make evil crimes appear normal, the meaning of everyday words was changed. Since these words were in normal usage, the list is frightening and makes uncanny reading. Normally, the word *asado* describes the most popular Argentinian meal: a barbecue. People would ordinarily say to a friend, for example, “Come to my place for an *asado* this weekend”. Walking around the streets of Buenos Aires, one might see the youngest or the most inexperienced worker on a building site preparing an *asado* for the workers’ lunch; from mid-morning, one could frequently detect the aroma of meat and chorizos from a construction site nearby. In the new lexicon, the junta used the word *asado* to designate the bonfire in which they burnt the dead bodies of the tortured or the murdered. *Parrilla*, the grill that is used for cooking the meat for the *asado*, was the name used for the metal table on which the victims were made to lie while being tortured.

This wilful linguistic distortion went together with an omnipotent distortion of reality. The double discourse used by the junta was also aimed at creating a culture of fear that sustained a “balance between making state terror known, yet hiding and denying its details” (Cohen, p. 153). This produced an uncanny effect: people were terrified but could not completely trust their senses; they were never sure whether they had valid reasons for their fear and terror, nor could they justify their intense need to feel safe.⁴

In his work on the uncanny, Freud described how Jentsch (1906) ascribes the essential factor in the production of the feeling of uncanniness to intellectual uncertainty; so that the uncanny would always, as it were, be something one does not know one’s way about in.

(Freud, 1919, p. 221)

People did not know, they could not find their way about, but they were certain of one thing: they felt uncomfortable and unsafe. In what Frank Graziano called “the strategic theatrics of atrocity” (1992, p. 61), the junta would deny that anybody was *desaparecido* while simultaneously declaring that the victims deservedly got what was coming to them. When the police or the military picked someone up from their home, they often did so in the middle of the night. It was all staged very theatrically: they arrived under cover of darkness but they still wanted to be seen – they wanted the neighbours to know that they were there. Whatever their “concealments”, their actions were performed in such a way as to show how much they could get away with (Cohen, 2001).
No two acts of repression could be the same but the theatricality of each one turned it into a ritual and a ceremony. The policemen and the military who carried out the abuses of civilians did not just feel that they “represented” the state; it was not a matter of “symbolising” that power. The people involved had been brainwashed enough to be convinced that they were the state. Each of the abductions thus became an original foundation of the terror state, managed by sinister people without scruples. The state demanded sacrifices to confirm its power, and each act of violent repression, each session of torture, each murder, was the guarantee of its existence.

Why is all this so strangely familiar?

In his book *Negara*, Clifford Geertz described his concept of a *theatre-state* that formed the basis of his general theory of politics, as exemplified by nineteenth-century Bali. Geertz used a metaphor to clarify his theory, believing that

\[\text{[the nature of the Balinese state] always pointed not toward tyranny . . . but rather toward spectacle, toward ceremony, toward the public dramatization of the ruling obsessions of Balinese culture. . . . The stupendous cremations, tooth filings, temple dedications, pilgrimages, and blood sacrifices, mobilizing hundreds and even thousands of people and great quantities of wealth, were not means to political ends: they were the ends themselves, they were what the state was for.}\]

(Geertz, 1980, p. 13)

Geertz tells of the central ceremony, described by a Dutch traveller in the nineteenth century, of the cremation of the king, who had died a few days earlier. Perhaps up to 50,000 people participated in this elaborate ritual, in which his three young and beautiful widows voluntarily died on the pyre, dressed in their finery. The observance of the ritual is interpreted by Geertz as something absolutely necessary: it re-established the Balinese state, which would otherwise disappear with the death of the king. The cremation of the king was only part of the ritual, claims Geertz; the whole of the ceremony was the state.

It is very difficult to imagine that the kings of Bali, who were able to create spectacular ceremonies, were not at the same time politically powerful men in control of their family and followers. They were not mere ritual objects. Nevertheless, Geertz’s theory of the theatre-state helps us to understand that king, ritual and state were all one: there was no distinction. The same conception of state applied to the South American kingdoms before the Spaniards arrived: to capture and kill the king was enough for the *conquistadores* to conquer their kingdom. The king was not just a symbol; he was the state (see Todorov, 1982).

This is very different from the king who truly believes he is *the* king and the psychotic conviction that would prompt a king to say, *L’État c’est moi*. The members of the Argentinian junta were probably not psychotic; yet, it was this kind of mad conviction that turned them into fanatic, messianic murderers, semi-officially supported by a reactionary, perverse and corrupt Catholic Church.
The church was allied with the upper classes, who did not seem to care much about what was happening to a significant sector of society, and also with the military, who were the perpetrators of the crimes. Some of the priests were in collusion with the repressive forces: they took confessions from the tortured, from those about to be murdered, and from the *desaparecidos*, who were at times thrown alive from airplanes into the River Plate during illegal flights at night. On occasion, some of them attempted to turn religious confessions into “political” confessions, so as to extract information about other alleged militants and activists. A number of priests officially participated in the cultural repression of the media (radio and television), the press, literature and the arts, accepting that they were part of the official committees of censorship.

The junta also had financial backing and active military cooperation from the government of the United States: first, during the presidency of Gerald Ford, and then during that of Jimmy Carter, who apparently tried somewhat to moderate that support. However, his attempts were not successful.

Uncannily, this process did not surprise most people in Argentina, although this did not mean that they supported their repressive government. There was a sense of *déjà vu*, something recognisable, perhaps even expected: the strange in the familiar. More people became indoctrinated and brainwashed by the junta’s relentless propaganda. Referring to someone who had *desaparecido*, people would say, “*Por algo será . . .*” (“There must be a reason”). Or, alternatively, “*Algo habrá hecho . . .*” (“He/she must have done something”). These refrains could be heard from people from all walks of life. And yet, there was a simultaneous feeling of strangeness: “It was never like this before”. They also would say, “*It can’t go on*”.

But it did go on until finally, one day, it ended.

**Places of memory**

In his introduction to the colossal, collective work, *Les Lieux de mémoire* (1984), Pierre Nora makes an interesting distinction between memory and history, which he sees in a complex relationship. “Memory is life”, he says; it is in permanent evolution, “open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation”. In contrast, he describes history as “the reconstruction, always problematic and incomplete, of what is no longer”. While memory of the past ties us to the present, taking root in “spaces, gestures, images, and objects”, history is a representation of the past that “belongs to everyone and to no one, whence its claim to universal authority”; history binds itself to “temporal continuities, to progressions and to relations between things”. Most relevantly, Nora stated that

> History’s procurement, in the last century, of scientific methodology has only intensified the effort to establish critically a “true” memory.  
>  
> (Nora, 1989, pp. 8–9)
According to Nora, memory has been completely transformed by its “passage through history”: no more personal gestures and individual habits, no skills that follow unspoken traditions, no “body’s inherent self-knowledge”. Memory, no longer spontaneous, has led the subject to become trapped in an identity that forces him or her to remember. The inane embodiment of this predicament can be seen in the case of so-called celebrities who write (or have written for them) their memoirs or biographies. Wayne Rooney had already accomplished part of this task (the first of a five-volume contract with HarperCollins) by the time he was twenty-one years old.

Furthermore, Nora argues that memory has been colonised by the pseudo-scientific drive to what he calls a “meticulous reconstitution”. And, in an inspired fashion, he claims that

what began as writing ends as high fidelity and tape recording . . . [Memory’s] new vocation is to record; [it delegates] to the archive the responsibility of remembering. . . .

(Nora, 1989, pp. 13–14)

Strangely, while history is disintegrating, the historian is the one preventing “history from becoming merely history” (p. 18). The historian has turned to what Nora calls les lieux de mémoire – places of memory that can be material, symbolic or functional. An archive, for example – a lieu de mémoire undoubtedly “material” – becomes such only if the imagination of the historian invests it with a symbolic meaning, a symbolic “aura”.

A purely functional place, like a classroom manual, a testament or a veterans’ reunion belongs to the category only inasmuch as it is also the object of a ritual. And the observance of a commemorative minute of silence, an extreme example of a strictly symbolic action, serves as a concentrated appeal to memory by literally breaking a temporal continuity.

(Nora, 1989, p. 19)

Pierre Nora’s concept has been broadly debated and it was used by historians and authors in a variety of ways. Herein resides the interest: these places of memory are created by a significant interaction between memory and history; they become relevant because they are concerned with identity. In the first place, there is – there has to be – a will to remember, not just a wish for an objective outline of objects to be memorised. Second, history, time and change play important roles, moving from the collective to the individual and vice versa in constant interaction. Nora writes:

[If] the most fundamental purpose of the lieux de mémoire is to stop time, to block the work of forgetting, to establish a state of things, to immortalize
Monuments and counter-monuments

Let us keep all this in mind: 

*an endless recycling of their meaning. An unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications.*

**Monuments**

The Warsaw Ghetto Monument is perhaps the most famous and yet controversial memorial. It simultaneously commemorates the annihilation of the Jews of Warsaw while also aiming to honour the heroism of the Jewish resistance against the Nazis. Created to mark a tragic event of the past, the monument has been experienced differently over the years by different people. At separate moments since its creation, each reinterpretation has determined a particular meaning.

The unveiling of the monument took place on 19 April 1948, on the fifth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. In the sixty-five years since then, the monument has become a focal point for many political and collective actions, and innumerable individuals and groups have used it “as a kind of screen across which the projected shadows of [their] preoccupations continue to flicker and dance” (Young, 1989, p. 70).  

The bronze statuary, created by Nathan Rapoport, was made in Paris in 1947. When shown to French art critics of the time, before being transported to Warsaw, the appraisal of the sculpture was unanimously positive. The critics celebrated it as a great achievement, the work of an exceptionally gifted artist. Significantly, in all their responses, there were explicit references to the historical events commemorated by the artistic creation: dates, descriptions of the events and statistics portraying the extent of the tragedy. The uprising and the subsequent murder of the Jews, the evocation of their heroism and the aesthetic appreciation of the bronze statuary were closely interlinked in the minds of the observers.

Once in Warsaw, the monument was installed on the very spot where the first fights erupted during the uprising. The western side of the monument, entitled “The Fight” (Figure 7.1), features men, women and children, symbolising the fighters’ courageous rebellion: from the end of April to July 1943 the ill-armed group had held out against the German Army. At the front, a figure holding a home-made grenade represents Mordechaj Anielewicz, their leader.

The relief on the eastern side of the monument, entitled “March to Destruction”, shows the suffering and martyrdom of the women, children and the elderly who were exterminated. The monument features an inscription in Polish, Yiddish and Hebrew: “The Jewish People in honour of its fighters and martyrs”.

At the time of its unveiling, there were no other buildings left standing in the area; the ghetto had been completed destroyed by the Germans, leaving a pile of
rubble 5 metres high. The monument seemed to emerge from this collective tombstone as a massive and powerful statement of survival (Figure 7.2).

Significantly, it was inaugurated in April 1948, the State of Israel being founded one month later. The creation of the monument was initially promoted by the relatively small Zionist sections of the original Jewish resistance organisation (the

Figure 7.1 Nathan Rapoport: The Warsaw Ghetto Uprising (1948). Relief, cast in bronze and set in granite, on the western face of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument. Photo courtesy wmpearl/Creative Commons.
Monuments and counter-monuments

ZOB, the Jewish Combat Organization), which included the Communist Party (also relatively small) and the Bund (the largest Jewish workers’ organisation, simultaneously a political party and a trade union). Nevertheless, the main bulk of the resistance had not been Zionist: the notion that Jews should leave Europe to establish themselves somewhere else was seen as giving in to the desire of anti-Semites. The Bund was, in fact, openly opposed to any such ideas. Perhaps this conflict between different factions of the resistance was reflected in the absence of any explicit reference to the State of Israel in the representation of the monument.

Nevertheless, the Ghetto Uprising and the monument itself were retrospectively interpreted by later writers, politicians and historians as a symbol of the Jews on the road to Palestine. The trauma of the ghetto of Warsaw, so harrowing to imagine, so truly difficult to accept and so impossible to work through, became an extended symbol of a hopeful future. We have here the first retroactive resignification of the monument.

Nowadays, the urban landscape in Warsaw has completely changed: the monument is surrounded by apartment buildings, set around a square with trees and green lawns playing host to dog walkers, people out for a casual stroll and sunbathers in the summer months (Figure 7.3).

The inevitable domestication of the memorial, despite its role as a reminder of the uprising of the Jews and their annihilation, has made slow but steady progress.

Monuments and counter-monuments

The very geography around the monument has also contributed to a recasting of the possible meaning attributed to it. Nevertheless, another meaningful historical period concerning the monument seems to have started now: the construction and the inauguration of the new Jewish Museum in 2013, just a few metres opposite the old monument, might add a new, different meaning to the place.

Still, geography is not all. Every single event related to the monument has, one way or another, added another layer of meaning to it. Every visit to the place, every ceremony, every reference either to the original event or to the monument has introduced a new and, at times, unpredictable meaning.

The memory of a historical event, the things of the past, however important or significant, cannot merely be transmitted from one generation to another. For many years, the monument was regarded with resentment by the Poles of Warsaw: that it represented the heroism of the Jews was not, in the minds of many Polish people, so relevant or important. For them, the presence of the monument in the middle of the city of Warsaw became a poignant reminder of the absence of any commemorative monument to their own rebellion and resistance to the Nazis.

The Polish uprising of 1944 (inspired by the Jewish one of the previous year) did not have, for a long time, its own monument. For many, the permission given for the construction of the Ghetto Monument by the Communist government only confirmed the disdain the Communists showed for the heroes of the Polish Home Army. This hurt the Poles’ sense of pride and their patriotic feelings: after all,
they could not forget that the Red Army had been quietly camping across the river while the Nazis were brutally crushing the Polish rebellion. Up to 180,000 Poles may have died during the fight, and the Red Army did nothing to prevent it. To add insult to injury, there was a cynical memorial to the Russian soldiers, erected by the Communist leaders in 1945, celebrating the arrival of the Red Army on the banks of the Vistula. It was later removed for the construction of an underground station and possible restoration, but, given people’s protests, now it may be never be replaced.

And yet, in spite of this ambivalence towards the Ghetto Monument, the place became in time a gathering point for Polish war veterans commemorating the war. At the beginning, the Communist government gave its approval. To the dismay of the authorities, from the early 1980s onwards, there was wish on the part of Solidarity to incorporate the Jewish rebellion into the Polish national history, possibly embracing the monument as to give legitimacy to its own resistance. This was also enhanced by the participation in Solidarity of Dr Marek Edelman, the last surviving leader of the Warsaw Ghetto, who wrote *The Ghetto Fights*, a moving first-hand account of the uprising (Edelman, 1945).

In 1988, during the commemorations of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Lech Walesa, the leader of Solidarity, wrote:

> We commemorate this struggle today in a special way because in this land, the land of so many uprisings, the uprising of the Jewish fighters was perhaps the most Polish of all uprisings.

*(Walesa, quoted in Young, 1989, p.177)*

In turning the Jewish rebellion into a Polish rebellion, Walesa turned the Jewish fighters into national heroes of resistance. Inevitably, this had immediate political consequences. As a reaction to Solidarity’s campaign, the government created a carefully designed memorial route. It consisted of a path that started at a newly erected “Tree of Common Remembrance”, a memorial dedicated both to the Jews who died during the Nazi occupation and the Poles who tried to save them. Thus, once Jews and Poles were united in the minds of the visitors, they could move on to their next stop, the Ghetto Monument. After that, the path continued to a number of other memorials devoted to remembering Polish history in general and the war in particular. The Warsaw Ghetto Monument was meant to be seen as one more national memorial in the series.

From its inception, the memorial was also adopted by other individuals, nations and groups as a meaningful icon of their own. What was Nehru, an Indian prime minister, commemorating when he was in Poland in 1955 and visited the monument? What might he have been thinking about then? What did the Ghetto Uprising really signify for him? The suffering of his own people, who had fought hard for the independence of their country?

Later, in 1983, two more critical visits took place, each signifying something completely different. The first occasion was when Pope John Paul II returned to
Poland and knelt down in front of the Warsaw Ghetto Monument. A few years earlier, on the fiftieth anniversary of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising, Pope John Paul II had issued this appeal:

As Christians and Jews, following the example of the faith of Abraham, we are called to be a blessing to the world (cf. Gen. 12:2 ff.). This is the common task awaiting us. It is therefore necessary for us, Christians and Jews, to be first a blessing to one another.

(L’Osservatore Romano, 17 August 1993)

The pope’s visit to the monument was meant to represent an act of reconciliation but, understandably, given the complexity of the events, the pope’s declaration was far from accepting any responsibility. This continues to be a point of contention and a source of considerable conflict for many Jews. The German Protestant Church and the French Catholic Church accepted their complicity, appealing to their God of Mercy. However, as Agamben has pointed out, the God of Mercy is not the God of Justice (1999, p. 95). Jewish people might feel that while mercy is welcome, justice, for them, will never be accomplished. How could it be otherwise?

In the same year, 1983, a member of the delegation from the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) laid a wreath at the Ghetto Monument. This represented a different kind of action. He declared that “as Jews were then justified to rise up against their Nazi murderers, so now are the Palestinians justified in their own struggle with the Zionists”. Five years later, in April 1988, during the intifada in Gaza and the West Bank, yet another Palestinian delegation “laid a wreath dedicated in Polish to ‘those who perished in the Ghetto Uprising from those who perished in the Palestinian Uprising’” (Young, 1989, p. 180).

There are numerous other examples of this process of retroactive resignification, the needs of the present redefining the events of the past. The different uses of the Ghetto Monument as a lieu de mémoire fully confirm its theoretical conceptualisation by Pierre Nora: they “only exist because of their capacity for metamorphosis, an endless recycling of their meaning and an unpredictable proliferation of their ramifications” (1989, p. 19).

**Counter-monuments**

In psychoanalysis, we are continually faced with the question that troubled Freud to the end of his life: how and when can we know whether an interpretation is correct? The answer will never be definitive. There is no better illustration of the uncertainty created by this question than Freud’s own thoughts and conclusions in “Constructions in Analysis”, written and published in the same year (1937). Towards the end of those brief but very important ten pages, Freud concludes his article by making the awkward and perhaps uncomfortable comparison between the constructions made by the analyst in his interpretations and the hallucinations
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of the psychotic (p. 268). He knew well that they were most definitely not the same; yet, he felt the need to make the point explicit.

Similarly, in history, the *lieux de mémoire* are never created by a knowledge that is certain and secure. They do not possess an essential “truth” that would confirm them as meaningful and relevant. They become significant places only retrospectively; they give a structure and an organisation to the historical memory of a society, but they can never be univocal. Through the alternative meanings attributed to them by different people, they come to occupy contradictory, conflicting, paradoxical places in the imagination.

With reference to the Ghetto Monument itself, one cannot consider the historical event, the Ghetto Uprising, in isolation. The subject of retroactive reinterpretation is a monument, the *memorial* of a historical event. The monument itself refers to a later event, its inauguration, understood to mark the trauma of the uprising and mark it as significant. But each different meaning given to the monument inevitably modifies the significance of the original event to which it refers.

The examples from the Warsaw Ghetto Monument follow a similar structure to Jung’s *Zurückphantasieren*: the interpretation given to both the historical fact itself and the monument commemorating it arises from motivations that belong to the needs of the present.10 The process of remembrance is changed repeatedly by the complex interaction of new associations and experiences. Politics greatly depends upon such readings and revisions. Freud pointed out how the distortion of historical records and the reinvention of the past are used by people and nations to advance political causes. Foucault argued,

> If one controls people’s memory, one controls their dynamism. . . . It is vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, administer it, tell it what it must contain.

(Foucault, 1975, pp. 25–26)

People who have been conquered and colonised, the exploited inhabitants of Third World countries, what we used to refer to as “the proletariat”, the working classes and women all over the world know full well how their memory and their histories have been thus controlled.

In contrast to the examples mentioned so far, let us consider a different scene: 7 December 1970. Willy Brandt, then chancellor of the Federal Republic of Germany, travelled to Poland on a state visit meant to improve relations with Poland and the Soviet Union. As part of the official programme, Brandt attended a commemoration of the Jewish victims of the Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. Brandt was well aware of the importance of this official state visit. He would later describe his thoughts leading up to the event thus:

> An unusual burden accompanied me on my way to Warsaw. Nowhere else had a people suffered as in Poland. The machine-like annihilation of Polish Jewry represented a heightening of bloodthirstiness that no one had held
possible. On my way to Warsaw [I carried with me] the memory of the fight to the death of the Warsaw ghetto.\textsuperscript{11}

Brandt had been elected in 1969 and, as chancellor, had negotiated a peace treaty with Poland. He was able to sign agreements on the boundaries between the two countries, signifying the official and long-delayed end of World War II. It was in the context of these negotiations that this important moment came in December 1970 when, during the official ceremony at the Warsaw Ghetto Monument, filled with emotion and taken by the magnitude of the occasion, Brandt dropped to his knees (Figure 7.4).

This had not been planned – and it did not seem in any way staged. It appeared as a completely sudden, spontaneous gesture. It was a surprisingly personal action. No individual could, of course, be held responsible for the Nazi atrocities. Nevertheless, it came to be seen as a profound act of apology and repentance. Brandt spoke no words, but falling to his knees seemed to many a way of accepting judgement, even though it would not be followed by punishment. Borrowing the words of the Italian jurist Sebastiano Satta, “the whole punishment [was] in the judgement . . .” (1994, p. 26, quoted in Agamben, 1999).

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{Figure_7.4}
\caption{German Ostpolitik (new Eastern policy): Chancellor Willy Brandt at the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial, for the signing of the Treaty of Warsaw (7 December 1970). © Sven Simon/Ullstein Bild/AKG Images.}
\end{figure}
It is not a question of deciding whether Willy Brandt was or was not a “good guy”. In fact, ironically and painfully, the Nazi perpetrators had cynically posed as the “good guys” at their trials, as rather “decent” fellows, each a *pater familias*, dedicated workers obedient not just to orders but also the law – whatever that “law” was. It is more relevant to establish, even speculatively, whether Brandt’s action was a genuine gesture of responsibility.

I could well imagine Brandt at that moment having Hannah Arendt’s thought: *This ought not to have happened* (1964, p. 14). Later, when Brandt described that day, he wrote:

[I felt as though I] had to do something to express the particularity of the commemoration at the ghetto monument. On the abyss of German history and carrying the burden of the millions who were murdered, I did what people do when words fail them.

Brandt did not speak of “collective” guilt in any of his public references to these events. He felt that he had to do something: this seemed to have been a personal statement about his own, individual guilt, even though he was referring to the collective responsibility of the German people. Is it possible that he, personally, was sincerely aware that there were no words to articulate their guilt, no way to acknowledge their responsibility? How could there be words? To have expressed any words about the Nazi extermination of Jews would have brought the uncanny back from beyond: the wish to make familiar through the use of words something that could only remain, forever, utterly alien, speechless.

Lévinas speaks of guilt as “... the radical impossibility of freeing oneself to hide oneself from oneself, the intolerable presence of the self to itself” (1982, p. 87, quoted by Agamben, 1999). And following on from this quotation, Agamben says,

To be ashamed means to be consigned to something that cannot be assumed. But what cannot be assumed is not something external. Rather, it originates in our own intimacy; it is what is most intimate in us. . . .

(Agamben, 1999, p. 105)

The image of Brandt’s silent apology, which appears to me as a very intimate act, was seen on the television news by many Poles and Germans and had a powerful effect on both nations. Today, we can contemplate the faces of the people surrounding him at the monument; they look dumfounded, incredulous, shocked (Figure 7.5).

Thirty years later, on 6 December 2000, at the dedication of the Willy Brandt Square in Warsaw, German chancellor Gerhard Schröder recalled Brandt’s courageous act:

Here a German political leader, the head of government representing the Germans in the Federal Republic of Germany, had the sympathy and the courage
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The image of Willy Brandt kneeling in front of the monument itself became a symbolic lieu de mémoire: in Warsaw, there is now a monument dedicated to Brandt’s kneeling. Nevertheless, we do not know whether the potential relevance of his original act continues to be equally meaningful or important; at present, it might be difficult to understand what this act of the past represents today for Germans or Poles or Jews.

Given Brandt’s background as an active militant of the left, his political commitment in opposing the Nazis and the risks that he took during the war, we can understand the episode of his Warschauer Kneifall from a Freudian perspective.

For Freud, a traumatic event is, in the first instance, perceived, albeit not fully registered; as a consequence, it is not properly understood, nor can it be worked through at the time. It is a crucial moment of semantic negativity; there is an active erasure of a perception that produces either a gap in reality or perhaps a vague impression of unreality. This impression will be capable of being reinterpreted at a later stage; it is this later reinterpretation that will give the event its traumatic significance.

Figure 7.5 Chancellor Brandt honours the victims of the Polish resistance to the Nazi regime; Brandt kneeling in front of the Warsaw Ghetto Memorial (7 December 1970). © Ullstein Bild/AKG Images.
We may imagine that for Willy Brandt the experience of being in front of the monument gave a particular meaning to the psychological trauma of the Nazi atrocities of the past, something inevitably present in his psyche. Is it possible that the incidents of Brandt’s past (escaping Nazi persecution, having to adopt a pseudonym to avoid detection by Nazi agents, being arrested by the occupying German forces in Norway, where he had escaped, and, in general, the many personal dangers he had suffered) became fully meaningful experiences at the very moment of falling to his knees? Did his past as an active political opponent of the Nazis make him become the politician that he was, interested in healing the deep wounds that separated people and countries? Being who he was in the present, did that make him fully aware of the “unusual burden” that he carried, a burden that made him fall to his knees at the moment of the commemoration, “when words fail . . .”?15

While other examples – the Solidarity campaign, the visits of Nehru and the Pope, the PLO delegations, and other events – could be understood as illustrations of Jung’s retroactive phantasies, making sense of the past through the needs of the present, Willy Brandt’s spontaneous act could be interpreted as the result of a different process, Nachträglichkeit. What he became (through whatever happened to him at the moment of falling to his knees) altered who he once was, the present transforming who he had been in the past. It also seemed to have played a part in what happened next.

It has been argued that the Holocaust is something that cannot ever be properly worked through, neither by the Jews nor by the Germans. Something in this tragedy refuses a process of mourning. The Holocaust will resist closure, and rightly so: being engaged with the memory of it, as indeed we must be, will never offer any resolution (Young, 1993, p. 21). And yet, although distinctive and incomparable to any other historical event, it should not be considered part of “a grim competition for first place in victimhood” (LaCapra, 1998, p. 57). People all over the world have had to live with dreadful memories of their past and horrific experiences in their present.

Today, the people of Warsaw have a monument that commemorates the exceptional chapter in their city’s history, the 1944 Warsaw uprising. For sixty-three days, people fought, against all odds; it was a rebellion organised by the Polish Underground Home Army, and, as mentioned earlier, many people died during the fighting.

And yet, the over-emphasis on collective memories of historical violence in the past, Jewish, Polish or other, may also promote virulent forms of revenge and hatred in the present. And they may also start ghastly, appalling new wars in the future.

For the Jewish people, the past will remain forever an open wound. For generations to come, the spirit of a Jewish person will be permeated, at some level, with a mixture of melancholic pain and unfathomable despair; it will remain confronted by the restraints of representation, persistently troubled by questions of witnessing. The ruins and material embodiments of the past can only be disfigured places.
While the Warsaw Ghetto Monument may be considered a lieu de mémoire, the concentration camps, for example, cannot be compared to it.

At Auschwitz, walking along the railway tracks, I desperately wanted to imagine it – but, saddened and pained as I was, I could not know it. I thought: these are only relics, bits of reality. And yet, there was too much reality in them. It is a place of memory, but the real memories did not belong to the place. How could they? I wished I could be part of the past, to touch it. Maybe, at least, I could say: I was there, honouring the dead. I put stones on the ruins. I told myself, I am a witness; they had not managed to erase all traces. Being a completely non-religious Diaspora Jew, I nonetheless identified myself unequivocally as a Jew by wearing a yarmulke during my visit. Such a small gesture. And then, a senseless thought: I yearned for, not the Gypsies, not the Polish, not the Jewish ghosts, but the ghosts of the Nazi guards inhabiting the place, to see me.

Each person visiting the camps might have a different experience; whatever the reaction, it cannot be universal, unequivocal, definite. The concentration camps belong somewhere else. Auschwitz can never be, should never be nor become, “symbolic” – even though, questionably, it has been named a “museum”.

In Germany, as may be the case in other countries, the complex relationship to the memory of the Holocaust represents a challenging conundrum; unsurprisingly, this has been reflected in German literature and art. One artistic response to the memory of those tragic events in the country’s history has been the creation of counter-monuments, “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises of their being” (Young, 1993, p. 27). Counter-monuments are abstract pieces: they do not aim at representing an image; they lack any explicit messages. People may feel engaged with them, but this engagement is very particular: there is an implicit and yet clear demand for a respectful individual tribute, rather than the endorsement of collective, open celebrations; reactions to these pieces are more likely to evoke personal memories and family recollections.

For example, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe (Figure 7.6), a Holocaust memorial designed by the American architect Peter Eisenman, located in the centre of Berlin, is laid out on a 2.2-hectare site between Potsdamer Platz and Brandenburg Gate. The centrepiece of the memorial is the “Field of Stelae”, covered with more than 2,711 geometrically arranged concrete pillars on an unevenly sloping field with four sides. The cement slabs are all slightly different in size; as one walks through the grey forest of concrete, the wave-like appearance of the slabs produces a disorienting experience. There is nothing “symbolic” in this memorial; walking through the passages between the slabs is daunting precisely because of the absence of a specific symbolic representation. The horror of the Holocaust is negatively represented.

Jonathan Sklar (2011) compared the Memorial to another counter-monument in Berlin: “a small glass window in the ground that looks deep into the ground, into an empty library with rows of bare shelves”, which marks the burning of the
books by the Nazis. In the latter case, this is not “significant or effective” (p. 166). In contrast, the former

is a work that is not hidden away but daily in the sight of all who pass by in the very centre of the city. It points the way unequivocally to that which is known and needs to be seen. It is unavoidable and an essential part of the regeneration of national soul and spirit by the constant confrontation with destruction.

(Sklar, 2011, p. 166)

The memorial could induce a feeling of a “descent into darkness” in those who view it. Michelle Leung (2011) speaks of her feelings while walking around the high pillars, of being isolated from the outside world – not necessarily experiencing fear, but, rather, suffering a profound sense of separation from the rest of the world. This, she says, made her sympathise with the Jewish community’s experience of disruption and confusion, bereavement and sorrow.

Another artistic example is Aschrott’s Fountain, built by Horst Hoheisel in 1987. In 1908, Sigmund Aschrott, a successful Jewish businessman, funded the
creation of a fountain in front of the city hall in his home town of Kassel. Since it was a gift from a Jew, the Nazis tore down the fountain in April 1939, leaving only the sandstone base. At the same time, more than 3,000 Jews from the town were transported east to concentration camps in Poland and Latvia. They were all murdered. Thirty-five years after the end of the war, the Society for the Rescue of Historical Monuments initiated an effort to restore the site that would memorialise the founders and benefactors of the town, especially Sigmund Aschrott. By then, the common assumption among the inhabitants of Kassel was that the fountain had been destroyed by Allied bombing during World War II. Horst Hoheisel, a local artist, proposed recreating the original fountain as a hollow concrete shell, displaying it for a short time upright in the city hall square; it was then buried upside down in the exact location of the original monument. This hollow, inverted version of the fountain was covered by glass; a grate was created, which traced the outline of the base of the original fountain. People walking across can hear water falling to the bottom of the inverted fountain, which is 12 metres below ground.

This counter-monument was also created through the concept of a negative space. There was no room for the “reparation” of the destroyed monument. Equally, the history of the destruction of Kassel’s Jews could not be represented by an aesthetic memorial: the losses, both of the original monument and of the murdered Jews, are represented by emptiness. Conventional monuments try to present a unified view of a given society, a view that is supposed to be accepted by its members as a true representation of its history and its identity. Counter-monuments are conceptual creations that resist the very existence of monuments, defying traditional convention (Harris, 2010).

In the case of Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz’s Memorial against Fascism (Figure 7.7), the consideration of the past is once again suggested through physical absence. This “monument”, constructed in 1986, was a 12-metre-high tower made of hollow aluminium and covered with a thin layer of lead, created for the city of Hamburg. It marginally resembled a column. People were invited to write their names and inscriptions on it; as more writing was added to the column, it was progressively lowered into the ground. Unveiled in 1986, it slowly disappeared over a period of five years: by September 1991 nothing of the original tower was left to be seen. There was no negation of memory here – just the opposite. It became a place where visitors were left with the challenge and the burden of remembering. It was called a “monument”, but there is nothing there.16

As psychoanalysts, we cannot simplify what is extraordinarily multi-layered and exceptionally complex. Therefore, psychoanalysis, as a discipline, can never reach a position where its theory and practice will be able to give a full account of its subject. Not now. Not in the future. The subject of psychoanalysis defies definition, because it is not directly knowable – and yet we need, we want to make sense of it. By now, we know a few things. For example, we know that what we call working-through, even in its most comprehensive sense, means having to accept that this task will never be fully accomplished. Nothing can be totally changed,
completely made good, wholly recovered. Something will remain untouched, undigested, repressed.

I suggested that what Willy Brandt may have become (at the moment of falling to his knees) altered who he had once been. His kneeling may have become, for him, a foundational act. From a strictly personal point of view, his action may have restored what we call the Law: through it something was symbolically returned to its proper place. Then, and only then, might there be hope, and Order could prevail over Chaos, the motivation for the Law to exist in the first place. By kneeling, Brandt exposed himself to the suffering of others. But there seemed to have been something crucial about his action: it was not just an exposure to the suffering of others but also the need for his own suffering to be exposed to others.

Figure 7.7 Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz, Mahnmal gegen Faschismus (Memorial against Fascism) (1986). Column of galvanized steel with a lead coating; 12 × 1 × 1 m. Harburg – Hamburg, Germany. Photo Kulturbörde, Hamburg. www.jochengerz.eu. Courtesy Gerz Studio.
In psychoanalysis, we do not confess our sins: instead, we wrestle with our imaginary, as well as our actual, capacity to cause real harm to others. By having to take full responsibility for our past, we have to recognise our potential capacity to do harm to other people in the present. Melanie Klein wrote about the importance of the sense of guilt in relation to the depressive position; with her, we moved from Freud’s understanding of guilt as emerging through the internalisation of the Law (an identification with a father representing the social Order) to guilt as something that forms part of our love for the other, a concern for the potential damage that we can cause to the primary objects that help us to survive.

It is this realisation – the fact that we can imagine ourselves harming the object of our love, that we feel love and yet cause pain to the same person, something so utterly strange and equally so completely familiar, so intrinsic to our subjectivity – that enables the tragic sense of our existence to be recognised.

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The fact that we cannot determine the particular causes of certain effects does not mean that causes do not exist. The Marxist dictum that history is produced first as tragedy and then as farce does not belie the fact that both tragedy and farce are also fictional, literary forms. This does not imply that there are no distinctions between literature and psychoanalysis; their differences should not be blurred. However, in the act of writing about psychoanalysis, literature has been constantly jumping at me, perhaps also jumping on me in this text.

And here it comes again.

In Jorge Luis Borges’s story, “Pierre Menard, Autor del Quijote” (“Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote”) (1939a), we learn about Pierre Menard17 through a pedantically written obituary, penned by a minor provincial writer. We are told about the visible part of Menard’s work (literary criticism, histories of philosophers and collections of verses and of his having also been a chess-player and a translator) and the extraordinary invisible contributions, the work of a genius. Menard undertook “an enterprise that was extremely complex and futile from the start”: to rewrite, “line by line and word for word”, el Quijote. The text offers the reader two identical fragments, one written by Cervantes, the other by Menard. The writer of the obituary argues with absurd passion that Menard’s Don Quijote, although absolutely identical, word for word, to the fragment of the original Don Quixote, is a much better version. This is Menard’s heroic and unequalled, yet unfinished, masterpiece, consisting of the ninth and thirty-eighth chapters of Part One of Don Quixote, plus a fragment from the twenty-second chapter. Menard’s ambitious project was to produce a text that would coincide precisely with that of Miguel de Cervantes.

This would be, in ordinary life, an extraordinary enterprise. Menard did not want to write a new version of Don Quixote: his wish was to reproduce the original book verbatim. It was an astonishing success: the new text is more subtle than that of Cervantes; although verbally the same, Menard’s is “infinitely richer”.
How can this be? Pierre Menard chooses to write the novel again and, in doing so, has, according to the writer and the fictional critics, given a new meaning to Cervantes’s original text. Cervantes had written *Don Quixote* in his own language, the Spanish of his time – there was nothing exceptional about that. Menard, in contrast, wrote it through an extraordinary act of creative effort. The artistic object does not have a meaning of its own. The words contained in the text of *Don Quixote* do not speak for themselves; the words have to be met, received by the reader who recreates them and gives meaning to them. When the reader goes back to read the original *Don Quixote* by Cervantes, he cannot help imagining that Menard is the original author: the present experience of reading Menard’s *Don Quixote* is different from the original experience of reading Cervantes’s *Don Quixote*. In rewriting *Don Quixote*, Menard has created it anew. Time has changed the original text: faced with the same words of the past, the reader has discovered an enriched text. In his self-mocking style, Borges made Pierre Menard open the possibility for every reader (in the present) to turn any book (of the past) into a new adventure. At the same time, the act of writing would become meaningless, effectively, without any life; it would imply the death of the author. This is Borges at his most ironic and sarcastic.18

But what then about history? Borges provides us with the answer: “Historical truth, for [Menard], is not what happened; it is what we judge to have happened”. From “Pierre Menard, Author of Quixote” he moved on to writing his essay, “La Biblioteca Total” – a library that exists in the terrifying immensity of infinite time. All the books ever conceived are housed here, all texts ever written, describing everything that could possibly exist in the universe (Borges, 1939b). Implicit in this story is the question of how we understand history. How do we measure and judge human experience, in the past or in the present?

Giorgio Agamben has argued that at present we can only acknowledge that experience is “no longer accessible to us”; he notes that this was diagnosed by Walter Benjamin as early as 1933 as a “poverty of experience” (1933, p. 732). Agamben (1999) does not refer to a supposedly “poor quality of life”, nor to its possible “meaninglessness”. He is specifically thinking of the banality of the quotidian, the “non-translatability into experience” of things like being stuck in traffic jams, reading the newspaper, queuing at the local supermarket. None of these things could eventually become “experience”; they are, I would say, “non-events”. For Agamben, it is not just a matter of the correlation between the experience of something and its knowledge, it is more that no one wields “sufficient authority to guarantee the truth of an experience” (p. 16). Slogans, he claims, have replaced maxims and proverbs.

Experience never goes together with certainty. This does not mean that we have to accept the postmodern suggestion that, as the very notion of the subject has been de-centred, then the entire world is purely fictionalised. Pure binary oppositions, the logic of political, philosophical or psychological Manichaeism, may have to be questioned, criticised and rejected. This does not imply that we should forget and therefore accept the breakdown of all distinctions.
Psychoanalysis teaches us that the subject cannot give account of his actions exclusively through conscious reasons and motivations. We also learn from psychoanalysis that the subject will always be disappointed because his or her desires will never be completely satisfied. Beyond that, psychoanalysis induces us to accept that the subject will never be able to explain his or her present entirely through the events of the past. B might follow A but this does not necessarily mean that B results from A. Reality is not necessarily experienced or known through the laws of reason and the “commonsense” understanding of causality.

People experience life as if living under a totalitarian regime of their own making: someone else, out there, outside, is always making choices for them. It is very difficult for people to understand, and then accept, that the tyrant is a creation of their own making. When patients enter the consulting room of a psychoanalyst, the last thing they want to hear is that they are “responsible”. They might feel extremely guilty, anxious, embarrassed and in the wrong, blameworthy, whether for real or imaginary actions, but not necessarily responsible. Interpretations, identifying the alien, the Other, in the patient might understandably produce an uncanny effect in them. For an initial but fairly prolonged period in their treatment patients want the analyst to become their secret accomplice or personal judge, to play along with the farce or to punish them. They may also want a justification and/or a psychological “explanation” to make them feel less guilty and thus less responsible. Since the psychoanalyst refuses to collude with the patient’s desires, it is not surprising that psychoanalysis is not particularly popular.

In psychoanalysis, we are still dealing with some fundamental questions: how does one cope with one’s losses? What did Freud mean by renunciation? Is there forgiveness? Can we truly love? Is there hope? These questions help us to return to a genuine sense of tragedy, to understand and go behind the intellectual farce that pretends and tries to convince us that there are no real political values or poetic values or even subjective values. Collective tragedies like Auschwitz or Hiroshima or Vietnam or Kosovo or East Timor or the South-American desaparecidos cannot be hidden behind so much contemporary postmodern ideological insistence. Menard was able to rewrite Don Quixote and make it appear as more authentic than the original written by Cervantes; the Holocaust can neither be rewritten nor reproduced.

I close this chapter with the words of the poet, Dannie Abse, who, in “A Letter from Ogmore-by-Sea”, wrote:

Goodbye, 20th Century,
What should I mourn?
Hiroshima? Auschwitz?
Our friend, Carmi said,
“Thank forgetfulness
else we could not live;
thank memory
else we’d have no life”.

(Abse, 2009, p. 87)
Notes

1 The original research, by Núñez & Sweetser, was published the following year (Núñez & Sweetser, 2006).

2 For the first twenty-seven years of my life I lived with this kind of institutionalised violence. I was lucky enough to have moved from Buenos Aires to London in 1970, unwittingly escaping the junta’s particularly vicious persecution of the 1970s: the relentless harassment of students, workers and professionals, the systematic disappearances and the murders. It is estimated that the junta did away with some 15,000 to 30,000 people – a whole generation. Some of the victims were my friends and colleagues; some of them had been particularly close.

3 It is astonishing, and yet not that surprising, given the common cultural background and religious legacy of both countries, to compare the Argentinian junta’s discourse with the discourse displayed by Spanish extreme right-wing Catholics towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century. In Paul Preston’s account of the torture and slaughter of thousands of civilians and prisoners during the Spanish civil war it becomes clear that the obnoxious notion of a “secret alliance of Jews, Freemasons and the Communist Third International [. . .] conspiring to destroy Christian Europe” was believed by many people (2012, p. 4). In fact, the idea of an evil Jewish conspiracy had been held by the Catholic Church since the Middle Ages. In the nineteenth century, this paranoid and mad idea was resurrected by the fanatical right: in Spain, “Freemasons were smeared as tools of the Jews (of whom there were virtually none) in a sinister plot to establish Jewish tyranny over the Christian world” (p. 4). This progressively increased in vehemence and violence: according to propaganda of the Catholic right, the Freemasons were used by the Jews to control “the economy, politics, the press, literature and entertainment world through which they propagated immorality and the brutalization of the masses” (p. 4). These views were actively peddled by their publications and newspapers. Preston adds, “In 1912, the National Anti-Masonic and Anti-Semitic League had been founded by José Ignacio de Urbina with the support of twenty-two Spanish bishops. The Bishop of Almería wrote that ‘everything is ready for the decisive battle that must be unleashed between the children of light and the children of darkness, between Catholicism and Judaism, between Christ and the Devil’. That there was never any hard evidence was put down to the cleverness and colossal power of the enemy, evil itself” (pp. 4–5).

A few years later, Franco’s rebel forces started their uprising against the Republican government. Many of his military followers were inspired by similar extreme right-wing ideas. And they clearly knew what they wanted. The director of the coup, General Emilio Mola, declared their purpose: “[to eliminate] without scruple or hesitation those who do not think as we do” (Preston, 2012, p. xiii).

The Argentinian junta used very similar language to justify their illegal war of violent repression of civilians. In his discussion of my paper, “Nunca más! Denial and reparation. From Buenos Aires to Warsaw via Berlin” (presented at “Ruptures – European Psychoanalytical Federation Annual Conference”, Turin, 10–13 April, 2014), H. Shmuel Erlich remarked upon the similarity between the junta’s messianic ideas and the ideology of the Nazi regime, both sharing a kind of “apocalyptic psychotic belief” that served to “justify” their atrocities.

4 The deliberate perversion of language, which was once the privilege of totalitarian regimes, has also been extended to our democracies; the calculated use of Orwellian doublespeak has become almost commonplace. For example, after 9/11, the invasion of another country became a “pre-emptive strike”; the capture and torture of civilians, “extraordinary rendition”; the sign in front of the prison at the Bahía de Guantánamo reads “Honour Bound to Defend Freedom” – a bit too reminiscent of the sign on the gate of Auschwitz. Most extraordinarily, suicide attempts by the prisoners have been relabelled as “manipulative self-injurious behaviour”.
In fighting a war, symbols become very important. For example, it is not enough to defeat the enemy; one has to take possession of their flag, so as to mark the triumph properly – that is, symbolically. This happens even at the level of the violent fights between rival hooligan groups in the world of soccer, where one of the aims is trying to steal the rivals’ flags. The humiliation of the rivals plays an important role.

A number of Argentinian Catholic priests were concerned about the repression and offered their support of and encouragement to the poor, the destitute and the persecuted. In contrast, a considerable proportion of them, following the more or less semi-official policies of the church and the directions emanating from the Vatican, supported the junta. For example, Monseñor Adolfo Tortolo would visit prisons and secret detention centres and bless the weapons and tools with which the prisoners were tortured; this was corroborated in the accounts of dozens of witnesses. Like other priests linked to the army, he was in shameful open support of the murderous guerra sucia. People who were killed apparently included some of their own relatives (González, 2013, p. 159; Mignone, 2006). In a rather disturbing study of the Catholic Church and its priests’ active collaboration with the repression carried out by the junta, Emilio Mignone presents a well-documented report. Monseñor Victorio Bonamín was another of the leading figures. In one public speech after another, he defended the military junta, arguing that the armed forces represented Western and Christian civilisation. In his opinion, they should use, as indeed they did, all possible means to fight against the evil forces of atheist materialism. He once declared, “This is a fight in defense of God . . . that is why I ask for God’s protection in this ‘guerra sucia’ to which we are committed”. This was in 1976. Five years later, he declared, “. . . the members of the military junta will be glorified by future generations” (3 November 1981). Another example, among others, of the public support offered by the Argentinian Catholic priests was Monseñor José Miguel Medina, who declared in April, 1982: “Sometimes, physical repression is necessary, obligatory, and, as such, legal” – a clear justification of torture. The list of priests, their speeches, their personal connections to the military, and their commitment to extract information from the prisoners through their offering to hear their confessions make for very disturbing reading (Mignone, 2006).

This is what Carter stated during the Universal Declaration of Human Rights remarks at a White House meeting commemorating the 30th anniversary of the declaration’s signing: “What I have to say today is fundamentally very simple. It’s something I’ve said many times, including my acceptance speech when I was nominated as President and my inaugural speech when I became President. But it cannot be said too often or too firmly nor too strongly. As long as I am President, the Government of the United States will continue throughout the world to enhance human rights. No force on Earth can separate us from that commitment. Political killings, tortures, arbitrary and prolonged detention without trial or without a charge, these are the cruelest and the ugliest of human rights violations. Of all human rights, the most basic is to be free of arbitrary violence, whether that violence comes from government, from terrorists, from criminals, or from self-appointed messiahs operating under the cover of politics or religion” (6 December 1978).

Promises. Words. The Argentinian junta, in partnership with the US government, supported the 1980 “Cocaine Coup” of Luis García Meza Tejada in Bolivia, before going on to train the Contras in Nicaragua, where the Sandinista National Liberation Front, headed by Daniel Ortega, had taken power in 1979. The junta, also with US support, helped the military in Guatemala and in El Salvador. Through Operation Charly, inspired by the United States, the Argentine military exported state terror tactics to Central America. This period in history has been widely denied and is, by now, more or less buried in people’s minds. Predictably, the junta also collaborated with other murderers in power, like Augusto Pinochet in Chile (1973–1970), Ernesto Geisel in Brazil.
(1974–1979), and Ivan María Bordaberry (1972–1976) and Aparicio Mendez in Uruguay (1976–1981) – all of them also approved and supported by the US government.

This is not the place to catalogue the appalling abuses supported by the United States, and, yet, it is worth mentioning that its shameful involvement in backing the repressive dictatorships in Latin America constitutes a distressing inventory of injustices.

The translation into English of the introduction to Pierre Nora’s work was first published as an article in *Representations* (1989).

As already acknowledged, I drew together the information concerning the history of the monument from James E. Young’s writings (1989).

Needs can be neurotic, distorted, egotistic, political, etc. The Argentinian writer, Adolfo Bioy Casares, who, as far as I can gather, was not acquainted with the Freudian concept Nachträglichkeit, argued that needs are often experienced “retrospectively” – as if, once, in the past, there was something that could satisfy them retroactively (1942, quoted in Ferrer, 2009).

This is a well-known statement made by Brandt and quoted by many. Nevertheless, I could not find the original source of the reference.

For example, consider the following statement made in 1947 by Rudolf Hess in his final speech at Nuremberg: “I am happy to know that I have done my duty to my people, my duty as a German, as a National Socialist, as a loyal follower of my Führer. I do not regret anything. . . . I shall some day stand before the judgment seat of the Eternal. . . . I know He will judge me innocent” (quoted in Pick, 2012).

This is quoted in many places on the Internet, but I could not find the original source of reference.

Again, this is quoted in many places on the Internet, but I could not find the original source of reference.

It is worth considering that Brandt’s falling to his knees might have also been evidence of the impossibility to (with)stand having the experience of the unrepresentable, of the Real (Carlos Sapochnik, personal communication, November 2013).

We may compare the idea behind counter-monuments with André Green’s concept of negative hallucination, which describes the moment when the infant is able to negate the mother’s presence. Through negative hallucination the mother is turned into a white screen, used as a background onto which the child’s representations will be projected; the mother becomes a framing structure, the condition for representation to appear (Green, 1998). Green refers in his work to the ideas developed by Bion, when this author suggests that the thought of a breast is created by the reality of the no-breast (Bion, 1965, p. 54). For further consideration of the concept of the negative, see Chapter 8. For further examples of conceptual counter-monuments, see Young (1993, pp. 21–47).

In French literature, there were several authors actually called Pierre Menard. One of them, a certain Dr Pierre Menard, (presumably a psychiatrist), was the author of several books, among them *L’écriture et le subconscient* (1931). Borges told Bioy Casares that he had chosen that name because, being aware that there were many Menards (or Ménards), he wanted to create the impression of *déjà vu* (Bioy Casares, 2006, p. 1394, quoted in Ferrer, 2009).

Borges wrote this story while convalescing after an accident, fighting for his life for a month against septicaemia. In the dark, he had run up the stairs in a building where the lift was out of order, and he knocked his head against a casement window that had been left open. The wound became infected, and he developed a high fever and had hallucinations; at one point, he lost his speech. While recovering his health, he was worried that he would never be able to write again (Williamson, 2004, p. 238).
Chapter 8

The broken sequence of the aesthetic

The work of the negative

Once I was waiting with my little son at the station as an empty bus went by. My son said: “Look, a bus full of empty people”.

Yehuda Amichai, “Statistics” (from The Hour of Grace)

... an artwork is not a static thing; ... clay, canvas, wood, plaster, oil [...] undergo constant transformations ... Forms are [...] animated by destruction.

Eyal Weizman, “The Master of Memory” (in Adrián Villar Rojas, Today We Reboot the Planet)

So how much energy resides in an empty box of a given size (containing nothing but a vacuum)? Quick calculations on the basis of quantum theory lead to an apparently nonsensical conclusion: there is no limit. The vacuum is not empty. In fact, it contains an infinite amount of energy.

Paul Davies, “The Turbulent Life of Empty Space” (in Nothing: From Absolute Zero to Cosmic Oblivion – Amazing Insights about Nothingness, edited by Jeremy Webb)

The National Gallery’s website “Glossary” defines pentimento:

The word pentimento is derived from the Italian “pentirsi”, which means to repent or change your mind. Pentimento is a change made by the artist during the process of painting. These changes are usually hidden beneath a subsequent paint layer. In some instances they become visible because the paint layer above has become transparent with time. Pentimenti (the plural) can also be detected using infra-red reflectograms and X-rays. They are interesting because they show the development of the artist’s design, and sometimes are helpful in attributing paintings to particular artists.
One of the most famous examples of *pentimento* is in Caravaggio’s *The Cardsharps*, at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth. Contemporary studies showed the existence of colour pigments that would otherwise have remained hidden under layers of paint, indicating that the painter had introduced minor changes to the painting. Another example is *Christ and the Virgin in the House at Nazareth*, by Francisco de Zurbarán from Extremadura, who came to be known as the “Spanish Caravaggio”. It portrays Mary with a particularly sad face in contemplation of her young son who is weaving a crown of thorns; in this case, the size of the white cloth on her legs was expanded after the dark background undercoat had already been applied. Yet another famous example is *The Lacemaker*, by Johannes Vermeer, at the Louvre Museum. The smallest of Vermeer’s paintings, it shows a young woman wearing a yellow shawl, bent in concentration over her lace bobbins. X-rays have shown that the knee was first positioned lower, so that a triangle of wall was visible under the table-top.

In the catalogue of the 2012 exhibition of Joshua Neustein’s work at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, Meira Perry-Lehman (the curator of the exhibition) put forward the idea that a *pentimento* would indicate a particular indecision of the artist in the course of the creative process: “indecision”, rather than a change of mind. Perry-Lehman had in mind a number of contemporary artists who indeed exhibit their work without attempting to hide their hesitations; instead, they leave visible traces of this process. In these cases, the *pentimento* becomes an exposed, visible part of the painting.

In the 2012 exhibition, Neustein offered remarkable instances of this approach. For example, in *Erased Displaced Square* (1973), Perry-Lehman described how Neustein first scribbled on a sheet of paper; he then erased the drawn lines, creating a sharp-edged square whose erased lines appeared as “pentimenti”, echoing the two operations: the act of drawing and the act of erasing. He then collected the residue of the erasure into an envelope and finally affixed it to the bottom of the sheet, thus upholding its presence.

(Perry-Lehman, 2012, p. 196)

This drawing forms part of a series described as “erased drawings” – a description that explicitly expresses a logical contradiction. At the Israel Museum, Neustein’s drawings, all brilliantly realised, were exhibited as a group. Seen together, the aesthetic effect on the spectator was extraordinary. These drawings were created through the erasing; it was the rubbing out of what had been drawn that made the drawing. The final form – the picture that is seen as the exhibited product hanging on the wall – materialised through the negative: something could now be seen – but not simply because it was “invisible” before. Normally, a picture does not exist before it is created; it is given existence through the determined action of drawing or painting. Where there was “nothing”, now there is “something”. However, in the case of the “erased drawings”, this does not describe
Neustein’s creative process: his drawings come into being only because, paradoxically, they are erased. Whether involving indecision or a change of mind, the feat is achieved by the artist through the negative. This is accomplished not through an epistemological change (let us say, a change in the quality of the object itself); rather, it epitomises a profound change in the symbolic status of the object (Soen, 2012, p. 185).

Kurt Schwitters’s Merzbau (Figure 8.1) is another example of an artistic creation achieved through the negative. The Merzbau was the dramatic transformation of six (or possibly more) rooms of Schwitters’s family house in Hannover, where he also had his studio. Started towards the end of 1919 or the beginning of 1920, the work was supposed to contain and be formed by everything that could be gathered from everyday life. The first room was finished in 1933 but the project was subsequently extended during the following three years to other parts of the house. In his essay, “Ich und meine Ziele”, published in Merz 21, the artist referred to his work as the Cathedral of Erotic Misery (Schwitters, 1931, p. 115). There is no further evidence that he used this extraordinary and intriguing description after 1930.¹

Schwitters cut through ceilings and floors of the building, extending his work vertically and horizontally to adjacent rooms. He developed an architectural structure made of plaster and wood, built up along multiple irregular axes; the interior of the structure was formed by enclosures connected to one another through small tunnels that doubled as spaces for the display of objects. Schwitters continually manipulated and re-arranged his eccentric collection of objects. Here is one description:

There were cavities and grottoes lit by light bulbs, the “sadistic grotto” revealed the mutilated body of a “sorely missed” young girl surrounded by offerings. A 10-per-cent-disabled war invalid stood next to his headless

Figure 8.1 Kurt Schwitters, Hannover Merzbau (1932). Photo Wilhelm Redemann/BPK Agency. © DACS 2014.
daughter, who was called Mona Hausmann. She was in fact a reproduction of the *Mona Lisa* and . . . the fact that her face had been replaced by that of Hausmann took away her “stereotypical” smile. Other treasures showed the treasure of the Nibelungen, a Goethe grotto with one of Goethe’s legs as a relic, and some pencils used almost to the end by poetry, a corner dedicated to Luther, and a brothel with a three-legged woman designed by Hannah Höch.

(Dachy, 2005, pp. 50–51)

Schwitters used these spaces to exhibit all sorts of things, which included discarded and random objects and fragments. The internal space was constantly transformed by new elements, including wood-shavings, chicken-wire, string, candy wrappers, splinters of glass, cloakroom tokens, newspapers, tram tickets—anything and everything. Things incorporated in the construction did not always belong to him; friends frequently noted that their possessions were missing, only to find them later exhibited at Schwitters’s house. Finally, there was a striking feature that transformed the project of *Merzbau* into a personal, intimate event: Schwitters included bits of his own hair as well as nail cuttings and, most remarkably, even his own urine, distributed in small containers throughout the place. All this existed in a living space where families, including Schwitters’s parents, had their home and where the visitor, after knocking at the front door, was greeted by “the smell of cooking cabbage, glue, and guinea pigs . . . .” (Webster, 2005, p. 62).

Kurt Schwitters was born in 1887 in Hanover, Germany, and died in 1948 in England, having lived as an “enemy alien” in various internment camps in the United Kingdom between June 1940 and November 1941. A painter, poet and playwright, he was also a graphic designer and a typographer. As a painter, he started his career as a post-Impressionist, moving at the time of the First World War to a darker, expressionistic tone in his pictures. In 1918, after showing two semi-abstract expressionist landscapes in an exhibition, he became acquainted with members of the Berlin avant-garde, including Raoul Hausmann, Hanna Höch and Hans Arp. Soon afterwards, he produced his first abstract collages, influenced in particular by Arp; eventually, he became famous for his collages as much as for his installations.

Although interested in Dadaism, Schwitters’s relationship with that movement was ambiguous and uncertain; he remained independent from it. He certainly employed Dadaist ideas in his work, even to the point of using the word Dada on the cover of his book, *Anna Blume: Dichtungen*; this was a collection of mock-romantic poems which achieved popular success when published by Paul Steegemann Verlag in 1919. Earlier in the same year, the poem “*An Anna Blume*” (translated into English by Schwitters as “To Eve Blossom”) had been published in *Der Sturm*, Issue 4. In 1932, the poem was recorded for the broadcaster Süddeutscher Rundfunk Stuggart. His poetry, inspired perhaps by the same aesthetic sense as his collages, was composed of snatches of overheard conversations and randomly derived phrases from newspapers and magazines.
If Schwitters was rejected by the Dadaists, as it is claimed, this did not seem to have bothered him much. He created his own movement and called it *Merz*, a syllable that he took from *Kommerzbank*, a word that appeared in one of his collages. *Merz*, originally part of a word from the financial world, became a term that was applied to all sorts of artistic creations: *Merzbau* (Merz construction), *Merzbild* (Merz image), *Merzzeichnung* (Merz drawing), *Merzbühne* (Merz theatre), *Merzdichtung* (Merz poetry). Constructions, paintings, collages, plays and poems could all be *Merz*.

In poetry, an example of *Merzdichtung* was Schwitters’s “*Ursonate*” (“Sonata in Primitive Sounds”), first presented in 1925 and subsequently developed and extended in many other performances during the following ten years. It was inspired by Raoul Hausmann’s poem “fmsbwazdu”, which was the result of Hausmann’s experiments with sounds, phonemes and “poster poems”, originally created by the chance choice of letters made by a printer without the poet’s active influence. The first lines of the “Introduction” to “*Ursonate*” are:

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Fümms bö wö tää zää Uu,
pögiff,
kwii Ee . . .
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(Schwitters, 1931)

Excerpts of this bizarre poem, recited by Schwitters himself, were shown at the 2013 exhibition, *Schwitters in Britain*, at Tate Britain; it can also be heard on the Internet.

With the rise of the Nazis in the 1930s, the revolutionary creative movements of the 1920s and 1930s progressively became the target of the Nazi party’s attacks. Schwitters’s work began to be considered part of the modern “degenerate” art and became overtly ridiculed and mocked. By 1936, his personal situation had clearly become dangerous. In January 1937, Schwitters was wanted by the Gestapo, who were interested in “interviewing” him; at that point he fled to Norway, where his son Walter and close friends had already taken refuge. On the evidence of Schwitters’s correspondence, by the time he escaped, the original *Merzbau* had spread to two rooms of his parents’ apartment on the ground floor, the adjoining balcony, the space below the balcony, one or two rooms of the attic and possibly part of the cellar.

Photographs of the *Merzbau* were exhibited in the Museum of Modern Art in New York in the late 1930s. The Sprengel Museum in Hanover possesses a reconstruction of the first room of the *Merzbau*. As if not wanting to accept being beaten, Schwitters later created a similar environment in the garden of his house in Lysaker, near Oslo, known as the *Haus am Bakken* (The House on the Slope). This was almost complete when Schwitters had to leave Norway for England in 1940, escaping once again from German troops. Unfortunately, this *Merzbau* burnt down in 1951, and no photographs survive. The last *Merzbau*, in Elterwater in Cumbria, England, was incomplete on Schwitters’s death in January 1948.
A further construction, which also served as a living space, can still be seen on the island of Hjertoya, near Molde, in Norway. It is sometimes described as a fourth *Merzbau*, although Schwitters himself only ever referred to three of them.

What was *Merzbau*? Was it just a wild, foolish extension of his ideas about artistic collages? Did Schwitters intend it to be a true sculptural environment or, alternatively, an architectural project? All we can see from the photographs is a series of angled surfaces aggressively protruding into a room, apparently painted all in white.4

*Merzbau* was made up of many *objets trouvés* (although, some of these objects may have been appropriated rather than found). Kurt Schwitters and artists associated with Dada, including Hans Arp, used damaged and reclaimed materials for their creations. Schwitters, in particular, sought to redeem the beauty and history of everyday items; he selected them by chance but was careful to arrange them according to his own principles of composition. Had Schwitters’s work not been curtailed by the coming to power of the Nazis, *Merzbau* would have become the most celebrated example of the *objet trouvé*.

*Merz* became the name of Schwitters’s one-man movement and philosophy. He gave different meanings to the word, the most frequent being that of “refuse” or “rejects”. Although this had a negative connotation, it allowed for the freedom to use and combine all imaginable materials for the purpose of creating a work of art; for him, one individual material was as suitable for this task as any other. A great diversity of materials was indeed incorporated into Schwitters’s large assemblages and painted collages of this period. For example, *Construction for Noble Ladies* (1919) was made from waste materials picked up in the streets and parks of Hanover; a precarious but resilient beauty was created out of the ruins of German culture. A perambulator wheel, wire-netting, string, cotton wool – all were considered to be as artistically useful as paint.5

Later, the resurgence of interest in the *objet trouvé* took many forms – for example, in the use of reclaimed rubbish by Robert Rauschenberg for his “combine” paintings, largely influenced by Schwitters. The same inspiration was behind the reliance on expendable materials in junk art – for example, in the assemblages of Edward Kienholz and those of Wallace Berman, the leader of assemblage art. Similarly, the absurd kinetic machines of Jean Tinguely and the “happenings” of Allan Kaprow and Jim Dine were inspired by Schwitters. His influence was also acknowledged by the feminist artist Louise Nevelson; her boxed assemblages, painted in a single, uniform colour, recall the *Merzbau* in their scale and in their accumulation of heterogeneous objects. In England, Edoardo Paolozzi, the Scottish-Italian artist, who eventually settled in London, turned his studio into a workshop filled with hundreds of *objets trouvés*: models, sculptures, materials, tools, toys and stacks of books – not quite a *Merzbau* but close enough in spirit. Paolozzi was interested in just about everything: he would use an enormous variety of objects and a large diversity of materials in his creations, particularly in his collages. Many artists, principally sculptors, seem to collect things, in the spirit of *objets trouvés* – frequently, but not necessarily, with
the conscious intention of using them later in their works. There seems to be an autobiographical element in the act of collecting objects, like tracing an imaginary path through time, marking the places where the artist has been, keeping a material memory of them. Richard Deacon, the British sculptor, declared, “There is a great deal of autobiography hidden within my shelves . . .” (where he set up his collection of objects) (2014, p. 31).

George Steiner considered Schwitters’s creation, in any ordinary sense, a non-existent event. And yet, Steiner says, “indeed because it is non-existent, the Merzbau . . . has exercised immense influence” in contemporary culture (2001, p. 275). Conceptually, it owed its importance to its non-existence. While defying artistic definition, Merzbau came to be considered an artistic object and, as such, attracted admiration and praise. Furthermore, it became an important conceptual reference in modern aesthetics, giving testimony and recognition to its influence. Works by Kurt Schwitters can now be seen in many art museums, including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Centre Pompidou in Paris, Museum Ludwig in Cologne, Insel Hombroich near Dusseldorf, Tate Britain in London and the Armit Museum in Ambleside, Cumbria. The largest and most important collection of his work, along with a reconstruction of the first Merzbau room, can be found in the Sprengel Museum in Hanover, which also has an extensive Kurt Schwitters archive.

The sense in which Merzbau came to be considered an artistic object calls for consideration. That something can be created through its negativity represents a paradox and an enigma; it challenges logical thinking. Merzbau was destroyed and could never be restored or properly reconstituted. And yet, once lost forever, its aesthetic was born. Prior to its destruction, Merzbau offered by definition no clear parameters to help visitors identify it as an artistic object; for them, the aesthetic experience resided in the broken sequence of the visit itself (Mansoor, 2002).

For many contemporary artists and architects, Merzbau embodies their struggle with the complexity of modern culture and society. According to Stefano Boeri, it is a notion that has become “strategically crucial”. Specifically referring to contemporary architecture and its challenges, Boeri speaks of a “degree of uncertainty, of incomplete determination, an incomplete definition of the building itself” (2005, pp. 12–13). In this respect, it resembles psychoanalysis: the complexity of the subject determines the uncertainty of its knowledge. Merzbau, in its incompleteness, suggests that the process of creation, the endeavour and the effort exerted may be more relevant than the completion itself. Furthermore, not to finalise nor complete a work of art, not to continue working forever on a manuscript, helps to maintain the illusion that the creator can preserve his or her sense of freedom, that there will always be the possibility of going back or going on. Perhaps, this may help to account for the compelling quality of the creative process (T. Griffiths, personal communication, January 2014).6

Richard Serra’s new works take us further. In September 2011, Serra presented two new sculptures at the Gagosian Gallery of New York: Junction (2011)
and *Cycle* (2010). They followed the same inspiration as his work at the Bilbao Guggenheim: made of weathering steel plates more than 4 metres in height, they were immediately recognisable as Serra’s work. Unlike at the Guggenheim, however, the visitor could not see the sculptures from above. Once again, these were sculptures to be “walked”, not just seen or looked at, as were the Japanese gardens that inspired Serra, where the simultaneous walking and seeing brought them to life. At every step, new forms were perceived: static observation was not possible. The way in which the work impressed the visitor led to the creation of new meanings.

*Cycle* is formed by two great, curved pieces of steel meeting in an apparently single opening. Nevertheless, the single opening turns into two: one opening leads into a big, empty, round room, the other follows a path of narrow walls where coloured sands and ocean waves may be imagined. Three circular extensions with different openings confront the visitor, who has to make a choice, each opening leading to a different exit; one is tempted to re-enter the sculpture from different places. Similarly, *Junction* offers the visitor different options for entering and leaving. I did not feel I could just go in and observe; I had to walk around, go in and out several times. Once all this was done, one had seen the sculpture from different angles and in its different forms, but it was impossible to keep a clear picture of it all as a whole.

These new sculptures add further complexity to the ideas developed in *The Matter of Time* at the Guggenheim (see Chapter 5). At the Gagosian Gallery, Serra pointed out that there was “the interval of choice”, which made the sculptures particularly interesting:

> The interval disrupts your thought . . . you have to make a decision. . . . That suspension of time happens at the interval . . . [these works] leave you at a moment of loss, in a void where you have to make a decision . . .

(Serra, in Goldstein, 2011)

There is no linear path to follow: everything – the interval of choice, breaking the sequence, the cadence of the visitor’s movements – creates a disorienting effect. One needs to hold tight: the challenge lies in experiencing the intervals. This is not dissimilar to the challenge posed in reading Borges’s “The Garden of Forking Paths”: the almost infinite possibilities of entering the sculptures recall the infinite possibilities of reading Ts’ui Pên’s novel in Borges’s story.

“El Jardín de los Senderos que se bifurcan” (The Garden of Forking Paths) (1941b) is a short story by Borges, who defined it as “policial” – a detective story. There are several layers in the story, with some scenes and circumstances mirroring one another. One central character is described in it: Ts’ui Pên, a legendary man, the author of a book, *The Garden of Forking Paths*, an infinite, vast, intricate and jumbled novel of which there are many drafts. The author is allegedly also the creator of an equally complicated, vast and impossible labyrinth, where all men get lost, and yet the labyrinth has never been found nor seen by anybody. In the
story, Dr Stephen Albert, an eminent sinologist, claims to have been able to solve the mystery of it all: the book is the labyrinth.

There may have been a beginning to this mythical novel, but, unlike normal development in fiction, Ts’ui Pên allowed for infinite possibilities to be opened. No two readings of this text can be the same. Supposedly, if one were to read *The Garden of Forking Paths* a second time, there could or should be different words, a new story, even though the characters are the same.

Borges’s short story is not even principally about the mythical novel of the title. It could be defined as a “detective” story, except that there are no detectives. Nevertheless, there is a story where a murder takes place and there is a punishment for the crime. The text is full of irony: Borges refers, for example, to a “lost labyrinth” – a labyrinth being the place where one gets lost and therefore the idea is of getting lost in an already “lost” place. Borges nevertheless claimed, in his comments on his short story, that he did not see a labyrinth as a symbol of “being lost” – on the contrary, he suggested that labyrinths gave people hope (Verdugo-Fuentes, 1986, p. 131, quoted in Ferrer, 2009). After all, he argued, if the universe were a labyrinth, it would have a centre; knowing this, we would feel more secure. As it is, we do not know whether the universe has a centre; therefore, it is only chaos, and we are lost in it.

“Labyrinth” was only a metaphor by which Ts’ui Pên wished to symbolise his concept of time and the infinite possible combinations of chance in the universe:

In all fictional works, each time a man is confronted with several alternatives, he chooses one and eliminates the others; in the fiction of the almost inextricable Ts’ui Pên, he chooses – simultaneously – all of them. He creates, in this way, diverse futures, diverse times which themselves also proliferate and fork . . . all possible outcomes occur; each one is the point of departure for other forkings . . .

(Borges, 1941a, p. 51, italics in original)

In another fragment, Dr Albert explains to Dr Yu Tsun, his interlocutor and the grandson of the “brilliant novelist”:

*The Garden of Forking Paths* is an incomplete, but not false, image of the universe as Ts’ui Pên conceived it. In contrast to Newton and Schopenhauer, your ancestor did not believe in a uniform, absolute time. He believed in an infinite series of times, in a growing, dizzying net of divergent, convergent and parallel times. This network of times which approached one another, forked, broke off, or were unaware of one another for centuries, embraces all possibilities of time. We do not exist in the majority of these times; in some you exist, and not I; in others I, and not you; in others, both of us.

(Borges, 1941a, p. 53, italics in original)

This notion of time, where each reality branches into alternate versions of simultaneous realities, anticipates the Many-Worlds Interpretation (MWI) of quantum
mechanics, which holds that there are many worlds that exist in parallel in the same space and time as our own – a theory proposed in 1957 by the physicist Hugh Everett. Perhaps more pertinent to our own interest in this book, Ts’ui Pên’s “network of times”, which embraces all possibilities of time, closely resembles André Green’s concept of a “tree of time”: this is a tree-like structure of time (2002, p. 162). Green conceived it as a network of simultaneously divergent forces and paths that nevertheless operate together without ever becoming an absolute unity. As such, events cannot be explained as a simple cause-and-effect development; they do not end at a given chronological point; they continue to exist while staying the same and while going on transforming themselves. No two readings of any particular event are ever exactly the same: with each reading we effectively change the events that have already happened during our first reading. The event changes in meaning with each further perception, appraisal and interpretation. There is timelessness in the unconscious, but this does not mean that there is no temporality.

At the Gagosian Gallery, there were moments of loss and moments of confusion but there was also hope: the spectator could not be in doubt that there was an invitation from the artist to be a participant – even though this was only achieved in Serra’s sculptures through the experience of negative space. This was reminiscent of Berenson’s aesthetic moment: intervals, creating confusion while compelling the subject to make decisions in time; movement, generating hopeful breaks while demanding to manage changes in space (see Chapter 5).

And then: loss, void, absence.

The negative, establishing meaning.

The negative

The negative is a fundamental theoretical tenet in psychoanalysis, best represented by André Green’s concept of the work of the negative (1993, 1997). The presence of the negative is to be found in Freud’s concept of the unconscious itself, where the prefix un- already represents a clear reference to it. In Freudian theory, there is no clinical or theoretical concept that does not relate to the unconscious and turns to the negative. According to Green, the work of the negative brings together “. . . the aspects inherent to the most general psychic activity”, common to all human beings (1993, p. 12).7

There is a paradoxical quality in the negative; it represents a dual mode of thinking. Negation will never be completely successful; the splitting of the ego will allow for knowing and not knowing at one and the same time; repression will produce symptoms and dreams, thus revealing what has been kept hidden (Kohon, 1999a). The work of the negative is infused by this fundamental dual mode, which is part of the legacy inherited by Green (via Jacques Lacan and Alexandre Kojève) from Hegel and his philosophical thoughts concerning dialectics.8

In the analytic encounter, the work of the negative grants access to the dynamics of presence and absence (see the papers in Kohon, 1999b). For example, the analyst’s withdrawal from the sensorial world of the patient will bring about his
ever-present existence in the mind of the analysand. The analyst’s silence creates the space and time that allows the patient to become a patient: to free associate, to daydream, to speak.

An important instance of the negative, a young child’s capacity to say “no”, is an essential aspect of psychic development. By saying, “no”, the child establishes the crucial sense of a “me”; in saying “no” to the world, the child says “yes” to its sense of self. Nevertheless, the attainment of a sense of self is never an easy task. Human beings are born premature and are thus completely dependent on other human beings to survive; they occupy a fundamental state of biological, emotional and psychic helplessness (Freud, 1926). In principle, the infant is sheltered by a protective shield against stimuli from the outside, a barrier against trauma. In fact, Freud describes as “traumatic” “... any excitations from outside which are powerful enough to break through the protective shield” (Freud, 1920, p. 29).

But if the infant depends so completely on its primary objects, how can he or she afford to reject them? In this situation, negativism does not come from the outside; the need to affirm the “no” comes from within. It is a libidinal desire. There is no protection against internal stimulus in the beginning: the infant feels either pleasure or unpleasure. It is conceivable that the baby’s frequent withdrawal into sleep may be one example of this need to say, “no”. Later, for the child to be able to say “no” and genuinely mean it requires, among other things, the provision of a relatively benign, good-enough holding environment that can help the child cope with persecutory anxieties and reduce the intensity of potentially uncontrol-lable fears, the true horrors (fright, terror or Schreck) that an infant inevitably experiences.

Freud writes:

[Schreck is] the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise. . . .

(Freud, 1920, p. 12)

The necessary psychic transformation of frightening psychic representatives of the drives (i.e. from thing-representation to word-representations) and the crucial elaboration of Schreck are facilitated by what André Green described as the creation of a framing structure, a function created by the negative hallucination of the mother’s body (see note 8). Green believed,

When contact with the mother’s body is broken, what remains of this experience is the trace of the bodily contact . . . which constitutes a framing structure sheltering the loss of the perception of the maternal object, in the form of a negative hallucination of it. It is against this negativized background that the future object representations, sheltered by the framing structure, will be inscribed.

(Green, 2005, p. 161, italics in original)
At the point of the mirror stage, occurring between the ages of six and eighteen months (Lacan, 1936 [1949]), the subject discovers himself as his own double in the mirror without realising that this is a fiction: the subject believes that the image of narcissistic plenitude that the mirror offers him is he. This is a function of méconnaissance, which alienates the subject from himself and supports a permanent split, a Spaltung. There is a division between a coherent and yet imaginary self, as reflected back by the mirror, and a mode of being that will always be other to the subject.

In Jean Hyppolite’s words, “. . . the impossibility of the self coinciding with itself in reflection, is indeed the basis of subjectivity” (1946, p. 191). He argues that “. . . the self never coincides with itself, for it is always other in order to be itself” (1946, p. 150). The subject will remain captivated by the narcissistic image in the mirror, forever ignorant of his alienation: “I am another”, famously said Rimbaud.

Similarly, Walt Whitman declared, “I am always conscious of myself as two — as my soul and I”. Or, in the words of Antonin Artaud: “ME/NOTHING, nothing/ Because I/I am there” (1947, quoted in de M’Uzan, 1999).

From a psychoanalytic point of view, the negotiations between who I am and who I am not are at the heart of the paradox of human subjectivity. For Freud, as rightly argued by Lacan, the ego can only have an imaginary autonomy; the ego behaves as if it is the “. . . master in its own house” (Freud, 1917, p. 143) — but this is an illusion, a genuine and fundamental misunderstanding, common to all human beings, which originates in the mirror stage.10

Being familiar to myself, how can I recognise myself in what I am not? Or, alternatively, how can my own self be so un-familiar to me that I might not recognise it in a mirror or in a photograph? The mirror stage offers the opportunity for a full identification, the first (perhaps) mythical moment when the subject can gain access to being a subject and can move away from primary narcissism. Nevertheless, being an illusion, this identification with an image in the mirror produces a double of the subject, turning into a source of alienation: being turns into not-being, the familiar becomes unfamiliar. For human beings, there is no escape from this imaginary identification: it is what it is.

De M’Uzan argues that, even though the statement, “I am me and not someone else”, should be self-evident, there are no guarantees; this kind of certainty can crumble fairly easily. The original, primary confusing boundaries between me and not-me will continue as a psychic function for the rest of one’s life (1983, p. 60). As a result, he asserts that

there is no true boundary between the ego and the non-ego, but a vague transitional zone, a spectrum of identity defined by the diverse positions that the narcissistic libido occupies. . . .

(de M’Uzan, 1976, pp. 28–29, italics in original)

Following a series of papers around the theme of identity (recently gathered in one volume in English under the title Death and Identity: Being and the Psycho-Sexual
The broken sequence of the aesthetic

Drama, 2013), de M’Uzan says that “the truest ‘I’ cannot lie anywhere else than . . . in what is most fundamental and, like the unconscious itself, most unacceptable for the mind” (1976/2013, p. 32). An identity is created by what is not: a human being can only be human if he or she accepts this fact. While understanding that “I am me . . .” can be acknowledged (in spite of its inherent complications and complexities), to consider which “part of me is not I” is much more difficult to grasp and accept. We are all driven by repressed desires that we will never become aware of, haunted by traumatic experiences of which we know nothing, persecuted by emotional and psychic states of alienation that we cannot comprehend, let alone articulate. The illusion of one day being able to reach another “truer” self, a self that will not suffer from the extimité of the self to itself (Lacan, 1953–54), becomes a tragic, as much as a comical, fruitless misunderstanding.

The uncanny, everywhere

That something can be created through its negativity is a disconcerting idea, but I would suggest that this is what the Freudian uncanny represents in the aesthetic: an encounter with the negative, something secret or repressed in the subject, which the artistic or literary object has brought to light or around which it is at least circling, threatening to do so. The negative is represented by the transitory feeling that Freud had at the Acropolis: his “feeling of derealisation”, his contention that what he saw was not real. He expanded the description of this feeling thus: “. . . the subject feels that a piece of his own is strange to him . . .” (1936, pp. 244–245).

We are back to “The ‘Uncanny’”:

The subject identifies himself with someone else . . . he is in doubt as to which his self is, or substitutes the extraneous self for his own. In other words, there is doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self . . .

(Freud, 1919, p. 248)

There are no certainties about our selves or our pasts; there is no certainty that something has once been lost, for it now to be recovered. In its particular mix of familiarity and unfamiliarity, the uncanny is disruptive and unsettling: it is everywhere. In the aesthetic, we face ghosts, doubles, unsolicited apparitions, déjà vu, dangers, anxious anticipations, unsolicited presences. All this leads me to conclude that being open – at some level – to experiencing the uncanny is fundamental to the experience of aesthetic pleasure. This includes being able to withstand, when faced with the aesthetic object, feelings of depersonalisation (or derealisation), where encountering strangeness has be tolerated. This does not mean that the experience has to be frightening, upsetting, disconcerting or disturbing. It can be exciting, stimulating, moving, inspiring, joyful and fascinating. It is the encounter with strangeness in the familiar, and the familiar en something new which constitutes the decisive, common factor.
While the negative of the subject makes the positive of his or her identity, the negative in art makes the positive of the subject’s aesthetic experience. This does not suggest that we can truly know the meaning of art nor that we are in a better position to understand why a subject becomes a creative artist. Applying psychoanalytic theories to art may be an impossible as well as an inadvisable task, for it easily becomes an exercise in reductionism.

Psychoanalytic and aesthetic concepts share another characteristic, albeit their modes of experience and forms of thought are different. This is that the concepts always exceed themselves and cannot be contained within the boundaries of their disciplines. They outclass, as it were, their definition. In this sense, they are disruptive and unsettling; they inhabit a risk zone. In the specific case of psychoanalysis, this characteristic poses an important challenge to the scientism that regrettably pervades the discipline at present.

Let us consider the following amusing description, offered by Jacques Rancière:

At the beginning of *A Night in Casablanca*, a policeman looks with a suspicious air at the strange behaviour of Harpo, who is motionless with his hand against a wall. He asks him to move on. With a shake of the head, Harpo indicates that he cannot. The policeman then observes ironically that perhaps Harpo wants him to think that he is holding up the wall. With a nod, Harpo indicates that that is indeed the case. Furious that the mute should make fun of him in this way, the policeman drags Harpo away from his post. And sure enough, the wall collapses with a great crash.

(Rancière, 2003, pp. 46–47)

Rancière claims that this is a fitting parable, which separates “the *everything hangs together* of art from the *everything merges* of explosive madness or consensual idiocy” (2003, p. 46, italics in original). To my mind, art, literature and psychoanalysis allow human beings somehow to “keep things together”; through them, we keep chaos at bay.

In a similar fashion to art and literature, psychoanalysis requires preparation, training, thought, practice and craftsmanship, and yet it cannot be characterised as art. Similarly, it cannot be defined as a science. Since psychoanalysis is different from art as well as from science, it has always been a challenge for psychoanalysts to explain what they do as practitioners.

Bion argued that psychoanalysts have yet another difficult job: no written paper, no interpretation must ever be so boring, so unaesthetic that “it becomes a pain in your mind to read it” (Bion, 1980, p. 121). He proposed an alternative to boredom. Referring to the “scientifically prejudiced people” whose knowledge is just “too thick”, he spoke of psychoanalysis as a form of “aesthetic criticism” (Bion, 1980, p. 127). Certain things in psychoanalysis, he argued, cannot be supported by the kind of evidence that would be regarded as scientific. Bion said that, instead, “it may be that the formulation belongs to the domain of the Aesthetic” (1965, pp. 37–38). After all, Freud argued that aesthetics should not be understood only
as a “theory of beauty” but also as a “theory of the qualities of feeling” (1919, p. 219). There is a good case, therefore, for thinking about psychoanalysis as part of the distinctive order of the aesthetic, for, in the sense variously examined in this book, art, literature and psychoanalysis are brought together by the work of the negative.

If, as Freud said, “To tolerate life remains, after all, the first duty of all living beings . . .” (1915, p. 299), then we can say with a fair amount of certainty that art, literature and psychoanalysis help to make this toleration possible. This effect of art and literature might more easily be accepted than that of psychoanalysis – perhaps only patients can tell. Yet I know, as the patient I once was, that the “compulsive estrangement of my life” was made tolerable by the understanding that psychoanalysis offered me of the “uncanny otherness of my own voice” (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 8). Through forty-five years of clinical practice, it has been my project as a psychoanalyst to try to understand, with my patients, how “. . . all voices come to be woven out of strands of alien experience” in all of us (Greenblatt, 1990, p. 8).

Notes


2 Later poems by Hausmann used words that were reversed, chopped up and strung out, then either typed out using a full range of typographical strategies or performed with boisterous exuberance. Similar experimental efforts can be found in other poets.

3 His funeral took place in Ambleside, in the Lake District. On the same day, the local policeman arrived to let him know that his British citizenship had finally been granted (Farley, 2013, p. 65).

4 The 2013 exhibition, Schwitters in Britain, at Tate in Britain showed an interesting collection of collages, paintings, assemblages and sculptures, all made during his time in Britain. In the notes and in the catalogue of the exhibition the theory of Merz was referred to, but its conceptual importance was not sufficiently conveyed (see Chambers & Orchard, 2013).

5 Rosine Perelberg suggested that the logic of dreams could be compared to the logic of objets trouvés: they are made up of day residues, objects, thoughts and memories that belonged to different places and times, somehow also “selected with recourse to chance but carefully arranged according to strict principles of composition” (as argued above). In dreams, “the principles of composition” can be said to be dictated by the rules of the primary process (personal communication, December 2013).

6 I have always been amazed and amused by the fact that several architect friends could never “finish” their work, particularly when it concerned their own family homes. Their houses seem always to be “in the process of being finished”. In some sense, artists and writers might feel the same about their own creations. At some point, though, the writer will have to say: “. . . it is necessary for the text to stop somewhere” (Cixous, 1976, p. 545).

7 These aspects might include what the neuroscientist Regina Pally (1997) has called “implicit memory” – a concept that attempts to describe the most primitive pre-verbal reminiscences in utero, when the foetus appears to recognise its mother’s voice – something akin to Bion’s concept of proto-experiences.
Among other things, Green used the notion of the negative to integrate the conflicting definitions of the unconscious and of the id. Freud characterised the id as follows: “It is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality; what little we know of it we have learnt from our study of the dream-work and of the construction of neurotic symptoms, and most of that is of a negative character and can be described only as a contrast to the ego. . . . We picture it as being open at its end to somatic influences, and as there taking up into itself instinctual needs which find their psychical expression in it, but we cannot say in what substratum. It is filled with energy reaching from the instincts, but it has no organisation, produces no collective will . . .” (Freud, 1933, p. 73, italics added). Its negative character defines the positive of the id. Both concepts, the unconscious and the id, are imbued with the negative. Based on its theoretical importance in psychoanalysis, Green proposed to gather the different mechanisms of repression (Verdrängung), foreclosure (Verwerfung), splitting of the ego (Ich Spaltung), negation (Verneinung), etc., within the concept of “the work of the negative”. He argued that “. . . all these mechanisms are elaborations of the prototype of repression. All of them imply a judgment of acceptance or refusal: a question whose answer has to be given in terms of yes and no” (Green, 1998). But the negative is not limited to these “psychical operations of which repression is the prototype” (1993, p. 269).

Friedman argues that the German word used by Freud, Schreck (translated by Strachey as “fright”) is closer to a state of terror or horror (Friedman, 1998, p. 192).

Friedman offers an interesting, alternative theoretical version of the notion of primary identification from Lacan’s own speculations about the mirror stage, as well as a modified picture of the one proposed by Melanie Klein, Donald Winnicott and other British object relations authors. He believes that the first object is not the breast, not even the mother’s breast. For him, “the identity of the subject is prefigured in a primary/primal identification with the (human) face/voice”. It may be worth quoting him at length: “The original binding/bundling of drive-excitation is the primal identification with and through the image (voice/face) and not the (part-) object breast. . . . It is this primal identification that serves as both the original achievement and defense against Schreck (terror, fright). It is the loss/absence of the image (voice/face) of this identification that produces Schreck” (Friedman, 1998, p. 192, italics in original). He forcefully argues against the idea of considering the (mother’s) breast as the first object of identification for the infant. For him, there is, instead, a primary identification with the configuration of the voice/face of the mother for the infant; very soon after birth, “eye contact and the synchronicity of facial expression between mother and child” become fundamentally important for the relationship to develop. According to Friedman, it is this primal identification that will constitute the foundation for all future object relationships. In spite of their differences, Friedman and Lacan share many views. Friedman refers to the notion of a complex system of negotiations and re-negotiations between the baby and the mother, which takes place during the initial period of life, a period described by John Muller as the “proto-linguistic” phase (Muller, 1996, quoted by Friedman). It is proto-linguistic, and not “pre-verbal”, because while the interaction between mother and child may not include words, it is still “. . . governed by an exchange of cues structured by a code” (p. 21). In the context of this semiotic code, specific signs are mutually exchanged between a sender and a receiver right from the beginning of life.
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